

GOSPEL DYNAMICS 4: UNION WITH CHRST (SANCTIFICATION: OBEDIENCE / A LIFESTYLE OF REPENTANCE)

PRIMARY QUESTION WITH REGARDS TO APPLYING THE GOSPEL

If the Gospel is how we are to view life, then how does the Gospel apply to us? If the Gospel shows much about our sin, and much about God's grace through Christ, then how does Christ's righteousness become mine? How is redemption applied to me? And how is it applied in such a way that redemption glorifies God, and not simply meets my need?

Scripture teaches that the Holy Spirit applies the Gospel (the Person and Work of Christ) to our hearts; how is it practically applied to our lives? How does reading and understanding a Christ-centered Scripture (Gospel Dynamics, Part 3) apply to me? What would the faith of Moses have anything to do with me, if the Bible is not a set of moral principles by which we are to live? At best, the connection between the experience of the ancients, and today's individual and corporate experience, appears tenuous, and, like a thread, easily disconnected; we both are human, having an inkling of desire to have a relationship with God (or some form of spiritual reality). This is a primary part of our understanding of *union with Christ* through the Gospel.

The Westminster Larger Catechism considers union with Christ as **the means** by which the benefits of Christ's mediatorial work of redemption are applied unto the elect. The Larger Catechism reflects the Reformed view that **the elect are saved through "union with Christ"**:

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

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

The questions in the first paragraph above come from both hedonists and legalists. Hedonists are existential by nature; they live life without an "alien" (outside) Master in their lives (the master they have *is* themselves). As a result, success and failure lead them to question identity, significance, meaning, and purpose—their self-worth. Similarly, success and failure lead a legalist to the same questions: identity, meaning, significance, and purpose (discussed in Gospel Dynamics, Part 2). How is the Christian life entirely different?

Here is how the Apostle Paul described the Christian life: "I have **been crucified with Christ and I no longer live**, but **Christ lives in me**. The life I live in the body, **I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me** (Galatians 2:20)."

The Apostle Paul focused on the following way of viewing the Christian life:

- (1) We have been crucified with Christ; we died (I no longer live) *with* Christ;
- (2) Christ lives *in* us (therefore, we live);
- (3) The life I live is now is *in* connection with Jesus (we "live by faith").

The statement above is an explicit statement of union with Christ. The Holy Spirit applies the life and death, the Person and Word, of Jesus Christ to our lives. By faith, our old selves have joined with Jesus in His death; when Jesus died on the cross, He died as the Federal Head, in which all of His people died. When Jesus rose again, all those who were in Him in His death also rise again in new life. Therefore, this life is no longer our own; we have dissociated ourselves from the old master (ourselves, Satan), and have come into union with Jesus. In other words, when we give ourselves to the Gospel, we no longer live for our own selves; we died to our old selves (our desires, lusts, cravings, values, etc.). The old self no longer has control over our motivations and deeds. Jesus now sits as the primary King of our hearts, and thus, our new lives are connected to Him. In summary, the following can be trusted as a picture of our lives in Christ:

JESUS	ME
"Jesus lived the life that I should live."	"I lived a life that I shouldn't live."
"Jesus died the death that I should die."	By faith-connection (union) to Christ: I died.
"Jesus lives."	By faith-connection to Christ: I live.

The theological way of phrasing the above is "union with Christ". The spiritual/personal way of saying union with Christ is our "adoption." You can see how the Scriptures teach us to see our union with Christ as the **power** for our new lives, in the following passages of Scripture:¹

ROMANS 6

- 1Q What shall we say, then?
Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?
- 2 A By no means!
We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?
- 3 Or don't you know that **all of us**
who were baptized into Christ Jesus
were baptized into his death?
- 4 **Therefore*, we were buried with him through baptism into death in order that,
just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father,
we too may live a new life.
- 5 **If we have been united with him like this in his death,**
we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.
- 6 For we know that **our old self was crucified with him**
so that the body of sin might be done away with,
that we should no longer be slaves to sin -
because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.
- 7 **because anyone who has died has been freed from** sin.
- 8 Now **if we died with Christ,** we believe that **we will also live with him.**
- 9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead,
he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him.
- 9 The death he died, he died to sin once for all;
but the life he lives, he lives to God.
- 11 In the same way, **count yourselves dead to sin**
but **alive to God in Christ Jesus.**

¹ Refer also to the famous Ephesians 2:1-10 passage.

COLOSSIANS 3

- 1 Since, then, **you have been raised with Christ**,
set your hearts on things above,
where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.
- 2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.
- 3 ***For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.**
- 4 **When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.**
- 5 **therefore*, put to death, whatever belongs to your earthly nature:
sexual immorality,
impurity,
lust,
evil desires
and greed,
which is idolatry.
- 6 Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.
- 7 **You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived.**
- 8 **But now** you must rid yourselves of all such things as these:
anger,
rage,
malice,
slander,
and filthy language from your lips.
- 9 Do not lie to each other,
since you have taken off your old self with its practices
- 10 **and have put on the new self,**
which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.
- 11 Here there is no Greek or Jew,
circumcised or uncircumcised,
barbarian,
Scythian,
slave or free,
but Christ is all, and is in all.

UNION WITH CHRIST

The working definition of “union with Christ” is the following: “the subjective experience of God’s grace via the joining/indwelling of Christ in the person and life of the believer (the glue being the Holy Spirit of Christ, who applies the work that Jesus did on the cross into our lives).”

What Is “Union With Christ”? Michael Horton, in *Understanding the Conversion*, explains it as such:

As a husband and wife are united through marriage and a parent and a child are united through birth, so we are united to Christ through the Spirit’s baptism. Those who are familiar with the historical (if not contemporary) discourses of Reformed and Lutheran preaching will immediately recognize the emphasis on the objective work of Christ in history. Themes such as election, the incarnation, the substitutionary atonement, the active and passive obedience of Christ, justification, adoption, and the objective aspect of sanctification (i.e., the declaration that we are already holy in Christ), form the diet of the best and most biblically faithful preaching. Each of these themes serves to remind the believer that his or her righteousness is found not within, but outside.

Nevertheless, there is a subjective aspect to our union with Christ, which receives equal attention in Scripture, and, therefore, commands equal attention from us. Calvin wrote, “We must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us...all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him” (*Institutes*, III.i.1).

All of our righteousness, holiness, redemption, and blessing is found outside of us—in the person and work of Christ. This was the declaration of the Scriptures and, following the sacred text, of the reformers, in the face of a subjective righteousness located in the believer. And yet, as Calvin points out, this “alien righteousness” belonging to someone outside of us would mean nothing if this righteous one remained forever outside of us...

While none of our righteousness is our own, Christ is! While none of our holiness belongs to us, properly speaking, Christ does...

It is essential, therefore, to point unbelievers and believers alike to Christ outside of their own subjective experiences and actions, but that is only half the story! **The Christ who has done everything necessary for our salvation in history outside of us now comes to indwell us in the person of his Holy Spirit.** “God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27).” While our assurance is rooted in the objective work of Christ for us, it is also true that “We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit (1 John 4:13).”

John employs this language of union in his Gospel, where Jesus is referred to as a vine, with believers as branches (John 15). As the branch is dead apart from the life-giving nourishment of the vine, so humans are spiritually dead unless they are connected to the vine. Elsewhere, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him (John 6:56)." As baptism is a sign and seal of our attachment to the vine (the beginning of our union), the Lord's Supper is a sign and seal of our perpetual nourishment from the vine.

Paul appeals to this doctrine as the organizing principle for his entire systematic theology. The First Adam-Second Adam contrast in Romans five depends on this notion. "In Adam," we possess all that he possesses: original sin, judgment, condemnation, fear, alienation; "in Christ" we possess all of his righteousness, holiness, eternal life, justification, adoption, and blessing. Further, "Even when we were dead in trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus... (Ephesians 2:5)." "I have been crucified with Christ," Paul declares, "and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me (Galatians 2:20)."

Thus, this doctrine is the wheel, which unites the spokes of salvation and keeps them in proper perspective. "In Christ" (i.e., through union with him) appears, by my accounting, nine times in the first chapter of Ephesians. Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, God has thus "made us accepted in the Beloved". He cannot love us directly because of our sinfulness, but he can love us in union with Christ, because he is the one the Father loves. "In him we have redemption;" "in him we have an inheritance," and so on.

THE "CLEAR BREAK": UNION WITH CHRIST AND JUSTIFICATION

In union with Christ, God sees us in a whole new way, no longer in Adam, now in Christ. There is a dramatic change. Although we are sinners, we are justified *in* Christ. This assures us that *positionally*, our *status* is regarded as righteous, just as the Person of Christ is righteous. One of my favorite preachers once taught the meaning of justification as such: it is the assurance that when God sees me, He sees me "just-if-I'd never sinned, and just-if-I'd always obeyed." Why is that? This is because the Holy Spirit applies the perfect righteousness of Christ onto us; we are literally covered in the righteousness of Jesus, in union with Him. Read the words of Ezekiel 36:26, the promise of God for His people: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." We were once slaves; now, we're free. We were once sinners; now, we have been declared righteous. We were once blind; now, we can see. We were once dead; now, we have new life. "When you were dead in your sins and in the 'uncircumcision' of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ."²

THE "CLEAR BREAK": UNION WITH CHRIST AND SANCTIFICATION

What does the above mean practically for the believer? Though, as a person, the believer is not destroyed, the believer's identity and nature have been fundamentally changed.

² Colossians 2:13.

We actually have the power to live a genuinely good life, unmotivated by a desire to “use” God for a selfish agenda, or to “use” my self-generated goodness to “earn” His love or a sense of self-worth (apart from the Gospel that is applied to me), but empowered by a desire to serve the Lord as His child.

St. Augustine had a particular way of demonstrating the implications of union with Christ in our practical lives (first, positionally, then practically), compared to our lives prior to being reborn:

<u>Pre-Fall State</u>	<u>Post-Fall State</u>	<u>Re-Birth State</u>	<u>Glorified State</u>
Able to sin; Able not to sin	Able to sin; Not able not to sin	Able to sin; Able not to sin	Able not to sin; Not able to sin

Prior to being reborn, there is absolutely no way that we can break free from our sin. All the good that we do is derived from a sinful heart that is predisposed to sin. Once we are saved, a clear break is visible. Salvation, thus, is an event, in that sense; you absolutely know that you are saved. However, sin continues to wreak havoc in my life continuously; a true believer knows that he cannot consciously defeat sin on his own. Therefore, one has to cling to the Gospel daily (“preach the Gospel to himself”); when I even slightly takes my heart off the cross of Christ, self-justification, pride, selfishness, and the rule of my core desires apart from the Gospel take hold. The Gospel assures us that no matter how much sin wreaks havoc (its pollution, its seeming power, its presence) in my life, in Christ, we are declared righteous. We have been made new positionally; our “last name has been changed upon our marriage” to Christ. The implication of this is that I now have to live life dying to myself, and living in this new identity, apart from my old self. I have the power to do so, despite the presence of sin in my life, but I live in faith that that presence is a defeated presence, and that the Holy Spirit’s power enables me to depart from it. This is what the Spirit does, and this is what continues to happen as I live in union with Christ.

Though my heart and mind have not been placed aside, my heart and mind have been made anew. I have, and grow in having, the heart and mind of Christ. As I grow to know Christ more, my mind and life reflect Christ’s mind and life. The chains have been broken, and thus, I have the power to live free of idolatry; although idolatry still wreaks havoc in my life, I am already free, and can break free because I have the power of the living Son in me, and I have placed my life in Him (can have the same power of the resurrecting Spirit in me to enable me to flee evil desires).

If I died, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me (and through me), then—

- I am free from the **penalty** of sin: the law no longer condemns me, because I already died (Romans 7:4) in Christ. The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 6:23). In other words, the price has been paid, even though you did not have to die (the law does not apply to dead people); you already legally died in Christ (in your union with Him).
- I am free from the **power**, the grip, of sin: sin has no hold on me because I already died in Christ (Romans 6:6). I can actually flee from sin. I can actually be free of my idols, sinful desires, selfish values, etc. As dead people, we no longer need to live for ourselves (2 Corinthians 5:14); we don’t have a life of our own anymore. Sin still wreaks havoc on my life, but I am free of its penalty and its eternal grip on me; I am no longer a child of Satan any longer. I can change, whereas, prior to my conversion, I was unable to change.

- I will one day be free of the **presence** of sin in my life. This is what we call future grace and future hope (1 Corinthians 15). I will one day bear the likeness of the man in heaven (Jesus).

Scripture wants us to know that there has been a clear break in the Christian life. Christ dwells *in us*. We live *in Christ*. We are *with* Christ, in the heavenly realms. Scripture calls us to seek out the richness of this love. In fact, Paul's prayer to the Ephesians was for us to seek out the love of Christ dwelling in you—refer to Paul's prayer for the Ephesians in 3:14-19:

¹⁴**For this reason** I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶I pray **that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,** ¹⁷**so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.** **And I pray** that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸**may have power,** together with all the saints, **to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,** ¹⁹**and to know this love** that surpasses knowledge—**that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.**

What was Paul's prayer? That we may be strengthened by the Spirit in our inner being, so that Jesus may dwell in our hearts, and that we may have power to grasp the richness (width, length, height, depth) of Christ's love, which is to say, that we experience the fullness of God. What Paul is praying is this: that we, as believers, continue to be in union with Christ, that we seek out the extents of Jesus' love, since that is how we can experience the fullness of God.

All Christians already have Jesus in them; Paul is writing to Christians, yet he prays that we are strengthened, and that Jesus dwells in our hearts (3:17), so that we know the width, length, height, and depth of Christ's love (3:18), that we are filled with the fullness of God (3:19). Why does Paul pray that Christians, who, by definition, already *have* Jesus in their hearts, who already *know* God's love, and who already *have* the love of Christ (and, thus, *are* filled with the fullness of God), *still* receive Jesus in their hearts? He wants us to "appropriate" the love of Christ, to "cash it in".

As Christians, we have been given the "marriage license" to Christ, but we still need to experience what it means to be "married" to Jesus. In other words, we have knowledge—that is, we know that Jesus, *positionally*, dwells in us, but we need to *functionally* experience this. This knowledge must enter into our core being. This is why Paul prays for the strengthening of our hearts in the Spirit; this is why he prays for Christ to dwell in our inner being. He wants us to more than know that Jesus loves us; he wants us to experience this love, and experience, then, what it means to be filled with the fullness of God.

The heart (perhaps, used synonymously with "inner man"): this refers to our "motivational centers", the center of our being, motives. This is the core you. Sure, as Christians, we know that we have Jesus in our hearts, in a positional manner (justification). Now, Paul prays that Jesus dwells in our core being, which is the center of our motivations, core beliefs, and values. This is where we hold onto our selfish idolatries, which causes us to act selfishly. Knowledge (intellectual reality) alone cannot change us functionally; knowledge of Jesus alone will not fill us. Paul prays that our knowledge becomes reality, as Christ dwells in our motivational centers in life, and changes them, so that the love of Christ becomes even more real to us.

How do you grasp the fullness of God in your life? We look at Jesus' Person and Work. How wide is Jesus' love? How long is Jesus' love? How high is Jesus' love? How deep is Jesus' love? We discover the richness of Jesus' love, when we connect with how deeply we have been forgiven, how free we really are from our sin and idols, how much we actually can change when we see the Gospel in our lives, and how much genuine love is shared with others once the Gospel takes hold of our hearts.

When I look at what my other "lesser gods" promise me, here's what I come up with: the other "masters" in my life promise me temporal love temporarily; as a result, money, power, sex, acceptance, and approval never give me the self-worth that I lost when man was in the Garden. They promise much, and deliver so little. However, when we look at the cross, we see the width, length, height, and depth of God's love—the fullness of God (the beatific "face" of God, the blessing of the Israelites) is in Christ, and when we see Him crucified, we see that God and Christ both were willing to go all the way for those who were eternally separate from them in sin. When Jesus died on the cross, we witnessed the distance and volume of God's love for us—Jesus experienced true hopelessness, true loss, true emptiness in His life for our sakes, so that we can see the "face" of God (have the fullness of God's love). The benediction in Numbers 6:24-26 became real in our lives because Jesus received the malediction on the cross; the Lord shines His face on us (we have the fullness of God's love), the ultimate blessing, because Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"

Outward change does not genuinely happen unless inward change has taken place. In other words, if we merely know the Gospel as knowledge (3:19), there will be no change in our lives no matter how much we seek out the Lord in prayer, nor how much we reflect on the word, nor how much we commune with others. We will only grow tired and burdened by the lack of change despite our knowledge. However, when we look at the cross to see the width, length, height, and depth of the Christ's love for His people in His grace, grounded in the love of Christ on the cross (the Gospel)(3:17-18), our hearts can be melted true love, a love that has true power to replace the grip of the "smaller gods" that we still cling to for salvation, self-worth, acceptance, etc.

The Gospel says that we are sinful, thus, we must die; the wages of sin is death. This sinful nature has to be done away with; either the sin must be gone, or you must be gone (such is the case of the original covenant), or the covenant must be done away with. Jesus ultimately assured us that the covenant cannot go, and also you must not go; He therefore took your place, so that your sin would go. Therefore, the life that you live now must be fundamentally different in nature; the power that once ruled you is broken, and the wages have been paid (you don't need to pay twice for the same price, lest God be an unjust God). It is actually possible for you, because of the Gospel, to not sin. How can this be?

The Spirit applies the work of the Gospel to us; the Spirit dwells within, and applies the work of Jesus on the cross to us. As the Gospel is applied to us, we experience the death and resurrection of Christ in us, spiritually. And as Christ and His Gospel are applied to us, we continue to make the break with the flesh (and sin) and become more alive in His life. The Spirit convicts us of our sin, stirs our hearts to change and repentance, leads us to repentance, empowers us for change and ministry, and assures us of grace in Jesus. There is hope for righteous and obedient living only because it is the life of Christ in us through the work of the Spirit, who convicts, reminds, empowers, leads, and assures, etc., as we pursue the mission and ministry of our Savior on earth.

What, ultimately, then, is the will of our Father for us? That Jesus grows organically in us—that the Gospel becomes organic in our lives. All spiritual fruit comes in connection to Christ. No spiritual blessing, maturing, growing, etc., comes without connection to Christ, our true vine (and we are the branches, John 15). We cannot accomplish anything, gain anything, be blessed, or mature by our own works. When we are able to forgive, or do good, we can actually do it genuinely, and not for selfish, sinful reasons. A relationship is organic; it is intimate and fluid. A discipleship program used kick-start our growth for sanctification is not organic, intimate, growth. It is choppy, erratic, artificial, and forced. God desires for the Gospel to become intimate—experienced, relational, and dynamic.

There is a difference between “knowing” the truth, and having it as yours, as something that is personal to the heart. What God wants for our hearts is to be transformed by the truth, not simply to be intrigued, or touched, by the thought of grace. Likewise, union with Christ is not just a doctrine to know, but also a truth that (emotionally, psychologically, spiritually) engages our hearts and lives, our motivational centers. Union with Christ is a personal way of saying how we have been adopted into the family of God.

WHAT UNION WITH CHRIST ASSURES: JUSTIFICATION LEADING TO THE POWER TO CHANGE

My union with Christ gives all of the benefits of the Christian life to me. It begins with the cross: in 2 Corinthians 5:21, I am assured that Jesus, who had no sin, became sin (my old self is united with Him in His death), and I become His righteousness (my new self, prone to sin, but free from its power, is covered in His righteousness). All of the perfections of Christ (righteousness, obedience, goodness, grace), the things that I should've been, but could not be, become infused into the believer by this union via the cross. All of the elements of the Christian's life, from election to glorification, are found in union with Christ.

As a result, my debt in sin is taken care of by justification. My struggle with sin is addressed by sanctification. Both are applied to me through my union with Christ. This union is accomplished by Christ's work on the cross that I receive **by faith** in Him. The Spirit through faith applies this work of Christ in my life; in other words, the same power that brought Jesus into the world (incarnation, conception through the Holy Spirit), and the same power that brought Jesus back from the dead, now resides in me to apply the Gospel to my life.

Here's another way of saying it: if you think that all Jesus accomplished for you on the cross is your justification (salvation, so that you can go to heaven), then you undermine the purpose of your time here on earth, and you also undermine the power of that work on the cross for the here and now; this explains why a lot of people live without Gospel power in their present lives after salvation. Jesus died, not just to break the chains of sin, but to continue to mature you unto glory (sanctification). The Spirit applies the work of Jesus for your transformation to become more like the Son. Your life on earth has purpose and mission, because the Lord is working in your life. The whole reason why we needed the Gospel was because we could not attain salvation on our own; we needed a Savior. However, all the more when we recognize our need for the Gospel for salvation, we would recognize how weak we were to begin with, that our own will is weaker than we ever imagined, and that God's grace, even for the now, is greater than we ever believed / dreamed. This is the faith that saved us then, and continues to save us, from ourselves (our sin). We are assured such grace to live the life of Christ because there is a Father that embraces us in success or failure, because we are clothed in the

blood of Christ; we don't have to run from the Father in fear of failure, nor live life distant from Him. We can live intimately in fellowship, reviewing our lives, reconsidering the meaning of our present sufferings, and reflecting on the work of God in us right now, for our repentance and work in us for change (this is what Biblical Counseling does for us).

Saint Augustine used to pray, "O God, command what Thou would, and grant what Thou wouldst command." The controversial monk Pelagius was disturbed by such a prayer because he believed, ultimately, that man could do good on his own will without any intervention from God; after all, how could a just God command things that His own people did not have the power to fulfill? Augustine, a firm believer in the truth that man is sinful since birth (the transfer of guilt from generation to generation, or imputation) from the time of Adam, believed that God had a right to command whatever He pleased, and would Himself work in us to be able to fulfill His will.

WHAT UNION WITH CHRIST ASSURES: FREEDOM FROM SIN

Sin still wreaks havoc in our lives, but no longer has control. Its presence is not a reminder of our chains; it is a reminder of our greater need to die to ourselves, and to be united with Christ all the more. In the Middle East, a terrible tyrant was ousted; today, although his presence is still felt, wreaking havoc in that community, everyone would agree that he would no longer be in power again. His rule is broken for good.

Grace is amazing because Jesus' blood covers over our sins. However, that is merely the passive component, which drives the active component: we sin, but now, we are able to let go of sin. This is fundamentally different than the life experience of a non-Christian. A non-Christian has only one choice: to sin (refer back to the Augustinian model). A Christian, however, has been empowered by his union with Christ, which frees him from the grip of sin. Before, we committed sin, and sin also committed us. Now, we may still commit sin, but sin no longer commits us; we can actually let go of our desire to sin because we are free from its power. Union with Christ assures that we can let go. Christians can have a growing desire to live out the Gospel rather than live in sin—to seek God's will (for the Gospel to grow organically in our lives) in Christ, to find out more of God's word in Christ, and to be transformed into the likeness of Christ by actively disengaging from our sinful idolatry (this is called repentance), despite the sin that often prevails in the flesh.

WHAT UNION WITH CHRIST ASSURES: FELLOWSHIP WITH THE FATHER (GENUINE, TRANSFORMING JOY)

God's forgiveness is not far away, because we know we have it in Jesus—who is united to us. Faith allows us to connect with the Father because of our connection to the death of Christ on the cross, as well as the life He now lives. The sin is mine; at the same time the grace is given by Christ, who dwells in me. For my goodness and righteousness are not of myself; it's of Him, dwelling in me, empowering me, assuring me, convicting me, working in me, giving me a real view of myself, etc.

We should experientially and subjectively sense that God is not far away; for the Son is near. Our loneliness and feeling of isolation should decrease. The feeling of being alone in the universe should decrease. The transcendent God is accessible to us through Christ. We can cry out '*Abba*' Father. We can pray, *Our Father*.³ God brings us into

³ This is primarily the reason why Jesus teaches us to pray, "*Our Father...*"; we need to live out the implications of both words "our" and "Father".

community with Himself, as His children (Galatians 4:4-7) in our union with Christ, and He also brings us into a covenant community with His church. Nothing will separate me from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:38). First, this means, again, that you cannot lose your relationship with the Father because you did nothing to earn it in the first place. Everything that Jesus deserved is given to you; to trust this is to live in faith.

If you think of the Christian life in this biblical way, you'll see that your fellowship with Christ is constant. His presence in your life is constant. We live in *Coram Deo* (the presence, or "face" of God) through Christ, the blessing of the covenant (noted in Gospel Dynamics, Part 3) in the "beatific vision" of God. He is constant and present.⁴ Hence, the smell we produce, even when we are at our worst, is the aroma of Christ; to the Father, this is the sweet smell of a living sacrifice. We are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved, and those who are perishing.

This results in genuine joy: the joy of freedom, the joy of security, the joy of assurance of acceptance and love, the joy of perseverance, the joy of a genuine community (that is not out to use us to get ahead, but to partner and grow as brothers and sisters in the covenant, or children of God), and the joy of the blessing of the covenant. This is the joy that results from being God's child, having the rights of being His child, and persevering as His child.

This joy is transforming. Religion is outside-in. I have to be good on the outside in order to feel worthy on the inside; the problem with religion is that it demands that I save myself. If I succeed, I am only as good as my last success; I have to be consistent, which is impossible, according to the Scriptures, unless I am connected to the vine of Christ. The Gospel is inside-out; I am accepted already on the inside, which loosens my grip on the need to cover over my own sins with outward behavior (a spiritual resume) and outward appearances (including wealth, vanity, materialistic righteousness, academic pride, family pedigree, etc.). The weight and burden of perfection was already placed on Christ, and He held it perfectly, then allowed Himself to be crushed for my inability to hold that same weight. As a result, I am free—what a joy that brings to the heart, a joy that enables a loosening of the grip of worldly idolatries (things that used to bring me a sense of self-worth).

Do you see the richness of Jesus' mercy and grace? Most of us do not cash in this kind of grace; we think that Jesus gives us barely enough to survive. In the miracle at the wedding in Cana, Jesus' first miracle, however, what was the significance of Jesus' command to fill the water jars to the brim?⁵ To show us that His "wine" (which always symbolized joy in the renewing Spirit of God), the new wine of salvation, is abundant, more than enough. Recall the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000: twelve baskets of bread were leftover; Jesus proclaims that he is the "bread of life" (bread always symbolized deep satisfaction in the Bible)—to consume Him is to experience ultimate satisfaction. The many baskets leftover teaches us that there is more than enough of Him, more than we need.⁶

Delighting in the Father (Fellowship with Him in Christ):⁷ Psalm 37:4, "Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart." We often interpret this to

⁴ 2 Corinthians 2:15.

⁵ Refer to John 2:1-11.

⁶ John 6 is the reference for this teaching; the number twelve usually means that the reference is directed at the church, thus, the twelve baskets leftover implies that there is more than enough of Christ's grace to feed the whole of the church.

⁷ Much of this was derived from the *Sonship* material developed by World Harvest Mission.

mean that if only we will delight, then we will get what we want. Our delighting is a way of ‘manipulating’ God. However, delighting in the Father can only happen if we truly know His delight in us. The more we receive God’s love and His delight in us, the more we will delight and desire Him. We should focus, not on what we should do for Him first, but what He did and does for us. It isn’t so much what you ‘achieve’ in your prayer life, or in devotions, or in your Scriptural study, but what you ‘receive’. It isn’t so much about having devotions as it is about having fellowship with the Father. Does spending time with the Father seem pointless, or exciting? If it seems pointless, for whatever reason, something has happened to lessen your intimacy with Him. You don’t need to do devotions to be more intimate; you need to become more intimate, so that devotions can be more delightful.

What keeps *you* from being close to the Father? George Mueller noted that his partnership with the Father prospered through his awareness that he had to die to what he thought of himself, and had to die to what others thought of him as well.

Two great hindrances to genuine prayer are legalism and license. Legalism destroys genuine prayer, for it prays for the purpose of self-righteousness, to look good to God, sound good to others, and ourselves. Legalism compares our disciplines with others. It prays without compassion or relationship. Religion actually alienates you from the Father, and also from others in your Gospel community (because it forces you to compare). License also destroys genuine prayer, since there is none. License is lacy, unconcerned, self-sufficient. It seeks gratification of the self from things of the world, and has no concern for the things not of the world. How does your legalism or license hinder genuine prayer?

What we ask for in prayer we don’t often receive. Scripture teaches that it isn’t because we are not asking enough (many teach that we need to pray harder, or pray more), but we ask with the wrong motives. We ask so that we can indulge ourselves. James 4:1-4 teaches that when we pray like this, we are adulterous: we are seeking to use another person for our own pleasure. Adultery is seductive; thus, we must keep in mind that our hearts are seductive when we ask the Lord. We try to delight in the Lord to get what we want, and we continue to delight so long as we are fulfilled. James warns that to live like this is to live as a friend to the world. What does friendship with the world look like in your life, and how does it play out in your attitude to prayer and spiritual disciplines? If you lost everything in this world – all your money, status, family, and you had nothing left but your relationship to the Father, would you have all you need?

WHAT UNION WITH CHRIST ASSURES: PERSEVERANCE AND ASSURANCE, PART 1

This is how we persevere in the Christian life (from the New Dictionary of Theology, Ferguson): “Perseverance logically follows from the nature of the believer’s union with Christ (Colossians 3:1-4), and from his justification (Romans 8:30).” The realization in the heart—its “quickenings” and regenerating power—who Christ is, and what He has done, is ours to embrace and enjoy.

We need to persevere (and we are assured the power/strength to persevere) for the following reasons:

- Our suffering on earth (for a variety of reasons: physical, emotional, psychological, financial, social, environmental, and familial, etc.) is a remnant of the brokenness that is the result of sin (general and specific) and its consequences. Perseverance comes by the Spirit through the Gospel applied to us

so that we can trust that our suffering is not punishment for our sins (Jesus already paid the price); thus, we persevere in self-counsel to consider the work of God in our suffering and trials.

- Our guilt, and the resulting doubt about the Father's deep love for us. We persevere in trusting that our faith is genuine despite our sin, that it doesn't depend on how faithful we are, how good we are, and that it doesn't even depend on how trusting and dependent we are—genuine faith allows us to believe that it is our union with a fully faithful Savior who had clothed us with righteousness.
- Our temptation to sin. The Spirit finally works through our sinful desires and temptations, empowering us to “let go” of the sin that had once owned us. We often believe that we are still powerless to sin; in Christ, we are no longer powerless. He has saved us, and we are free from its power and penalty.

Faith through the Spirit brings us closer to Jesus who assures us of such power.

WHAT UNION WITH CHRIST ASSURES: PERSEVERANCE AND ASSURANCE, PART 2

God, a God of love, has various resources by which He transforms (sanctifies) the people He loves, and His resources do not always come in the form of blessings; however, none of these resources bear any true life-renewing power without the Gospel. The age-old question of evil and suffering thwarts the minds of many people (even many Christians); however, as one comes closer to the heart and mind of Christ, one connects more with the suffering that is present in his reality. After all, God's deepest love was for His Son, yet His love for us (and His love and trust in His Son) also sent Jesus to the cross of suffering, where Jesus suffered physical (the pain of the before-and-after of crucifixion), psychological (the mocking of the crowds, testing Jesus to come down), emotional (the presence of sin, and the abandonment of those Jesus loved, as well as the sight of those weeping nearby), environmental (the earthquakes, darkness, clouds, etc. upon His death), social (complete rejection from His own people), financial (He was naked on the cross), and ultimately, spiritual (complete rejection from His Father) suffering. Faith provides us deep connection with Christ, so that we can see what the Lord is doing in our lives:

- (1) **Personal Sin:** our Father is an omniscient, sovereign God. There is no new information that can be provided to Him that will cause Him to alter His course or actions. From the beginning, everything that you are, and everything that you do and did, is used by God to bring you to salvation in Jesus, and sanctification in Jesus. In other words, God never has a “Plan B” for your life, because you thought you ruined His “Plan A”. This brings incredible assurance to people who live with tremendous regret in their lives; God does not bear that same regret. This has an incredible implication for us: this means that God, right now, is using you, in whatever context you are living in (sinful, just barely coming to know Jesus, consciously growing in Jesus), to shape you to become more like Christ.

Where is God when you are sinning? The answer is simple and clear: He is right there; His presence is there, working in you, despite your sin, and using your sinfulness to eventually turn you towards Jesus even more. Do you believe that God is that loving, and that gracious, and that powerful? There is hope in that the very sin you love to commit (whether or not you can confess it, or readily admit that you love it) – as a believer in Jesus, as a child of the Gospel promise,

God is working in you so that you will eventually come to hate and fight your sin.

The promise of the first-fruit of the resurrection is this: Jesus' resurrection gives us the assurance that every first-fruit is followed by the harvest of fruits to come (the multitude who will rise again); on that day, we can sing that we are free from sin in every way possible. However, in our lives today, God is using us in our sinfulness, to turn us to Jesus and cause us to repent and hate our sin.

Refer to Genesis 29:15-35. In this passage, you see Laban, who is marked by greed and selfish pursuits. You see Jacob, marked by pride, covetous greed, and a selfish sense of independence. You see Leah, marked by a constant desire to be loved and accepted. Decades, and many children later, the fourth child of Leah, the forgotten, unloved daughter of Laban and wife of Jacob, carries the Messianic Seed; Leah bears the son, from whose line bears the incarnate Jesus. Jacob's world is a sinful world much like our own personal world, yet this passage is absolutely critical to Jacob's transformation – whose fullness is still chapters away from Genesis 29. In this passage, we visibly see the breaking of a very prideful, covetous, greedy, and selfish man; God is working in the lives of all the members of Jacob's family to humble them, bring them to repentance, and also to bring them to covenant life in the grace of God. By the birth of Leah's fourth child, one of the things that are clear from this passage is that God works in the lives of sinful people – working to transform them. Jacob experienced brokenness; Leah was humbled, yet made more confident in the Lord's favor towards her.

- (2) **Other's sins that impact us**; refer again to Genesis 29:15-35. God not only works in our sinfulness, but He works through our sin as well. Laban's sinfulness resulted in the exploitation of His nephew Jacob. However, his sinfulness also interacts with Jacob's covetous pride and greed as well (you see this in the passages following Genesis 29). Their combined worldly pursuits impact the lives of both Rachel and Leah. Laban's sin, cascading into Jacob's sin, which cascades into Leah's sin and resultant desire for approval and love (as a measure of her self-worth) results in the birth of four children. Do you see the impact of sin in the lives of your immediate community (particularly those who are closest to you)? Nevertheless, Leah is made stronger through God's use of Jacob's sin; in spite of Satan's work in Jacob's sinfulness, and despite Leah's deep-seeded insecurities, God used one to counsel the other. Leah's disappointments and failures to receive earthly love resulted in her seeing the greater love of God's favor; she would be a "mother" of Christ. As a result, she praised the Lord (and appropriately named her fourth son Judah, meaning, "I will praise the Lord."). Jacob, seeking to earn Rachel (to increase his sense of self-worth) by working 7 years, was disappointed by his uncle's deception; yet, God used Laban's deceitfulness to humble Jacob, and to teach him that seeking worth through work and earthly love would only result in harder labor down the road (leading him to turn to the Lord for the true blessing of God's favor in a later chapter).

One of the greatest flaws in moralizing the teachings of Scripture is the inevitable issue of addressing how to view the sinfulness of our biblical "heroes". Moralists try to deny, neglect, or explain away the evident sinfulness of the "heroes" of Scripture. It is absolutely clear in the Bible that the only sinless human, the only person who ever lived the righteous, obedient, Godly life is Jesus Himself. Scripture contains the most diverse array of sins, ranging from murder and incest

all the way to genocide. These sins interact with, and in, our community, sometimes resulting in catastrophic episodes of human evil. Yet God uses one person's sin, not just to trigger another's, but to reveal the deep sins that can destroy us; we can never see the sins that are most critically affecting us. This is why we need to commit to the Body of Christ, as well as to the mission of Christ (the worldly community); Gospel Dynamics, Part 6, will teach us that both types of communities (their strengths and their weaknesses) are used by God to reveal our sinfulness, counsel us, and lead us to repentance.

- (3) **Our personal suffering;** think about Leah and Jacob in Genesis 29. Both experience tremendous disappointments and losses in life; Scripture never teaches that suffering is a good thing, but it teaches us that God uses suffering ultimately for the good. We cannot consider genocide or grave, personal losses, or physical handicaps, as "good" things. Scripture teaches that all these things are the results of sinful people living in a world that has been broken by sin. We are "image-bearers" of God, but bearing broken images. However, God uses our suffering, and we can see things when we look back after a period of maturity in our lives, to restore our hearts to Himself. God also uses our suffering to teach us about hope in Jesus; we grieve, but we grieve with perseverance marked by hope. This is how we make sense of a loving God in a sinner and a sinner's world.

Refer to 1 Corinthians 15:49 again. The resurrection of Jesus is not a consolation for our suffering. It's not even the removal of suffering. You will experience loss on earth still, but you will find restoration in full, everything that is wrong will be undone, in heaven, and trusting this will increase your joy after your time of mourning and growth in the process (and the Lord affords you time). 1 Corinthians 15:49 teaches us this: "We will bear the likeness of the man in heaven." Look at Jesus at the resurrection; how does He look? The disciples did not recognize Him at first, but they came to recognize Him by His scars. He was glorified, but He kept His scars. What does this mean? We will also bear the likeness of Christ in heaven, but His scars tell us that in a paradise without suffering, in glory, our suffering actually matters; suffering will come to an end, turned on its head forever, but it will matter.

If you want to know why we suffer, why there're tragedies, think of it this way: if you didn't have suffering on earth, what kind of heroic stories would there be in heaven? What would we celebrate in heaven? What would define triumph that could be felt by everyone there? There is meaning to our suffering, and the resurrection promises that the suffering will be swallowed up in victory, all because of Jesus' work of redemption. Our suffering points us to greater hope, a renewed and transformed life on earth.

Our suffering is also a tool used by God to remove the deep, sinful parts of our lives that are eating away at us, seeking to destroy us. Suffering teaches us that our lives are not in our hands, and points us to renewal in trusting only in Jesus. We are anxious in life because we desire control over our lives, but what does Scripture say? Control is an illusion, and worry is our way of being at war with God to demand peace in a way that would satisfy us. Suffering is God's way of removing the spiritual tumors, to free us from anxiety, and the deep sins that draw us away from the true Sabbath of our Father's embrace.

Refer to the Genesis 29 passage one more time. Jacob's suffering was not a punishment for his deceitful lifestyle; God was beginning to humble Jacob to show him that his quest to seek a life of peace (wealth, riches, and a beautiful wife and family) on his own terms was only going to end in cosmic disappointment. Leah's suffering was God's way of demonstrating to her that the only acceptance (recognition), attachment, and love that she needed (her first three sons were named after such desires) for her self-worth was the Lord's unfailing love. Of course, for both Jacob and Leah, these were not immediate lessons learned; we don't always see what the Lord is doing in our suffering. In fact, there are certain kinds of suffering that we will struggle with for the rest of our lives. Nevertheless, the Lord is always active, working in our suffering, not to punish us, but to bring us the truth of how much deeper, wider, longer, and higher God's love is for us.

The Gospel is good news because it assures us of our positional righteousness (we are clothed in Christ), so that we are not devastated by our own sinfulness, devastated by the sinfulness of others, nor devastated in our suffering.

WHAT UNION WITH CHRIST ASSURES: SANCTIFICATION (A DYNAMIC, HOLY SPIRIT IN OUR LIVES)

Christ lived the perfect life. And only because He perfectly obeyed, kept all of the law, served God without fault, this same Jesus is united to me, which would make me want to serve and obey God. Religion says, "You obey in order to be loved by God." Hedonism says, "You must be successful (another form of religion) in your pursuit of desires (finding yourself) in order to feel worthy." The Gospel is not the middle ground of the two, but a wholly other way of life; the Gospel says, "You are already loved and worthy (and the cross assures us of this), so you can now love and obey and serve God genuinely." My striving is because Christ has done all of the striving perfectly. I work because Christ has completed all of the work perfectly. There is no need to fear failure, since Jesus had already succeeded. I can take large risks to obey God's calling in my life with my lifestyle to love Jesus and love others genuinely, despite how sinful I am because my successes, nor failures, determine who I am.

The effort and striving for my righteousness is not mine; the Spirit convicts *and* empowers. In fact, we must always remember that when the Gospel enters into our lives, our transformation (the desire to change, the conviction of the heart, the power and will to change, the joy that results from the momentum of change in one's life, the "feeling" of "knowing" the Gospel that enables change) is initiated and "worked" through the power of the Spirit in our lives. This is significant: as mentioned previously, the same Spirit that incarnated Christ, the same Spirit that brought Jesus back from the dead, is the Spirit that resides in you, working to transform and empower you (refer again to Jesus' reminder to the disciples of the coming of the Spirit in Gospel Dynamics 3).

Consider Philippians 2:13, "For [this is the grounds by which we can do this] it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." Paul begins this passage in Philippians 2:12 by writing, "...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling..." "Continuing to work out" must then mean to remain faithful and progress in unfolding, decompressing, or flushing out the believer's salvation already purchased by Christ (in union). Contrary to the position that personal salvation is achieved by personal effort (or is sustained by personal effort), "salvation" must be referring to Paul's earlier statement in Philippians 2:1, "if you have [been] united to Christ."

God's working in us is not suspended because we work, nor our working suspended because God works. Neither is the relationship strictly one of cooperation as if God did his part and we did ours so that the conjunction or coordination of both produced the required result. God works and we also work. But the relation is that because God works we work. All working out of salvation on our part is the effect of God's working in us... We have here not only the explanation of all acceptable activity on our part but we also have the incentive to our willing and working... The more persistently active we are in working, the more persuaded we may be that all the energizing grace and power is of God.⁸

WHAT UNION WITH CHRIST ASSURES: A "LIFESTYLE" OF REPENTANCE (OBEDIENCE IN FAITH)

For most people, repentance is an act. However, Scripture teaches us that repentance is more than just an act, or an event. It is also a process. The Gospel teaches us that we are more sinful than we could ever imagine; this truth, if we truly believe this to the core of our being, humbles us. However, the Gospel also assures us that God's grace is greater (in union with Christ) than we could ever dream; this truth gives us humble boldness. Our humility and boldness lead us to live a more confident life in the Father, with a more intimate love and delight in the Father. We can confess our inner beings as our sins become revealed to us (this happens in several ways, but most often through community). Thus, the Christian life is marked by our repentance, which is more than just an event that happens (and then we forget about it); our repentance becomes a process, a lifestyle of humble of boldness with respect to our sin, our desire to confront it, our desire and hope to rid ourselves of it, our hatred towards it, and our mortification of it.

There is a huge difference between what we normally call repentance and what Scripture calls repentance. Look at the difference between Judas Iscariot's version of repentance (Matthew 27:3-5) and the kind of repentance that Scripture calls us to (2 Corinthians 7:10). Judas was regretful; Judas even returned the money as an act of turning from what he had done. World Harvest Mission teaches that it is not about how sorry we are, but what kind of 'sorry' we have. In essence, we are often sorry about the consequences of our sin, but we rarely address the deep-rooted sin that resides in the heart that results in such consequences. "We gloss over the fact that our hearts are rebellious, hateful, arrogant, controlling, stubborn, and idolatrous." Genuine repentance may see the consequences and cause you to feel bad, but it also causes you to look into the **deep-rooted sin beneath the outward sin and consequences**. Repentance causes you to look at the sin, and breaks you, because in your own power you cannot escape. It finally causes you to turn to Christ, not to your own devices to cover over, or work towards redemption from, your sin. Turning to Jesus, a work of the Spirit that applies the Gospel, is an active work of the Spirit in your will that indicates that the Gospel is actually at work in your life. It is not natural to seek outside of yourself to change; the Gospel working in you causes you to be convicted of the deep-rooted sin: not just the unforgiving attitude, but the hate and vengeance in your heart; not just your promiscuity, but the sin that causes you to pursue security and acceptance and love through sex; not just your excessive drinking, but the sin that leaves you feeling empty and in need of escape. By the way, I am not saying that the Gospel just fills your needs, gives you security, assures you of love, etc. Your problem is not that you have deep needs. Your problem is that your pursuit of security apart from God is a deep-seeded sin, or your sin causes you to lack security, and as a result, you seek elsewhere for

⁸ From John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied*, pp. 148-149, as found in Silva's *Philippians* commentary, p.140.

filling. The Gospel causes you to see the sin, the sin beneath the sin, and lead you to Jesus, who forgives your sin, and empowers you to forsake your sin (the deep-rooted sin) so that you can stop working actively to sin. In essence, this is active freedom, and it leads to joy. This type of joy is renewed and grows as you continue to repent, to realize more of the sin in your life...all because you are in Christ (this does not happen naturally, nor apart from the Spirit's work). Genuine repentance leads you to the freedom of your union in Christ, and to joy and power. The test of true repentance then is the remorse, joy and renewal (restoration to the Father), the power to change, and the progress of sanctification.

From *Sonship* (World Harvest Mission):

Remorse: "I can't believe I did that!" or "I just can't forgive myself!"

Resolution: "I promise to do better next time!" or "I won't *do* that again!"

[Paraphrase: Two great misunderstandings: this is a result of **overestimating ourselves** (and running from our deep-rooted sins, thus, leaving us surprised when we do the sinful things we do. In essence, **we don't believe what God says about our hearts**. Second, **we believe we can change ourselves**. We make resolutions, etc., a result of making light of our sin (**underestimating our sin**).]

[When we approach our sin with those above misunderstandings, then we approach others' sins with misunderstandings as well:]

Resent: "I hate it when you do that!" or "I wouldn't have done that."

React: Angry thoughts, dirty looks, cutting words [withdrawal/retaliation].

We are lenient on ourselves, but harsh on others. Another way of saying that is this: we are hedonists toward our sin, but legalists towards others' sins. Repentance looks different than the above:

Realize: "I *did* do that." Or "I *can* believe that I am like that!"

Repent: "Lord, forgive me! You are my only hope."

Hosea 14:1-9 describes true repentance. Psalm 51 describes repentance. The parable of the Pharisee and tax collector's prayers; the tax collector's prayer is a prayer of repentance, asking, begging the Lord to make atonement for him as the only way for forgiveness.

WHAT UNION WITH CHRIST ASSURES: THE SIGN AND SEAL OF OUR UNION (BAPTISM)

The sacrament of our Baptism practiced in the Church is also a visible sign of an invisible grace; baptism is a reminder of my death and resurrection in Christ (produced by our union with Christ). It is a public sign and seal of our redemption in Jesus; I am clean in Jesus (the former covenantal sign of being a member of the redeemed was circumcision, in the context of a family; baptism is a sign and seal of the new covenant, of the kingdom of God). Baptism is a sign, a public sign, that we have become covenantally related to the Father through our union with Christ.

What happens in baptism? We are immersed in a sea of sin with Christ, in His baptism. (From Romans 6:3-4). We emerge clean; Jesus emerges dirty. If you remember Mark 1, you learn that Jesus was baptized after all of the repentant sinners were baptized first by John the Baptist. Why did Jesus, the perfect man, the man who lived a perfect life, need

to be baptized? Imagine yourself in the basin of the Jordan River among the line of people who were being baptized. As each person is being immersed, they arise before one another clean. Jesus then follows and is immersed in a basin of sin. It's like going into a bath after all the dirty folks had already taken a bath. Everyone else was dirty and made clean. Jesus was the only clean person to begin with, however; when He enters the water, He was immersed in a basin of sin. Jesus became dirty to soak up the sin of His people.⁹

When the Apostle Paul talks about baptism in Romans 6:3-4 as the way into salvation, the special emphasis is that baptism plays the ceremonial part of what the Holy spirit can only do in full—unite us to Jesus. Hence, although baptism is not the “magic bullet” that solves the problem of our sin, at the same time, baptism is the normal experience for the believer—for our experience of the reality of our union with Christ into the community of Christ. It is a public confession of the sign and seal of our faith.

For the Israelite, baptism did not conjure up a comforting and inspiring ceremony. Rather, to “baptize” evoked associations of violence. The word “baptism” (in the Greek) was used, for example, of people being drowned, or of ships being sunk. When baptism is applied to Christian initiation we should not think of gentleness and inspiration; it means death, death to a whole way of life. That's Paul's point. **Christians are people who have died, and their baptism emphasizes that death.** We were drowned in our old selves, and made alive in our new selves because Jesus was not just immersed in a basin of sin; He cosmically drowned in it. Baptism into His death means that we died. We died enough to be *buried*. Our sins have been buried, in a sense.

Why? Because of sin in us, we needed to die to self (Galatians 2:20), to put to death our sin and sinful nature (rendering it powerless and useless). “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry (Colossians 3:5).” Terms to mortify sin and sinful nature are: self-denial, self-control, putting to death, taking off the old self, all applied to the heart by our union with Christ. Before we can truly live, we need to die. We need to mortify sin in baptism, and we need to mortify our sinful nature continually (in repentance), for sanctification.

WHAT UNION WITH CHRIST ASSURES: THE SIGN AND SEAL OF OUR UNION (COMMUNION)

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper practiced in the Church is a visible sign of an invisible grace; the Lord's Supper is a continuing of the communion we have in union with Jesus, as celebrated in communion as the body of Christ. From Gospel Dynamics 3, we learn that the Lord's Supper is really an aspect of the continuity-discontinuity of the covenant established between God and man. Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper as a means for renewal of the covenant; every time we drink of the cup, we are performing an act of renewal of the covenant through the blood of Christ. We have the power to renew the covenant in our failure, because Jesus had fulfilled the stipulations of the covenant, and we live in Him. We are not given a death sentence because the cup, Christ's blood, covers us; we had died in Him, and no longer owe the debt due to the wages of sin. The same goes for the bread; it was Jesus' body that was broken on our behalf, and we, in union with Him, are given the privilege to renew the covenant, despite our failure, because we live in Him.

⁹ It wasn't until I read something from Sinclair Ferguson's *Mark Commentary* that it struck me about the significance of His baptism.

The cup and the bread teach us the following: either God must forsake the covenant, or we must die because we had failed to live according to the stipulations of the covenant. Either our blood must be spilled or the covenant must be forsaken (thus, the character of God is shattered); Jesus spilled His own blood so that neither the covenant is forsaken, nor our blood is spilled. Either our body must be broken, or the covenant must be left broken. Jesus sacrificed His own body so that neither the covenant is broken, nor our bodies. We drink in faith and are assured in faith that we are in union with Christ; we died with Him, and are made alive through His blood and broken body. Neither we are forsaken, nor the covenant forsaken because Jesus was cosmically forsaken.

LIVING THE LIFESTYLE OF REPENTANCE: THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL

God's Word addresses "the seriousness of sin". How does God's Word do that? He uses His Law, which is perfect. The reason why the Law of God (what a holy God demands in a holy people), ultimately, was given was to make God's people into a nation, a kingdom. Thus, since laws define how a society operates, God's laws defined how God's people would live. Breaking His law defines, then, the flawed nature of man as the "image-bearer" of God. Breaking the law resulted in death.

Consider Romans 2:

All who sin apart from the **law** will also perish apart from the **law**, and all who sin under the **law** will be judged by the **law**.¹³ For it is not those who hear the **law** who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the **law** who will be declared righteous.¹⁴ (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the **law**, do by nature things required by the **law**, they are a **law** for themselves, even though they do not have the **law**,¹⁵ since they show that the requirements of the **law** are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.)

Everyone is under the Law, and all have failed in observing the law of God. Consider Romans 3:20, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the **law**; rather, through the **law** we become conscious of sin." Here, we have one of the most explicit statements about the function of the Law, which is "to make us conscious of sin": "The **law** was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more...(Romans 5:20)"

The Law of God (as Apostle Paul is developing, at least, in Romans) should convince us *how sinful (or how much more sinful) we are* in light of God's holiness; understanding the consequence of falling short of the glory of God, as defined by the Law (because of our sinfulness we could not measure up to God's glory, that is, we could not stand in His *shekinah* presence—we needed a veil to protect us). That truth should drive us to a great Savior who obeyed the Law perfectly, and yet died by taking on our sin.

A biblical understanding of the Law will draw you into the true Gospel; a wrong understanding of the purpose of the Law will drive you away (in fear / shame / guilt) from the Lord. Only through Jesus Christ can we have the righteousness of keeping all of the Law.¹⁰ This should wake us up from trying to live for our own goodness, and also

¹⁰ Matt. 5:18, "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

wake us up from desiring to break the Law, in pursuit of our own desires. Jesus lived life perfectly; He kept all of God’s laws; He performed everything right; He obeyed perfectly. The true Gospel calls us *to not work for our own salvation (legalism)*, but to place our trust in Jesus, our “alien” righteousness, who performed all of the work perfectly for our salvation.

Christ also died the death, to pay the penalty of breaking the law (that others broke). Sin was so serious that God’s justice had to punish sinners for sin. Christ’s death was the perfect sacrifice that eradicates sin. The true Gospel calls us *to stop living according to sin and the thinking that it will be alright if we continued in sin (hedonism)*, but to place our trust in Jesus, who died the death to satisfy God’s justice for our salvation.

With regard to Galatians 2:11-16, Dr. Timothy Keller quotes J. Gresham Machen: “The central point between Paul and the false teachers is not the temporal order but the logical.” The issue is not the temporal-chronological, because everyone’s life is different with regard to how these things come together; the issue is of logical order, of cause and effect.¹¹

The logical order, of Paul:

1. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ
2. At that moment you are saved.
3. Immediately you keep the law of God.

The logical order of the false Teachers:

1. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ
3. Immediately you keep the law of God.
2. At that moment you are saved.

Like the false teachers, we try to add to Christ by trying to believe, obey, and are saved. But the Gospel according to Christ teaches that we believe, are saved, and then obey. This logical order is critical in the life of a Christian; we need to understand the critical “take-aways” from our justification and our sanctification; the following chart helps to delineate the two:

PARALLELS OF JUSTIFICATION AND SANCTIFICATION¹²

	JUSTIFICATION	SANCTIFICATION
THE PROBLEM	Powerless to save myself— “I am guilty.”	Powerless to change myself—“I am helpless.”
THE BASIS	The finished and present work of Christ.	The finished and present work of Christ.
THE INSTRUMENT	Faith in the promises of the Gospel.	Faith in the promises of the Gospel.

¹¹ If you refer to the Acts 15 passage that is examined throughout Gospel Methods, Part 2 and 3, and in the Gospel lesson in this seminar document, this logical order of acceptance-obedience is thoroughly discussed.

¹² From “Living for the King,” New Life Dresher, Fall, 2004 (JFK).

MAJOR DIFFERENCE	Deals with the guilt of sin— once for all.	Deals with the power of sin—moment by moment.
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GOSPEL LESSON WITH REGARD TO THIS LOGICAL ORDER [ACTS 15:1-21]

The **significance of the dispute** in this passage (the teaching of some of the believers in 15:1-11):

We see that the church in Antioch was divided when men from Judea came into sharp dispute with the Apostle Paul and Barnabas, who were sent to Jerusalem to address the issue, and what was the issue? We see this in 15:2, “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved,” and in 15:5, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.” What was the major issue? The earliest Christian church began with Jewish converts. It became evident that as more and more Gentiles, who had a completely different view on culture, and faith practice, and morals, entered into this community, the cultural fiber of the church community was changing rapidly. The church was becoming less Jewish, and as a result, some of the traditions held closely by the Jewish community were being questioned.

Circumcision was one of those traditions held very closely among the Jews; it was held sacred because it symbolized a pact with God, a blood-pact, a covenant. The skin of the male was literally cut, blood was drawn; it was a sign and seal of this covenant, saying that God would build His nation through Abraham’s descendants; it was also a sign of purification of the people who are in this covenant relationship with God. The pact was like saying, “May this happen to me,” for anyone who violated the covenant, either God or man. It was a sacred ritual, symbolizing the most sacred, intimate, holy relationship between God and man.

So early church leaders debated this issue, especially with regard to the Gentiles. The Gentiles were never included in this part of history, yet they were still called to this covenant [by grace]. They heard the Gospel, just as the Jews of the early Christian church. So, since they were a part of this citizenship, this covenant, as a people called by God, shouldn’t they be forced to comply with the same Mosaic laws?

And as you can see, there was sharp dispute and debate. You see the two sides. In 15:2, what was the teaching of some of the believers? Unless you are circumcised, you cannot be saved. And what Peter’s response? 15:10-11, “Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved, just as they are.” What was Peter trying to say? The significance of the dispute is this: at the heart of the dispute is how one relates to God, how one gains access to God. And you have two opposing views; they are sharply opposed.

Every sees one of two ways to gain access to God. The **first** is summarized by 15:2 and 15:5, “Unless you are circumcised, unless you obey the law, you cannot be saved.” In essence, “I obey so that I am accepted by God”. The **second** view is summarized by Peter’s response in 15:6-11,

The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the

gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

Look at the language here: **choice, no distinction, accepted, purified by faith.** In essence, "I am accepted by God, and so I obey."

So, there are two views: either you believe that "I obey God in order to be accepted," or you believe that "I am accepted, and therefore, I obey God." What Peter warns is this: how you order the two concepts of 'acceptance' and 'obedience' will change the way you live. If you place obedience first in the order, or anytime you place obedience as a part of the pre-requisite list, then what you are doing is this: you are testing God, and "putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear."

In other words, Peter is saying this: anytime you use obedience as a pre-requisite for acceptance, you are turning your people into slaves. The slightest tradition, the additional ritual, the occasional rule or law. So, the significance of the dispute is this: the dispute reveals that there are two ways of viewing how one relates or connects with God, and depending on which of the two ways you believe, you will either have a yoke around your neck, or you will be spiritually free. Either we obey to become accepted, or we are accepted by God, by His choice, without distinction, by grace, and this truth transforms us daily. That's the first point.

The **implications of living on either side of the dispute** (15:6-11):

Depending on which side of the dispute we lean on, there will be consequences. What do you see in 15:3? The apostles shared about how the Gentiles are being converted, and what happens? "This news made all the brothers very glad." In 15:7, Peter addresses the assembly, and what does he say? "God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from *my* lips the message of the gospel and believe." In 15:12, what do you see? All who heard were silent as the apostles shared about what God was doing through them to the Gentiles.

In essence, if you really believe that God accepted others, just as He accepted you, if you really believe that He made no distinction, if you really believe that He purified *their* hearts by faith (and not by works), if you really believe that we are all saved by grace, then it becomes possible for several amazing things to happen on the inside.

First, people wholly different than yourself will inevitably hear the message of the gospel from *your* lips. There is no more 'we-versus-them'. They will hear from you! You will dare to see people as flawed, but chosen. Flawed, but accepted. Flawed but undistinguishable. Flawed, but purified (redeemed). Flawed, but saved. Second, they will hear the *gospel* from your lips. The good news. The *music*. You will dare to stop placing conditions on others for them to receive forgiveness, to receive salvation. You will not place cultural conditions on others because the gospel promises that they are just as easily acceptable; the gospel transcends culture. Look at Peter: a low-class Jew, yet he was preaching to both Jews *and* Gentiles. You will stop placing your own moral conditions on others, because the gospel is without distinction. That's good news. It doesn't look at outward change as proof of inward transformation.

What do I mean by outward change as proof of inward transformation? Here's what I mean: you see, religion is outside-in. I have to be outwardly pure, as a way of feeling inwardly worthy, acceptable to God. In other words, I have to be 'circumcised' on the outside, so that God will accept me. The Gospel is inside-out. Do you remember what Stephen said before he was stoned in Acts 7[51]? "You stiff-necked people, with *uncircumcised hearts and ears.*" The Gospel is about transformation that takes place on the inside, marked by an event, Jesus' death on the cross, that declares me worthy, and *that* transformation starts to change every aspect of my life on the outside as a result.

The moment you begin to let the slightest of either of these truths to enter into your life, it changes your whole life. If you start to follow the Gospel, but then add obedience to even one law in addition to the Gospel, for your sense of self-worth, then you're going to get stuck. You place yourself on a path that forces you to obey every law perfectly, and you will *never* feel complete, or whole, or acceptable, or loved, or worthy.

In essence, there will be no sense of *gladness* [like the gladness of the brothers in this passage] because of the Gospel. You will hear the preaching of the Gospel, you may even agree with it, but it won't *move* you; you may hear the words of the Gospel, but you won't hear the *music* of the Gospel. There will be no transforming joy in your life, you see.

The Gospel, however, is about joy. Why? Look at 15:10-11. Peter knows that the moment we depart from the essential truth of the Gospel, we start to force people to earn their acceptance, or to earn their distinction, or to earn their purification. And he says that we are testing God when we do this. How do we test God? "By putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear." Any attempt at joy with this yoke around your neck will be a terrible burden, a tremendous weight. And that's not inspiring. It isn't moving. And it won't change you.

The moment we depart from the essential truth of the Gospel, we start to step all over other people; we make them slaves, putting a burden on them that they can't bear, one that we can't bear ourselves. Peter says, "No! It is through the *grace* of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

We cannot bear this burden on our own; it would crush us. I am trying to hit the gym again to prepare for the summer basketball season. Part of that involves weights. Now, I am 130 pounds. What would happen if I went under the assumption that I could lift weight more than I could? By overestimating my actual strength, I would get crushed. Trust me, it happened this past week.

What is Peter teaching? When we try to use obedience as a way of gaining access to the Father, do you know what you are doing? You are overestimating your spiritual ability to carry a weight that you cannot carry; and when you fail, the weight of guilt, frustration, failure will break your spiritual back. Peter is saying this: that when you try to use obedience as a way of gaining access to God, you are overestimating yourself, and putting a yoke, a weight, around your neck that will crush you. You aren't hearing the music of the Gospel. There will be no freedom, no sense of gladness in your life.

So, we have two points so far. The first deals with the significance of this dispute in your life: Do you see how all your pursuits in life, all your desires, all your deeds, all your inner requirements – these all point to your view or understanding of your self-worth – these are all outward ways of pursuing how you view how you relate to God? Either

you are working to earn God's acceptance, or you are obedient as a result of seeing that you are accepted.

The second deals with the implications, or indicators that you are on one side of viewing the Christian life, or the other. The implications of living as though we merely *hear* the words of the Gospel, or hear the *music* of the Gospel. Are you consistently critical of others, their flaws, and specific about how they are different from you, and not specific enough about your inward flaws? Where is your joy? Is it visible? Are others glad about the changes going on in your life, and the changes that you are enabling in others' lives? Do you see how one view draws you closer to freedom in your relationship with God, while the other puts you in the position of a slave?

The **resolution of the dispute** (Acts 16:12-18),

We see this in James' summary. James was a very conservative Jew, but here, he aligns himself with the teaching of the apostles. Look at 15:16-18, "'After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' that have been known for ages."

This was derived from Amos 9:11-12, and it teaches about God's promise to restore all the nations of His people as one nation, the people who bear His name. In essence, what James was teaching was this: that the salvation of the Gentiles (the deeds of the apostles), and the fact that the deeds of the apostles was powered by the essential truth of the Gospel behind Peter's teaching, falls in line with God's whole plan to restore His nation. He points to a prophecy in Amos to show how all these things were in agreement with God's plans.

In Amos' day, sinners, those who opposed God's laws, were cut off. The nation of Israel was circumcised and made pure through a promise, and as a result, many nations would be cut off, torn away. Do you see the imagery here? But, what was James saying? That the rebuilding of David's tent, the place where God dwells, where God would lead His nation and be among His people, that this restoration of the temple presence of God would be followed by His remnant who will seek Him, including the Gentiles. That the Lord would rebuild and restore this fallen tent of David. How would He accomplish this?

In John 2, after Jesus cleared the temple of all those who were in the outer courts of the temple, incidentally the part of the court reserved for Gentiles seeking after God, but not allowed into the inner court, the religious, the Jews demanded, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this," what was Jesus' response? "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

Circumcision was just a visual picture of what would happen to Jesus, as a sign and seal of the covenant. On the one hand, it's the same covenant because it's a sign of God's promise of salvation and citizenship into His nation, and it's a blood oath. Circumcision was a visual picture of the covenant promise: the flesh had to be torn so that the blood oath could be made, as a promise that if we don't live according to God's promises, we would be cut away, torn away like the flesh.

On the other hand, it's a new covenant; we never lived up to the promise, we deserved to be cut away. Jesus, however, who fulfilled the whole law, was destroyed. On the cross, He cried, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" In essence, He was completely cut off, so that we would be completely accepted. His flesh was torn, so that

we would not be torn. The circumcision mainly demands what? It's either the promise, or you; either the promise goes out the door, or you go out the door. Jesus shed His blood, His perfect blood. So that it's not the promise, nor you. It's Jesus' body that is torn; He is the one that is cut off, so that you would not be torn, and would be accepted. So that you would be restored.

[Jesus bore the yoke that we cannot bear, that others cannot bear. He's the only one who actually could gain access to God by obeying the law; He was perfect. He was the only one who could bear the yoke. And yet, what happened? He was torn; He was cut off completely. He was rejected by God, so that we, who could not bear the yoke could be accepted by God.]

When you trust in the Gospel, what happens? If you've been living obediently to try to earn God's acceptance, you can invert your way of life. Live life trusting that you are accepted, and hear the music of salvation everyday. When you hear the music of salvation, then you will see the Father's delight in you—that He purified your heart by faith, and demands to lift that impossible yoke off your neck, and see it placed on a perfect Savior who lived the life that you should live, then died the death that you should die. This will free you to live out of love for your Father.

INWARD APPLICATION

1. What is your working definition of the Gospel, now with respect to repentance and obedience?
2. How do you often get caught between your self-righteousness and active righteousness? How does passive righteousness lead to active righteousness in union with Christ? What drives your power to change?
3. What are the many assurances you have the closer you come to Christ? What are the implications of not pursuing this union? How do those implications become evident in your practical life?
4. What characterized your repentance in the past? How does life in the Gospel shape our view of repentance? How must we shift our lifestyles to live out the Gospel in our repentance?