

Sharing in Christ's Life and Ministry: Moving Beyond Burnout or Bitterness
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Grace Communion International, Orlando, FL, July 22-24, 2010

I can truly say that it is a privilege to be with you this morning. I'm grateful for the opportunity to be here and to share with you these few days together. I say that because I am aware of the great work the God of our Lord Jesus Christ has been doing among you for close to two decades. This gathering of the newly named Grace Communion International, I'd have to say, is something of a modern day miracle. Rarely has a denomination undergone such a wonderful transformation---and survived! You are a living sign of the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. I also am aware and humbled in hearing about some of the suffering for the sake of Gospel many of you have experienced as you went through that purifying transition. And in that way you are not only a sign of the resurrection of Christ, but also of his sufferings.

I should tell you that back in the mid 70's, I was a student at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA. Two things stand out in my memory now, sparked by my more recent reacquaintance with you. Back then, from the third floor of the Fuller classroom building, I believe we could look out towards the West and see the construction of the magnificent Ambassador College auditorium. I can attest that at that time many Fuller students were praying for this denomination, for your full inclusion in the church of Jesus Christ.

I had a particular interest in the WCG because four of us seminary students rented a house the a man who was a member of this church. And he loved to engage us in theological debate every time he came around to collect the rent. We prayed for him as well. I can tell you today that the Lord has done far more than I was asking or thinking or praying in those days. So it's a particular joy to be with you again at this time in your history.

This morning I want to share with you some thoughts about our life in Christ. For many of you this will only be a reminder of what you have already seen and heard. Perhaps for

some of you this message may be relatively new and fresh. In either case, I trust it will be a lesson from the heart of the Gospel that will renew, refresh and invigorate you through the gracious working of our Triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As you have become aware, the heart of the Gospel of God is Jesus Christ. He is the center of the center. The living center, the living reality at the center of Christian Scripture and Revelation. For Jesus Christ does not just bring to us information about God, but embodies in his person the self-revelation of God, in flesh and blood, time and space. Jesus Christ is God's own self-revelation and self-giving in person, up-close and personal! God did not send someone else to make himself known. God did not send someone else to accomplish our redemption, but came himself in a divine act of self-giving. God was in Christ, reconciling the whole cosmos to himself. When we consider Jesus Christ, then, we come face to face with the whole God. We find out through his word and act and very being, Who God is.

And very much like the early church in the first few centuries you have been seeking to understand what faith in Jesus Christ as Lord means. You have been reflecting relentlessly on the teachings, actions and astounding events of Jesus. You, like the early church, have been searching for words, concepts, illustrations and stories that could point faithfully to the same reality they beheld in Jesus Christ—and finding many that were inadequate and downright mistaken and misleading. And that's exactly what good theology is all about.

The early church wrestled with the teaching of the Apostles and Gospel preachers and writers. They took into account their daily lives of worship and prayer, that had begun anew when they were baptized in the name of, God The Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Pondering deeply the mystery of Jesus Christ at the center of the center of their faith led them to conclude that: to deal with Jesus Christ was to have dealings with the Father and the Holy Spirit in Him. For Jesus' entire ministry could be summed up by saying: he came to show us the Father and send us his Spirit. One theologian of the early church thought of it this way. As the invisible light of the Holy Spirit shines on the

human face of Jesus, we behold in his face the very visage of the Father. Being in the presence of Jesus was being in the presence of God himself: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Although only the Son was incarnate by taking on a human life the whole God was present and active in Jesus. Their devotion to Jesus Christ as Lord at the center of the center led them to know and worship and live their lives in relationship to the Trinity.

And from that root developed over time what we now call the doctrine of the Trinity. But the doctrine of the Trinity is merely a transposition into words of the revelation of the reality that was present and active in the being, speaking, actions and events of the life of Jesus Christ. The believing community had met the Trinity in person before it ever knew there could be a doctrine about the Trinity. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ was the Father-Son-Spirit God from all eternity—now personally known in time and space, flesh and blood for us and our salvation.

Now for us today, we are not so much interested in the doctrine of the Trinity as a teaching. We are interested in knowing the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In worshipping the Father through the Son and in the Spirit. Adoring God as our Triune God. The doctrine is like a map that helps us navigate well and safely through actual real life and real relationship with the whole true God. Consequently, we want as faithful a theological map as we can have since that map leads to doxology, praise and prayer.

I want to explore in some detail today how that theological map of the Trinity sheds light on our daily lives under the Lordship of Christ, who shows us the Father and send us the Spirit. For that Triune life itself is shared with us in and through Christ. Our life in Christ is formed and shaped by that Triune Life. This is so because Jesus shares with us not only himself, but also his communion with the Father and the Spirit. ***You see, the shape and pattern of relationship Jesus has with the Father in the Spirit is the same shape and pattern for our relationship with God.*** That pattern can clearly be seen in the Gospel of John. There are three pairs of relationships that can be compared to each other according to Jesus' teaching. He states: As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. He also indicates: As I have loved you, so you ought to love one another. So the love that is

between the Father and Son (from all eternity), that exact same love is repeated in the Incarnate Son's relationship with us in time. And that love we receive from Jesus we are to live out in relationship with each other. All these relationships are relationships of love that finds their origin and source in the very eternal life of the Trinity!

If that isn't astounding enough, there is an even deeper mystery here: Jesus does not just indicate to us the outlines of right relationship with God. In Jesus we actually are made by the Holy Spirit to share in his own relationship, his own communion, with the Father in the Spirit. By grace he shares with us His relationship with the Father.

So, on that basis I want to talk about just four major points. First, the Incarnate Son's unity with the Father. Second the Son's participation in his relationship to the Father. Third our unity with Jesus, the Incarnate Son of the Father. And fourth, our participation in our unity with Jesus by the Spirit.

1. Jesus union with the Father

So, let's look at Jesus relationship with the Father. There are some important and intriguing passages of Scripture that convey through Jesus' teaching some deep realities. In Jn 17, as we overhear Jesus praying, we gain a unique view into his extraordinary relationship with his Father. That relationship involves a oneness, a unity, a togetherness that surpasses any others we know of. He says twice in his prayer that they are one (vv. 11 and 22). The uniqueness of that oneness is especially highlighted when Jesus speaks twice in this prayer of the Father being *in* the Son and the Son *in* the Father (vv. 21 and 23). That particular phrase is repeated three other places in the Gospel of John. "I am in the Father and the Father is in me." (Jn 10: 38; 14:10,11) The early church hardly had words to refer to this profound reality. They ended up saying the Father and Son in-exist in each other (*en ousia*). They went on to coin a couple of other words to try to point to the unique oneness of the Incarnate Son with his Heavenly Father. The reality exceeded any and every way they had available to refer to what they came to know, in and through Jesus, about his relationship to the Father.

2. Jesus participation in the Triune life with the Father and the Spirit

That unity and oneness is further depicted in John and in the rest of the New Testament by noting various kinds of interaction that takes place in their relationship. The upshot is that *there has been from all eternity a personal, dynamic interaction, a fellowship or sharing and participation between them*. The Son is said to have lived in the very heart of the Father and so has seen him like no other (Jn 1: 18). The relationship between the Father and Son is described as an exclusive one of eternal love and eternal knowing. “no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son (Mt. 11:27 Lk 10:22). The Father and Son know each other deeply and love each other fully, and that has been going on in the Triune life before there ever was time itself (Jn 17:24). Their communion also is described as the activity of mutual glorification. The Son desires to have the Father glorify him so that he can glorify the Father (Jn 17:1,5). I imagine a kind of a hot-potato-of-glory-game going on for all eternity, before the world existed. As soon as one would receive the glory from the other, they’d pass it on. Glory is not to be possessed, but to be passed on, to stream forth to the other. You cannot give yourself glory, for that would be inglorious. So, even in God, glory is given, glory is exchanged, glory shines forth.

Other places in John’s Gospels also describes Jesus’ participation and fellowship in this glorious, loving relationship. He says, he only does what he sees the Father doing (Jn 5:19). He only says what the Father has told him (Jn 8:28). Jesus indicates that his working is sharing in the Father’s continual working (Jn 5:17). They act together in all they do. Returning to John 17, we hear that Jesus receives everything from his Father and then passes it on to us. Jesus receives from the Father his authority, his words, his people, his work, his name, his love and ultimately his own glory. They share everything because in the unity of their loving and glorious relationship everything is given over to the other. The Triune life involves an extraordinary and active oneness of love from all eternity.

I think, for many, this calls for somewhat of a correction in our theological maps. Often we think that when the Father sends the Son, the Son went off on his own, leaving the Father behind. We image that after he had accomplished his Father’s will, he would return and report back in, filling his Father in on how it went—down there. But what we

hear Jesus telling us is far different. The Son was the Father's going out, going forth. So that the Father is with the Son in his sending. The Father is not left behind!

Also we tend to think that there was some kind of division of labor going on in God, much like one of our factories or workplaces. Again, that is just not the picture we have. Since God is one, all the actions of God toward creation involve all three Persons—Whether Creation, Reconciliation or the final Redemption of the new heavens and new earth. The work of God cannot be divided up. The most we can say is that in various works one takes the lead as the others participate in their own way in their co-operative activities toward creation. Well, we could say much more, but we'll stop there for now on this topic. We can at least see these basics clearly in Jesus own life and teachings. The Father does not stay behind in sending the Son. The Words of God cannot be divided among the persons.

Sum: Jesus Being and Action in Relationship

We can sum up and say Jesus' whole life is one of being and action in relationship. Jesus has his identity and his very being by being in an eternal relationship of holy love with the Father. And out of that being in relationship flows the action of the Son with the Father in a fellowship and communion of co-activity. And that activity of relationship has occurred in God from all eternity and so now also flows out to us, in time. The blessedness and joy of god is to be and act together.

In an attempt to point faithfully to this extraordinary relationship the early church came to invest a couple of words with unique meaning. Since no words or concepts or analogies they had on hand were anywhere near adequate, they had to invent some. They said the Son was of one nature or one being with the Father. *Homoousios*, was the Greek word. They said the Son and the Father “in-exist” in each other. They also declared that they mutually indwell each other or they mutually envelop each other or they co-inhere in one another. *Perichoresis* was the Greek word they used to point to this profound unity and dynamic interaction of Father, Son and Spirit.

In sum, the Father and Son had a one-of-a-kind unity and personal communion that only exists between the Father and Son in the Spirit. God was never a lonely God, looking for

someone to love, but a fullness of fellowship, communion, of holy loving from all eternity. When we grasp the holy loving in the Triune life, then we see what real loving is like. And we see this loving both in being and in action as we contemplate the relationship of Jesus and his Father in the Holy Spirit. All love, all unity, all togetherness, is to be measured by the Triune love because that love is the source and sustenance of all true loving. Knowing God as a Trinity teaches us about the true nature of love.

3. Our union with Christ

So, what about us? Where do we fit in? What does the relationship of Jesus with the Father have to do with us? We'll see that the pattern of relationship is the same. We too are given the gift of a relationship with Jesus, the Incarnate Son, that involves a unity and a participation or communion comparable to the unity and participation of the Father and the Son. Now it would be easy for us to think of this pattern as providing us a wonderful example to follow of unity, of oneness of love. But to stop there would be a serious mistake. The relationship of love we see there, in the life of the Trinity, is not for us to just try and imitate. In fact it is impossible to imitate. Rather, that love, that unity, is there for us to participate in, get involved in, to share in—not merely imitate, not just view it from afar and try to emulate.

And that fact and reality is an astounding grace. Jesus did not come merely to be an example for us, but came so that we might share in *his* union and communion with the Father. Let's look at some passages that spell this out.

In John 17 we find out something astounding about our relationship with Christ. We live and move and have our being in relationship with him. First, by grace we are united with Christ. And second, we participate in all that he is doing by the Spirit.

We see in Jesus' prayer that what he receives through his relationship of oneness to the Father he then gives to us. Jesus extends and shares with us: his knowledge of God's true name and character, his word, his mission, his love, his glory. And, he gives us a unity and oneness with himself and with the Father. This is astounding; nearly

incomprehensible. We actually are said to have a unity and oneness that is comparable to Father and Son's own unity and oneness. He prays: (v 21) I ask "that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one"—with the result "so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." (v. 26). Both the language of oneness and of indwelling, of "being in," are used of the Father-Son relationship and also of ours!

The Christian life is one bound up from beginning to end in the life of Christ since he shares with us all that he has received from the Father. The truth and reality of our union with Christ is announced not just here in John 17 but throughout the New Testament.

Scriptural Teaching on Union with Christ

So what do the Scriptures teach? Let me say first *what it is not* to help us stay on track as we review the biblical teaching. 1) Union with Christ is not essentially a *moral* union with the result that I agree and am committed to doing what God regards as right and righteous. That may be a moral fruit of our union, but that is not what it is. 2) Nor is it essentially a *psychological* union where Jesus has positive regard for me and I feel warmly connected and desirous of his approval and presence. Again that may be a fruit, but not the source. 3) Union with Christ is not a *volitional* union where I am willing to do the practical work of God, accomplishing all that he sets out for me to do, so that my will is a mirror image of God's will. 4) It is not even a union of purposes, a *telic* union, where my goals, aspirations, dreams, ideals and hopes match God's. Even at that level we are not to the bottom of union with Christ. Our union with Christ is much deeper, more enduring and far more effective in our lives than these other aspects of the Christian life. Lets take a brief look at some of those passages.

The New Testament proclaims that we are so united to Christ that the core of our very being is changed because it has become spiritually joined to the perfected humanity of Jesus. The Apostle Paul writes that we are one in Spirit with Christ (I Cor. 6:17). In the letter to the

Ephesians we read that we are so connected that we are, presently--right now-- seated with Christ in the heavenlies (Eph. 2:6). We are so joined that what has happened to Christ two thousand years ago has actually included us. So in the letter to the Colossians we hear that we have co-died with Christ and we have been co-raised with Christ (Col. 2:12-3; 3:1). Paul announces this fact as a completed action which is actually true of all the members of the body of Christ.

In 1 Corinthians the Apostle Paul announces that everything that Jesus has is actually and really ours. He declares that Jesus himself is our wisdom, our righteousness and our sanctification (I Cor. 1: 30). The New Testament is filled with language that points to a profound reality that we belong in an astounding way to Jesus Christ. We can be said to indwell him and he, us. We are often depicted as being *in* Christ, not just being with or alongside him. The book of Ephesians is full of this kind of description that frankly blows our minds and fries our rational mental circuits. We have been called and destined *in* Christ. We have become new creatures *in* Christ (II Cor. 5:17), because “he has made us his own” (Phil. 3:12).

Especially in the book of Hebrews we see that such a union had its beginning in the Incarnation, in Christ's assuming a complete humanity reaching from conception to his death. What qualifies Jesus to accomplish this priestly ministry with us is his assumption of our humanity along with its fallen condition. And the amazing and truly awesome result is that He is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters (Heb. 2:11).

The early church recognized the depths of the incarnation when it declared at the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) not only that Jesus was one in being (*homoousios*) with the Father, but also one in being (*homoousios*) with humanity. The Apostle Paul, of course, laid the ground for this doctrinal explication of the Council when he identified Jesus as the new Adam (Rom. 5:14; I Cor. 15:45) the new head of humanity. Jesus Christ is united to us even more closely than our being united to the Adam of the Garden in Genesis. His divinity, by virtue of his union with the Father, is no more true of him than his humanity, by virtue of his union with us. Who is Jesus? He is one with the Father and Spirit and one with us. Thus our relationship with Christ puts our very existence on a whole new basis. We are who we are in relationship with Jesus Christ.

Calvin pointed back to how the early church expressed it: “He who was the Son of God

by nature, became a son of man so that we who are the sons of men by nature might become the sons and daughters of God, by grace,.” In more recent times Prof. James Torrance tirelessly reminded us that by his grace we are given “the gift of sharing in the Son's union and communion with the Father in the power of the Spirit.”

The theological reflection of the Reformation recognized the significance of this teaching on our union with Christ. Calvin called it a “wonderful exchange” occurring at the deepest level of who we are, so that Christ takes our fallen and broken natures and gives us a share in his sanctified and perfected human nature. The truth is that who we are is no longer who we are alone. For we are not alone. We are who we are by virtue of being united to Christ.

When Calvin and Luther commented on Ephesians 5:21-32, following the early church teachings, they did not exposit on the nature of human marriage, but marveled that we are far more united to Christ than a man and woman are in matrimony! Marriage is a dim and distant reflection of the deeper truth about our real communion with Christ. The ultimate companion we are made for is Jesus Christ who is truly bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh and to whom we are united by the Holy Spirit.

Calvin used to warn that we ought never consider Christ at a distance from us. We are, to the root of our being, who we are in relationship to him, who made himself one with us. This is why both Luther and Calvin recognized that our whole salvation was complete in Christ: not just our justification, but our sanctification and glorification as well. To have Christ was to have the whole Christ. Christ could not be divided up into pieces, so neither could our salvation. What is complete and actual in Christ is truly and really ours even if it does not yet appear to be so. Our lives *are* hidden in Christ (Col. 3:3). Our life *in him* is being worked out *in us* by the Spirit. But this new nature wrought in us comes through the sheer gift of our union with Christ. This union is not the result of our working out a potential that might be true if we properly apply ourselves. Rather the Christian life is living out and manifesting the present reality of our union with Christ. He has made us his own!

Our redemption does not just depend upon what Christ did, but upon who he is in the depths of his being—one with God and one with us. For our salvation, our life in Christ, was not

only accomplished *by* Christ but *in* Christ as Calvin used to say and as James Torrance used to regularly remind us. Our new life is not external to us and layered on over us, but is worked out first in the humanity of Jesus and then given to us through his Spirit.

How Does this Compare to How we Think About Being Christians today?

So, a case easily can be made from the New Testament that essential to the very meaning of being a follower of Christ was that one was *united* to Christ. If you asked someone in the early church whether they were followers of Jesus, they would likely answer, “Yes, I am united to Christ.” And centuries later this was also true of the magisterial Reformers. Being a Christian meant for each: *I am united to Christ*.

Now think of how we most often identify ourselves as Christians. Is one of the *first* things you think of, “Well, yes, I’m united to Christ?” Or would you begin, “Yes, I made a decision for Christ.” “I follow the teachings of Jesus.” “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” “I attend church regularly.” “I was baptized and confirmed.” “I’m committed to Jesus Christ.” Now there’s nothing wrong with these answers in themselves. They contain part of the truth. Notice, however, that they all refer to something *we* do or have done. The emphasis is on our response and action. But does this get to the root of who we really are as Christians?

By leaving union with Christ unacknowledged, all these other definitions and declarations actually leave us on a precarious perch. As James Torrance used to say, we can easily be “thrown back on ourselves” when we concentrate on our response apart from being first grasped by the truth, reality and actuality of our union with Christ. Fuller Seminary theologian and friend of WCG, Ray Anderson, used to say that burnout in ministry and the Christian life was a theological problem. Jesus Christ, when regarded from within an emphasis on our making a response, can appear to be at a great distance from us. The work Christ does can be viewed as largely in the past and relatively external to us. The grace of God can begin to seem merely as if it provided us with a new potential or a new ideal. So, we can end up thinking: “By grace God made the Christian life possible by forgiving our sins and giving us a new status of being in right relationship with him. Now all *we* have to do is appropriate, apply or actualize that new potential life that God has graciously given us.” And so we turn with enthusiasm (or perhaps in

desperation) to one of those emphases, visions, tasks or goals often envisioned by us to make us better Christians. We attempt by our efforts, programs and techniques to make the Christian life practical, relevant, and vital. That, at any rate is how I went about my Christian life for many years, even in ministry--as if God in Christ had given me a potentially new life. And it was up to me to make it real and actual. That's all!....No wonder it made little sense to me when I read in 1John: "and his commands are not burdensome." No wonder I couldn't take very seriously Jesus telling us that his burden was light and his yoke easy. At most I thought he was offering me some kind of nice condolence—for all the trouble!

What I have observed so often in the Christian church is that whether conservative or liberal, traditional or contemporary, emergent or mega-church, many, perhaps most Christians basically live as if saved by grace but sanctified by works. Once we're "in," we depend on our own efforts, choices, accomplishments or zeal. Grace may be where we start the Christian life but often we somehow end up "thrown back upon our own resources" and feeling under a great burden. Then we become first unimpressed, then perhaps depressed, and finally even coldly cynical or bitter about the whole Christian life itself. A great part of the problem is that we often have not grasped and we often have not been taught either in our churches or in our seminaries, about the full extent of the grace of God. We have failed to hear what union with Christ means and of our participation in the continuing mediatorial ministry of Christ.

Obstacles to Grasping the Reality of our Union with Christ

Now I think we must acknowledge that there are significant obstacles to our even beginning to grasp the truth of our union with Christ. I'd like to give some consideration to those concerns that often have blunted if not obliterated any concerted effort to grasp this profound theological truth.

Too Good to be True?

First is the sheer wonder of the profound depths of such a grace. Would God really go to such lengths, heights and depths for us? It sounds too good to be true. But when it comes to God, shouldn't we expect the good news to sound like it is too good to be true? Is not God's grace

beyond all we can ask or imagine? Certainly this response is no reason to rule out its gracious reality. But we can be tripped up by this temptation. But nothing from our Triune God is too good to be true.

Confusion of Ourselves with Christ

Also union with Christ has often been avoided because of fear that if we say we are united to him at the ontological depths of our being we will collapse ourselves into him and confuse ourselves with him. That particular misunderstanding of our union with Christ is a possibility expressed not just in what we think, but reinforced by how we are *taught* to think. We learn that what things really are is what they are all by themselves. They are all individual substances, all one stuff. So, if two things of that sort are truly united, the difference between them as well as the distinction of each must be lost. For, if truly united then either one thing would turn into another, or both would turn into a third thing. Following this pattern of thinking, union with Christ would mean we turn into Christ or he would turn into us. Each would cease to be what it was. Now James and Tom Torrance were both quick to warn that this way of thinking about ourselves as if we were individual substances (a way that can be traced back to Aristotle) would indeed lead to such a confusion. If we assume that we are what we are independent of anything else, then of course a relationship, such as union, cannot contribute in any essential way to what or who we actually and really are—but only lead to our “disappearance.”

But what if Aristotle was wrong? What if we human beings are what we are by virtue of our being in some kind of relationship with God? What if relationship to God is essential to human being and not optional or accidental, so that that we would not be what we are except by virtue of the relationship in which we exist with God? If that is the case, then the Triune God who has his being in relationship reconstitutes our humanity by forging a new relationship with fallen humanity. We become truly human through the Incarnation of the Son and indeed through his entire life, death, resurrection and ascension as the New Adam. In that case, Jesus Christ has now also become our Lord from the inside of our humanity. It was the truth of our union with Christ that led the Torrances to rethink our Aristotelian *ontology* (the study of the nature of being itself), and conclude that being itself, divine and human is “onto-relational.” If relationship is essential to who we are, then in union with Christ, we are really united, but we remain

distinctly ourselves without confusion with Christ. We are most truly ourselves just when we are really united to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Union, then, is a continual relationship with Christ at the deepest levels of our being, not a confusion of ourselves with Christ. That union does not threaten our humanity but actually establishes and perfects it.

Grasping the truth of our relationship to Christ really calls for the renewing of our minds so that we begin to think differently about what makes us who we are. The good news is that as Christians we are those who are united to Christ in such a way that all that is ours is his and all that is his is ours. So that the Apostle Paul put it this way, “though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (II Cor. 8:9).

What does it mean to be a Christian? It means by grace we are united to Christ as his actual, true brothers and sisters. Nothing less. That is who we are in Him.

No Place for Us: Antinomianism?

Now that second obstacle, to worry that any real union must confuse us with Christ, can be joined to and reinforced by a third obstacle. Many seem to be compelled to trace out a false logic which goes something like this: if who we are is who we are in Christ and if our whole salvation is complete in Christ, then there's no place for me and no significance to what I do. This is the antinomian objection, that if we are really united to Christ then there is no reason or purpose for my choices or obedience. I can do what I like. Of course this might be one logical implication of our union with Christ. But first, theology is not the result of logical implications. Second no simple logical inference is every necessarily true. And third, everything depends upon what we mean by union. Of course it's clear that the New Testament affirms a profound union with Christ, the completed work of Christ, and the wonderful exchange. Yet it also calls for our involvement, our activity, our participation. So can we make any progress in understanding how these two elements fit together? I think the answer is yes. Union with Christ in this realist way does not eliminate the trusting obedience of the Christian, but actually strengthens it!

A Personal Union

Why? First we should remember that the biblical picture points to the union of persons who remain persons, not to the joining of two things. The union is a personal union, not mechanical or functional or impersonal. Such a personal unity calls for interaction, for inter-

relationship. A personal unity means that neither person is lost, but the distinction of persons is maintained while the inter-personal exchange takes place. Unity in this frame means the establishment and fulfillment of the creature in relationship to God through the humanity of Jesus Christ, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. This, of course, is a reflection of the Triune relationships but now mirrored in God's relationship to us in Christ and through the Spirit. Jesus can pray to the Father in a meaningful way even though he is one in being with the Father in the Spirit. From all eternity the Son can glorify the Father and the Father glorify the Son and yet be one. It turns out that the oneness of God is a unity where relationship is intrinsic to the being of God so that if God were not Father, Son and Spirit, God would not be God. Aristotle's presuppositions about what things can be and how they exist are apparently incorrect. Relationship can be essential to who, at least, God is---and who we are as human persons.

A Saving Relationship

And within those relationships there is real interaction, personal activity. So mirroring that saving relationship of exchange into which we, by grace, are taken actually calls for interaction, inter-relationship, and responsiveness. Salvation, rather than being an impersonal steady state of being, like a statue, is a relational reality. This is what makes salvation personal and alive. Being united to Christ is not being formed into a perfect, inert statue, but rather involves being in a dynamic relationship where there is intimate giving and receiving in a wonderful communion. And that relationship determines the essence of who we are and who we are becoming.

Perhaps we can draw a distant comparison with marriage in answer to the question, "Why should we do anything if we are united to Christ and our whole salvation is complete in him?" Raising the question that way about our union with Christ would be like asking why two people, who are married, should live together, since after all they have entered into the state of matrimony. But isn't marriage by definition a sharing of life together? It would make no sense and be a violation of the logic of relationship to say, "Well, since we're already married there's no point in living together." So too in our union with Christ. As James Torrance used to exhort us, following Calvin, union with Christ and communion or participation in Christ are twin doctrines that can never be separated and never collapsed. Our unity with Christ in a relationship of

wonderful exchange is a completed gift in which we personally participate. In this way the truth and reality of who we are in Christ becomes more and more manifest in our lives as we grow up into Him and participate or share in his life.

We live out our lives in union with Christ because we live and move and have our being by being in communion with Christ. It is a personal reality in which we are meant to participate. Neglecting our active participation is neglecting our present salvation established in Christ. What does it mean to be a Christian? It means living by the grace that we are united to Christ as his actual, true brothers and sisters. Nothing less. There is plenty of room to be who we are *in* Him. Being a Christian is not a spectator sport.

4. The Christian Life as Participation in Christ's Continuing Ministry

So then what light does our union with Christ shed on the Christian life of obedience, or on our calling to ministry or service? I have found that the word *participation*, which is a translation of the Greek word *koinonia*, (often translated fellowship) is indispensable. Our obedience, our service and our ministry can only be properly grasped as a sharing in or participating in the obedience and ministry of Jesus Christ. And this participation mirrors Jesus' own participation in his co-activity with the Father.

Notice again in Jn 17 how we also are caught up in everything that the Son and Father are involved in. We are given the name, the word, the unity the glory and the mission that the Son has. "As the Father has sent me so I have sent you." Now remember the Son did not leave the Father behind, and the Son, in sending us, does not leave us behind. He gets us involved in the very things he is doing. Our working is nothing but participation in his continual working!

The continuing humanity of Christ, the basis of our participation.

But if Christian life and ministry is somehow a participation, what is it that we actually get involved in? Christ has completed his once-for-all ministry. How can we get involved in that? Certainly we can't attempt to redo what he has done. How exactly can we participate? Furthermore he is divine and we are not. So how can we be expected to be like him.? However, this line of questioning indicates that we often forget or perhaps never fully grasped the fact that the risen Christ ascended in his bodily form with his humanity, a humanity not only intact but

now glorified. James Torrance used to put these questions to his classes. “When do we really see the true humanity of Christ? Was it when he was hungry? Was it when he was asleep in the boat? Or was it when he was angry in the temple? No. We see Christ's true humanity and so ours, in his *ascension*. There we see our humanity sanctified and glorified in him as he takes us with him as our substitute and representative into the very presence of the Father.”

The humanity Christ assumed at conception was not cast off like the empty external fuel tank of the U.S. space shuttles, only to fall back to earth some minutes after its blastoff for outer space. Christ ascended bodily. And will return bodily, that is with his humanity. No, the incarnation is permanent because, as Paul put it, the man Jesus Christ is and remains to this day our mediator (I Tim. 2:5). And his perfected humanity remains the only place for God and humanity to meet. The point here is that in being united to Christ we don't become something we aren't or can't be. We don't turn into God nor do we exchange our human nature for Christ's divine nature. Rather, we by the Spirit meet God and Share in Christ's glorified and continuing humanity. And that's where we will always meet with God, in the humanity of our eternal high Priest. And that's why we can be joined to Christ yet remain human and be involved in what he is actually doing.

But not only does his humanity abide, his active ministry to humanity also continues. Christ's gracious service did not end at the cross. Yes, the reconciling work was finished, but that reconciling work was for the sake of our living out and bearing witness to that recreated relationship, now securely reestablished. The word we are given by Jesus we are to pass on to others that they may believe as well. As we see throughout the book of Hebrews, we serve a living Lord who continually intercedes for us. He remains the one true apostle, the one true leader of our worship, the one true pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Our Lord Jesus Christ remains ever vigilant, ever active. He is no retired Savior who is now unemployed. We share in his continuing ministry of reconciliation.

So all our responses to Christ are nothing more than following Christ in his present activity and engaging in the ministry that he is actively doing now through the Holy Spirit. There is only one ministry and it is Christ's. We do not have our own ministries. When we preach the gospel, we participate in the apostolic ministry of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. For the Spirit

continues to bear witness to Christ and to our need for Christ. When we love a neighbor, or love an enemy for the sake of Christ and his kingdom, we are merely catching up with God. We're merely going to work with God who already loves my neighbor and my enemies. When we pray, we're joining Christ in his faithful prayers of intercessions for us and for the world. When we worship we are joining in with all the faithful, including those who have gone before us, who are continually worshiping, following the leadership of Jesus Christ, our great *leiturgos*, or worship leader. Even when we confess our sins we're joining with Jesus himself who really is the only one who truly knows the depth of sin, who is truly and perfectly repentant and so for us received the baptism of John the Baptist. But as our great mediator who knows our weaknesses, he takes our weak faith and meager repentance and graciously makes it his own, perfects it and passes it on to the Father. The work of Christ was to save us, rescue us *from* sin. But more than that, we are saved *for* participation in an ongoing relationship of wonderful exchange to the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit.

When we see our whole lives this way we join with the Apostle Paul who proclaimed, "I live yet not I but Christ lives in me." But that is not just a general platitude that sounds nice. The whole of the Christian life is actually a participation in the life and ministry of Christ. So that we can say, I pray, yet not I but Christ prays in me. I obey, yet not I but Christ in me. I have faith, yet not I but Christ in me. I hunger and thirst for righteousness and reconciliation, yet not I but Christ in me. The joy, peace and love that Christ wants for us is not a joy, peace and love that is *like* Christ's, that *we* somehow achieve with God's help. No, by *his* Spirit, Christ intends to share with us *his* joy, *his* peace, *his* love, *his* righteousness. And, from the foundations of the earth, he never thought otherwise! Never view yourself apart from Christ for that is not who you are. We are one with him in his glorified humanity!

Going Against the Grain

Yes we can live in denial and hide the truth when we attempt to depart from Christ. But that cannot undo the truth of who we are in Christ. We may indeed get splinters but we cannot change the grain of the wood when we go against it. The only choice we really have is 1) to affirm the reality with our minds and in our actions or 2) to deny the reality of who Christ is and who we are in relationship to him. Undoing that reality is not an option we have. So, so we never need

to ask the speculative question, “*WWJD?* What Would Jesus Do?” but rather should ask the practical question, “*WIJD?* What Is Jesus Doing? and how can I get involved?” Our task is to seek to discover, by faith in our union with Christ, what Christ is doing in this present situation and how we can get involved with his activity. For once we see the depth of the grace of God in uniting us to Christ to share with us his communion with the Father, what else can we possibly do with our lives except go where he goes, do what he does, and live for the glory of the Father as he always has? All obedience is simply fellowship and communion with God through Christ in the Spirit.

What does Participation Look Like? Jesus and Feeding the Five Thousand

What does participation look like? A familiar gospel story from Mark 6: 30-44 illustrates how our union with Christ and our participation in his ministry are held together. As this story begins, Jesus took some unanticipated initiative. He told the disciples that *they* should feed these five thousand people. They’d been listening to the teachings of Jesus until very late that afternoon. There was, perhaps, just enough time to get home by nightfall to prepare supper. So the disciples were astounded at Jesus’ suggestion. How could they possibly feed so many? They didn’t have two years worth of daily wages in their wallets to buy bread and they certainly didn’t have a chain of bakeries ready to deliver truckloads of it. Jesus had asked them to do the impossible. But Jesus was not stymied by their incredulity. He had another word for them. “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” I’m sure the disciples must have wondered at the relevance of such a request. But it got worse. The results of their count yielded only five loaves and just two fish. The disciples did not know what to do next.

Jesus took over. He directed the disciples to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. Amazingly the people actually did what the disciples asked though it would not have been clear what would follow. Some must have muttered, “It’s getting a little late isn’t it? I thought he was finished.” Next, Jesus took from them the loaves and fish. He then looked up to heaven, directing his gaze and his words of thanksgiving for the food to his heavenly Father. For what was going to take place not only would involve Jesus and his disciples but also Jesus with his Father. He broke the fish and loaves in pieces to distribute to the twelve standing around him. Then the disciples were called back into action. Jesus directed them to hand out the food to

the people. I suspect that the people followed the example of the disciples and broke off pieces to give to those next to them. Almost without realizing it (Mark here is so understated!) “they all ate and were filled.” Not only that, but from those five loaves and two fish there were twelve baskets full of broken pieces leftover! Twelve baskets--one for each of the disciples. Can you imagine their reaction as each one lugged back a full basket after handing out just a few scraps?

How did this happen? Well, we could simply say Jesus performed a miracle. Of course, but how did he go about it? Was it with great fanfare, a spectacular Hollywood magic show complete with light, smoke and mirrors by which the amazing Jesus impresses us again with his phenomenal powers? Not at all. It is crucial to realize that Jesus did not multiply the loaves and fish by himself. In fact, he drew very little attention to himself. In lifting the food to heaven and saying a blessing, Jesus understood himself as dependent upon his Father. This situation was like all the others he encountered in his earthly life: Jesus only *did* what he *saw* his Father doing (Jn. 5:19). Jesus participated in the actions of his Father. Further, Jesus had said to the disciples, “You feed them.” And they did. Now I suppose that Jesus (with his Father) not only could have provided the loaves and fish, but he could have had the disciples stand back, saying “Watch this boys!” and sent those loaves and fish flying instantly right into the laps of all five thousand. What an amazing magical moment that would have been. But he didn't go about it that way at all. He involved his disciples. They participated with him in feeding the hungry.

I am not suggesting that Jesus needed the disciples--or even their fish and loaves. That would be a gross misrepresentation of the truth. But rather, Jesus delighted to find ways for his disciples to get involved in the very things he and his Father were doing. Did these disciples have the understanding or the resources needed for the task? Not at all. But Jesus found a wonderful way for them to participate in his humble exhibition of the divine compassion of his Heavenly Father. The disciples got to be involved in the very thing Jesus (and his Father) was doing. I'm sure they were astounded--not just that all the people got fed but that Jesus took what was theirs, made it his own, and then gave it back to them to serve the people in his name. Can you imagine the joy and wonder of being involved in God's feeding of five thousand?

Partnership with Christ

I think you can! Isn't that exactly what Christian life and ministry are like? This story

illustrates what it's like in union with Christ: What is needed, good and right is always overwhelming, even seemingly impossible. We hear a word from Jesus which sounds like "You feed them," and we quickly become aware that we have so little. It's humiliating, at least to our pride, to admit how meager our resources are compared to the compassionate aims of God. At that point the question becomes, Will we act in faith, trusting in the character of the one calling for our action and obedience? Will we give him what we have so we can see what *he* will do with what little we really offer him? We may offer to him our failures and our sin in confession, or offer our resources, action-plans and obedience with thanksgiving. Will we trust him to do with our "loaves and fish" just as he did with those disciples? Will we marvel at the miracle of participating in Christ's own obedience to the Father as he continues his ministry to his neighbors and his world? That's the wonder of Christ's Lordship; he always makes room for our participation though we never really have what it takes. It is only in partnership with him, in fellowship and communion, in union with him, that we reflect the glory of God as his children.

Preaching, Teaching and Counseling In Participation with Christ

As energizing as this story may be, there is a further crucial question. How then do we motivate ourselves and other Christians to participate as the disciples did? Ironically, having understood something of our participation, when we turn to teaching and counseling, we can easily enough revert to addressing people in ways that ignore altogether the reality of our union and participation! When we focus on our own obedience we are in the habit of thinking that our individual will is the key to our behavior and actions. If something is going to get done then we tend to depend upon one of two things: 1) the strength of our own wills, or 2) the effectiveness of our native or learned skills, and their deployment in the programs, plans, techniques or formulas available. But, on the other hand, if we lack both these, we may simply conclude that we have no responsibility at all. It must be someone else's calling. So, how do we properly call people to join us in the Christian life as communion, fellowship, and partnership with Christ?

First, let's consider how all of Scripture is structured as it invites us to participate. As James Torrance reminded his students so often, All the commands of God are built on the premise of the unconditional covenant promises of God. All obedience is moved by faith in the character of God. "I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer. 33: 33; Gen. 17: 8;

Exod. 6: 7) is the foundational refrain throughout the whole Old Testament. God made a unilateral covenant with Abraham: “I will bless you... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12: 2-3). That covenant is renewed throughout Israel’s history. It was not, Paul reminds us, until 433 years after God made his covenant with the people that God provided them with the law (Gal. 3:17). The law falls within the circle of the unconditional promise of blessing.

And notice how even the Ten Commandments unfold. They were given *after* the great Exodus of Israel from slavery under the Egyptians. Then, in Exodus 20: 2, we find a theological preface to those holy obligations. “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt!” Then the commands follow as a result of this saving work. We could insert a “so” or “therefore” before each one. So, “you shall have no other gods before me. So “you shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.” So, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” So, “you shall not murder....commit adultery.....steal.....covet.” That preamble calls all Israel, and us, first to remember who God is and who we are in relationship to Him. It does not first address our wills or set up conditions for blessing. It announces the unconditioned, good, gracious and faithful character of God. The stipulations of obedience are built upon that foundation. From our New Testament vantage point, God's own faithfulness is further demonstrated in the fulfillment of that promise. In Jesus Christ God has become our God and we have become his people in an unimaginably intimate way. We became united to Christ who lived, died, was raised and ascended for us that we might share in his divine life. All our obedience then, is meant to follow the same pattern. Trusting in God to be true to his character provides the foundation for all obedience. For behind the promises made to us stands the Great Promise Maker and Promise Keeper. It is this God who then subsequently calls us to a life of obedience in relationship to him.

James Torrance used to point out that all the imperatives, the commands, of Scripture are founded upon the unconditional indicatives of Grace. Obedience then is not a means to condition God to be gracious to us. No. God's unconditional Grace brings with it a call for our unconditional obedience. The imperatives point out the obligations of grace, *not* the conditions for grace. The imperatives of our obedience describe the shape of our participation in the new covenant relations in which we live and move and have our being. They show us the direction of

the grain of relationship so that we don't get splinters.

But are there not consequences for disobedience? Yes there are. When we move against the grain of our relationship with God, we won't enjoy the relationship and its benefits. In fact we experience the negative consequences of resisting it. We cannot receive them when we fail to trust in God and participate in the life he has provided for us. This failure, however, does not amount to the negation of the unconditioned grace of God. Our disobedience has no power to undo what Christ has done. All our obedience is nothing more and nothing less than acting on our trust in our union with Christ and participating in what he is doing.

The Pressure to Preach Sanctification by Works

If faith in our gracious union with Christ is the foundation for all our obedience, then how do we build upon it? Do we merely yell more loudly what God wants his people to do? Do we give endless advice? Do we perpetually offer as the key to effective Christian life new programs, new methods, new understandings, improved seminars and conferences? Do we change from plan A of preaching the unconditioned Grace of God, to plan B and threaten people with a subsequent *conditional* grace of God? Do we preach as if God were finished with his work so now it's all up to us, as if he had no further plans—so that, if we fail, then God's plans fail? Do we preach grace for salvation but works for a life of obedience?

I'm afraid we often do resort to these tactics. Despite the pattern of biblical teaching which begins with God and his faithfulness, we feel the pressure to preach and teach and motivate folks to obedience by addressing the naked will with raw commandments. We begin with ourselves and speak as if we were God's slaves and as if God was dependent upon us, as if God was at a distance, and ministry was really up to us, as if God's grace merely established a potential which we, if we are able, are to realize and actualize and make true.

But this is not how Jesus or the Apostle Paul addressed the “problem of the Christian life.” For if all the imperatives of Scripture are founded upon the unconditioned indicatives of Grace and upon the very character of God represented by them, then when obedience is not forthcoming, we must go back and build the foundations up and not attempt to find another one. We must go back to preaching and teaching and discovering the character, heart and promises of God. For everything that we are called to do mirrors what God is always and continually doing for us

and in us on the basis of the vicarious ascended humanity of Christ and our union with him. Obedience is built on trust—not trying.

The Danger of Legalism

For every act of desired obedience we must hold up and focus on the character of God manifest in Christ that corresponds to that imperative. For all obedience that gives glory to God must arise out of faith, hope and love for who God really is, both in himself and towards us. The Apostle Paul says both at the beginning and the ending of Romans that his whole ministry is to bring about the obedience of faith (Rom. 1:5 and 16:26). He explains that any obedience that does not proceed from faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). We often think that legalism is the problem of someone committed to consistent obedience and so who needs to be corrected by allowing for, well, *inconsistent* obedience?! But really legalism is obedience that does not arise out of faith, hope and love in the character of the Gracious Law Giver. Legalism is obedience without faith. James Torrance often reminded us of Calvin's concern to avoid especially any kind of legal repentance, that is repentance without trust in the gospel of grace. Thus, it is a grave mistake to merely preach the commandments by simply addressing the will of the Christian and calling for volitional conformity to the standards of God. Concentration on the requirements of God or even the ideals of God may even tempt hearers to a faithless obedience. It is even more dangerous to misrepresent the character of God by speaking as if God had two sides to his character, as if God was two-faced, or double minded: first offering grace and then switching to a concern for a legal and contractual conformity to his will and threatening the withdrawal of his grace. Preaching this way communicates that although we are first saved by grace, we are really sanctified by works. The Christian life may have begun by a covenant of grace but is essentially lived out in a conditional and contractual relationship with God. Under such guidance many, I think, see their lives under a great impossible burden. I've heard of some who have even gotten to the place that they long to be non-believers again so they can become Christians all over, experiencing afresh the grace of God! But such misguided admonishment, undoubtedly concerned for faithful and consistent lives, still obscures the truth and actuality of Christ's gracious and unconditioned continuing ministry and our union with him. It regards Christ as if at a distance, sending us out to

do for him what he is unwilling or unable to do himself, somehow being dependent upon us. We end up communicating that God, at least subsequent to our conversion, can no longer be more faithful than we are!

Preaching the commandments apart from the promises of the unconditional grace of God is like putting people in a windowless room with the door shut and the lights off and telling them, “There’s a beautiful sunset taking place outside right now. But you are forbidden to go outside. But nevermind. On the count of three start enjoying the sunset! Ready? One. Two. Three. Enjoy!” Few have such imaginative powers. But if we could take someone to the top of Sentinel Dome on the three thousand foot high western-facing ridge of Yosemite Valley, just at sunset, all we would need do is declare, “Watch!” and their joy would be irrepressible seeing the sun set. So in preaching, only the glory and the character of God can draw out of us a faith that leads to a faithful obedience. Otherwise, our sacrificial endeavors are most often driven not by faith, hope and love, but by guilt, fear and anxiety as we are thrown back upon ourselves and our own five loaves and two fish while standing in front of five thousand hungry souls. Only the presentation of the heart and character of God fully revealed in Jesus Christ can bring us to the point of faithful obedience. And this is why all our preaching and teaching must take as its starting point the question of who this God is, not the question of what should we do, or how should we do it. I find this is often not the starting point in talking about the Christian life. And I think that fact contributes to the weaknesses of our churches and burnout and bitterness in the Christian life and ministry. It will also erode any of the many new initiatives intended to renew the church.

The Obedience of Faith, Hope and Love

The Christian life must be one moved by faith, hope and love for God's Word spoken and living. Such faith, hope and love bears witness to a God who out of his own graciousness promises to be faithful and to give us an inheritance as his children united to Christ. As those whom he calls friends and even his brothers and sisters, he invites unswerving confidence in the gift of our union with him. He calls forth, by his Spirit, the power and joy to enable us to participate in his continuing ministry. All our endeavors built on this foundation will reflect in word and deed the very character of God and exude a joyful trust in his continuing work. Putting our trust in ourselves, our programs, our commitments, convictions, our techniques, our skills,

our training or our sophistication and formulas, no matter how ideal, morally ambitious, or spiritually sincere, bears false witness and most often leads to burnout and bitterness. The Good News is that this is not the God of the Bible, nor the God we worship today. Rather, the Father, Son and Spirit has united himself with us and us with himself so that all that we think or do we do as his children, participating with him in all that he is doing in our world now through the continuing ministry of Christ by the power of the Spirit.

The Christian life is nothing but the gracious gift of daily thanksgiving for our real union with Christ in his glorified humanity and participating by faith in his faithful and continuing ministry to us and to all those around us. And on that foundation we may surely build our lives in Christ's name and to the glory of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.