

ATONEMENT AND UNION WITH CHRIST

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The doctrine of atonement ought to bring renewal to the mind, transformation for life, and reconciliation in the church. Unfortunately, however, there is often a gap between one's understanding of Christ's atoning work and their daily life as a follower of Jesus. How does the covenant-keeping life of Christ speak to one's search for identity? What does the cross have to say to a cancer diagnosis? Does the resurrection have anything to do with the plight of homelessness in urban centers throughout the world?

For many Christians, the doctrine of atonement simply does not influence day-to-day life. Perhaps this is because theology in general is often perceived as an academic discipline removed from life in the "real world." Maybe the gap exists because people reduce the gospel to a ticket to heaven that impacts eternity but has nothing to say about today. It is also possible that the atonement is not applied to the Christian life because people have sought to fill that gap with simply imitating Christ's life as an example. Whatever the reason, the profound and multifaceted atonement theology of the church has too often been left in the books and left out of life.

May it not be! Theology is for all of life, infusing the church with a deeper understanding of the gospel in order to live faithfully as followers of Jesus. The good news impacts all of eternity but it also speaks to all of life, here and now. And while Christ is an example to be imitated, he is first and foremost a savior to be trusted. The doctrine of atonement is essential for following Jesus and indispensable for the flourishing of the church.²

How, then, does the doctrine of atonement apply to the Christian life? While there are many ways to answer this question, I will argue that the key is union with Christ. As the Apostle Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). To live in light of the atonement, we must learn the crucial connection

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² Of course, asking how the doctrine of atonement impacts the Christian life already assumes a partial answer. Apart from the atonement, there is no Christian life. As oxygen is to breathing, atonement is intrinsic to Christian living. Atonement does not merely impact life; it is the basis for new life.

between Christ's work *for* us and Christ's work *in* us. The atoning work of Christ is applied and experienced through union with Christ by the Spirit.³

I. ATONEMENT ACCOMPLISHED AND APPLIED

The doctrine of atonement is the result of faith seeking understanding of the way in which Christ, through all of his work but primarily his death, has dealt with sin and its effects to reconcile sinners and renew creation.⁴ For the purposes of this essay, however, we must begin with the distinction between atonement accomplished and atonement applied.⁵

The Father sent the Son with a mission to save sinners and establish the kingdom of God. When Jesus cried out "it is finished" from the cross (Jn 19:30), he made clear that he accomplished the mission for which he was sent. It is imperative, therefore, to understand and appreciate the *finished* nature of Christ's atoning work (Heb 9:12, 24–26; 10:14). Jesus did not start a work that needed to be completed at another time. He did not mostly accomplish a work that needed to be fine-tuned at a further point. What he came to do, he did. And he did it perfectly and definitively. By dying sacrificially in place of sinners Jesus fully accomplished all that is necessary for the salvation of souls, the renewal of the cosmos, and the establishment of the eternal kingdom of God.

Why, then, if Christ's work is fully accomplished, is there still so much sin, suffering, and evil in the world? The answer is that while the finished work of Christ has been *accomplished*, it has not been fully *applied*. In between the "already" and the "not yet" of the kingdom of God, the Spirit must apply the finished work of Christ in and through his people. Christ's atoning work is not a partial accomplishment that needs to be finished, but rather a full accomplishment that must be applied.

The distinction between atonement accomplished and applied is pivotal for John Calvin in his *Institutes of Christian Religion*. After book II, where Calvin lays out all that Christ has accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection, he begins book III by saying, "As long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for

³ Applying the atonement to the Christian life through union with Christ is not exclusive to other approaches that address the same problem. For example, one might argue that atonement can be applied to the Christian life by talking about the vertical and horizontal dimensions of reconciliation. Through his death on the cross, Jesus reconciles sinners to God and to one another (Eph 2:11–17). But union with Christ is complementary, not contradictory, to this approach. As Paul says in 2 Co 5:19, God was reconciling the world to himself "in Christ," which means that vertical and horizontal reconciliation are not given to us separate *from* or in addition *to* Christ, but rather *in* Christ.

⁴ For a more thorough understanding of my approach to the doctrine of atonement, see Jeremy Treat, *The Crucified King: Atonement and Kingdom in Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

⁵ I am drawing from John Murray's language in *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.”⁶ Could there be more appalling words to apply to Christ’s glorious work than “useless and of no value”? But Calvin is right. Apart from union with Christ, sinners are left in utter dismay with no hope for the future. What is the solution, according to Calvin? “Christ effectually unites us to himself.”⁷

The atoning work of Christ has already been accomplished—it is finished. But the finished work of Christ must be applied, and this happens through union with Christ by the Spirit.

II. UNION WITH CHRIST

Apart from Christ, we have nothing. In Christ, we have everything. Our whole existence, therefore, hinges on union with Christ.⁸ But what does “union with Christ” mean? At the most basic level, union with Christ refers to the idea that Christians are in Christ (2 Cor 5:17) and Christ is in Christians (Col 1:27). Constantine Campbell offers a more thorough definition, asserting that “union with Christ” is a meta theme encompassing the biblical ideas of participation, incorporation, representation, and union.⁹ The mysterious nature of union with Christ,¹⁰ however, is precisely why the New Testament often uses analogies to discuss the oneness of Christ and his people:

Jesus is the head; the church is the body (Col 1:18).

Jesus is the groom; the church is the bride (Eph 5:31-32).

Jesus is the vine; the church is the branches (John 15:1-11).

Jesus is the cornerstone; the church is the building blocks (Eph 2:19-22).

Jesus’ message to his disciples captures the essence of union with Christ in a concise but profound way: “Remain in me, as I also remain in you” (John 15:4).

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 3.1.1.

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.

⁸ This is in reference to God’s saving grace in Christ. His common grace, of course, is over all (Ps 145:9).

⁹ Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 29. Campbell develops a theology of union by working through the various prepositions related to union with Christ: ἐν Χριστῷ, σὺν Χριστῷ, διὰ Χριστοῦ.

¹⁰ My use of the word “mysterious” here is grounded in the biblical concept of mystery. In Eph 5:31–32 the apostle Paul refers to the union of husband and wife and then says, “[T]his mystery refers to Christ and the church.” According to John Murray, the biblical understanding of mystery “is not the blurred confusion of rapturous ecstasy. It is faith solidly founded on the revelation deposited for us in the Scripture and it is faith actively receiving that revelation by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit. But it is also faith that stirs the deepest springs of emotion in the raptures of holy love and joy.” Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 173.

III. ATONEMENT APPLIED THROUGH UNION WITH CHRIST

How, then, does union with Christ relate to the atonement? In short, all the benefits of the atonement are received in union with Christ by the Spirit. One of the most beautiful and potent portrayals of union with Christ in Scripture is Ephesians 1:3–11, which is one sentence in the original Greek and includes up to eleven references to believers being united to Christ.

The thesis statement of the passage is that “in Christ” God’s people have been blessed with “every spiritual blessing” (Eph 1:3). The apostle Paul then goes on to praise God for the array of these blessings that the believer has in Christ: election, adoption, redemption, forgiveness, revelation, and so on. Furthermore, union with Christ is not merely a dynamic between the individual and Christ. In fact, according to Ephesians, the entire story of the world will come to a head *in Christ*, the savior who is not only reconciling sinners to God but is also uniting heaven and earth (Eph 1:9–10).

Once again, it all depends on whether or not one is in Christ.

Apart from Christ, we are...

- Guilty in sin (Ro 5:16)
- Covered in shame (Je 17:13)
- Deserving of God’s judgement (Ro 1:18)
- Under the sway of the devil (Eph 2:2)
- Enemies of God (Ja 4:4)
- Separated from God (Is 59:2)
- Enslaved to sin (Jn 8:34)
- Dead in transgressions (Eph 2:1)

In Christ, we are...

- Forgiven of sin (Eph 1:7)
- Cleansed of shame (Heb 12:2)
- Declared righteous (Ro 4:5)
- Victorious over the devil (Ro 16:20)
- Adopted into God’s family (Jn 1:12)
- Reconciled to God (2 Co 5:18-19)
- Free from the slavery of sin (Ro 6:18)
- Risen with eternal life (Ro 8:11)

Everything hinges on union with Christ.¹¹

One of the most important implications of union with Christ is that it prevents Christians from seeking the benefits of atonement apart from Jesus who is the source of atonement. The greatest gift of God’s grace is

¹¹ While union with Christ is of utmost importance, I am not presenting union with Christ as a framework for atonement and I differ from those who say union with Christ is “central” to soteriology. Rather, I concur with Campbell who describes union with Christ as the essential ingredient that binds all other elements together.” *Paul and Union with Christ*, 30; Employing a different metaphor, but making a similar point, Mark Garcia says, “Union with Christ is the connective tissue binding the varied aspects of Christ as atoning sacrifice to the varied ways in which we have need of him and benefit from what has been done in him.” “Union with Christ,” in *T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*, ed. Adam Johnson (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 783.

his own Son. The blessings of salvation do not come separate from Christ, nor are they in addition to Christ. The immeasurable riches of God's grace are given in Christ. As Calvin says, in union with Christ believers are made "participants not only in all his benefits but also in himself."¹²

The doctrine of union with Christ puts the emphasis on Christ himself while also acknowledging all the benefits that come through him. As the English Puritan Rowland Stedman said, "If we will have life from the Son, we must have the Son; that is, we must be made one with him."¹³ The benefits of Christ's atoning work are not received from a distance but through Christ dwelling in the hearts of his people by the Spirit. This holds together the person and work of Christ—"Christ and him crucified" (1 Co 2:2)—as it applies the grace of the gospel to our lives.

Romans 8:32 displays the doctrine of union with Christ in a nutshell: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" First, God's greatest gift is that he has given his only Son. Second, he has also given "all things." But third, and most important for our current discussion, he has given all things "with him," that is, in Christ. The work of Christ for us is received through the person of Christ in us. As Mark Garcia says, "The 'in Christ' reality, effected by the Holy Spirit, renders the Word of God's work in Christ good news to those who are otherwise 'far off' and in abject need of reconciliation and redemption."¹⁴

IV. THE ROLE OF THE SPIRIT IN UNION WITH THE SON

We have seen, thus far, that the accomplishments of Christ's atoning work are applied to sinners through union with Christ by the Spirit. Having spent much time discussing the role of the Son, I will now clarify the role of the Spirit.

The Spirit is at work in every stage of Christ's atoning work. Throughout his perfect life and ministry, Jesus was led and empowered by the Spirit (Lk 4:1). Christ shed his blood and offered himself "through the eternal Spirit" (Heb 9:14) to secure our redemption." He was resurrected from the dead by the power of the Spirit (Ro 8:11). But while the Spirit is at work in accomplishing atonement, he is also—and especially—at work in applying Christ's atoning work. This corresponds with the broad trinitarian pattern in the Scriptures: atonement is planned by the Father, accomplished by the Son, and applied by the Spirit.

The role of the Spirit in applying the finished work of Christ is especially evident in the way the story of the gospel unfolds throughout the New Testament. After conquering death through death, the Nazarene

¹² Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.24.

¹³ Rowland Stedman, *The Mystical Union of Believers with Christ, or A Treatise Wherein That Great Mystery and Priviledge of the Saints Union with the Son of God Is Opened* (London: W. R. for Thomas Parkhurst, at the Golden-Bible on London-Bridge, under the gate, 1668), Wing / 335:13.

¹⁴ Garcia, "Union with Christ," 781.

carpenter walked out of the tomb and then ascended to the right hand of the Father. Sitting on a throne in heaven was a sign not only of Christ's finished work but also of his continual reign. How, though, does Christ reign from heaven? He reigns through the Spirit. Jesus poured out the Spirit on his disciples in order to apply his finished work, bringing about the renewal that would one day reach to the ends of the earth. Without Pentecost, atonement means nothing.

In the *Institutes*, Calvin's emphasis on union with Christ is coupled with the indispensable role of the Spirit. Calvin says, "[Christ] unites himself to us by the Spirit alone. By the grace and power of the same Spirit we are made his members, to keep us under himself and in turn to possess him."¹⁵ The Spirit unites us to Christ whose finished work is then applied, not in a transactional exchange but in a covenantal union (1 Jn 4:13; Ro 8:9–10). J. Todd Billings is right to say that union with Christ "has a trinitarian cast, as believers are united to Christ by the Spirit, who enables them to cry out to God as 'Abba! Father!' (Ro 8:14–17)."¹⁶

V. DYING AND RISING WITH CHRIST

Union with Christ is not a static reality based solely on the person of Christ. It is a dynamic reality involving Christ's person and work. Believers are united with Christ in his death and resurrection (e.g., Php 3:10; 2 Co 4:9; 2 Ti 2:11–12). The Apostle Paul says, "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Ro 6:5). Union with Christ, therefore, means that not only are believers one with Christ but also that they participate in his death and resurrection. Believers today are pulled into the historical events of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection.

Followers of Jesus, therefore, do not simply imitate Christ's suffering. We share in his suffering (Php 3:10). In a similar sense, the risen Christ does not merely bestow new life. We share in his life (Php 3:10). Mark Garcia says, "It is not enough that we died to sin like Christ; we have died to sin in and with Christ (Col 2:9–3:4). Union with Christ is thus indispensable for the realism of the Gospel in its lived expression: we have died with Christ, we live in him."¹⁷ By faith in Jesus, Christians are not merely following a pattern but rather participating in a reality—a covenantal union with the crucified and resurrected Christ.

Union with Christ teaches that the atonement is not only about Christ's work *for us* but also Christ's work *with us*. In more technical terms, a biblical understanding of atonement must give attention to the themes of

¹⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.3.

¹⁶ J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 10.

¹⁷ Garcia, "Union with Christ," 784.

substitution *and* representation.¹⁸ Scripture clearly speaks of Christ dying as our substitute:

“Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Pt 3:18).

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Co 5:21).¹⁹

However, while Scripture affirms that Christ died in our place *instead of us* (substitution), it also declares that Christ died in our place *with us* (representation).²⁰ And Christ’s representative work applies to the full scope of his ministry. We have been “crucified with Christ” (Gal 2:20), “buried... with him” (Ro 6:4), “raised with Christ” (Co 3:1), and “seated...with him in the heavenly places” (Eph 2:6).

The idea of representation is on display in the classic battle between David and Goliath. David fought as a representative of Israel. If David won, Israel won. If David lost, Israel lost. So, when David defeated his giant foe, Israel shared in the triumph of their representative victor. And yet, David points forward to his descendent, Christ. Jesus is the greater David who fought—as our representative—against the enemy of Satan. Though Christ is the one who wins the battle, his people share in his victory because he fought in their place as a representative.²¹

It is not enough, therefore, to say that Christ died outside Jerusalem two millennia ago so that redemption could be applied to people here and now. There is a deeper reality at work. When Christ died on the cross, we

¹⁸ In his survey of modern theologies of atonement, Kevin Vanhoozer identifies a trajectory that focuses on representation instead of substitution and locates the atonement primarily in Christ’s incarnation and life, not his death. Within this trajectory he discusses Edward Irving (“Representative Flesh”), J. McLeod Campbell (“Representative Repentance”), and T. F. Torrance (“Representative Mediation”). Kevin Vanhoozer, “Atonement,” in *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction*, ed. Kelly Kapic and Bruce McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 180–85.

¹⁹ For a review of criticisms regarding substitution and a defense of substitution in Scripture, see Simon Gathercole, *Defending Substitution: An Essay on Atonement in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).

²⁰ At this point, one may wonder what to make of the apparent contradiction between representation and substitution. If substitution, by definition, means exclusive place-taking, how then can Christ also be a representative who includes us in his work? On the one hand, we must affirm what Scripture teaches, and it clearly teaches that Christ is both our substitute and our representative. On the other hand, while the concepts may seem contradictory, they are not. As Simon Gathercole says, “representation necessarily involves an element of substitution.” Gathercole, 20; Take, for example, a volleyball player who is a substitute in the middle of a game. By substituting for the other player, she takes her place on the floor. And yet, while she has taken her teammate’s place on the floor, she still represents her teammate with her play. Substitution and representation are both at play and are not in contradiction. See also Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, 351.

²¹ For a similar interpretation of the David and Goliath story in 1 Samuel 17, see Martin Luther, “Prefaces to the NT,” in *Luther’s Works, vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I* (trans. Charles M. Jacobs; rev. E. Theodore Bachmann; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960), 358.

died with him (2 Co 5:15). When Christ was raised from the dead, we were raised with him (Col 3:1).²² We are “co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Ro 8:17). Robert C. Tannehill says, “If the believer dies and rises with Christ, as Paul claims, Christ’s death and resurrection are not merely events which produce benefits for the believer, but also are events in which the believer himself partakes. The believer’s new life is based upon his personal participation in these saving events.”²³ We participate in—without contributing to—Christ’s death and resurrection. We bring nothing to Christ’s atoning work except for our transgression that makes it necessary.

Representation, however, is not merely about individuals participating in Christ’s death and resurrection. The idea of representation in Scripture is communal and corporate. In fact, Romans 5:12–21 places all of humanity under one of two representatives: Adam or Christ. As Herman Ridderbos says, “Christ and Adam stand over against one another as the great representatives of the two aeons, that of life and that of death.”²⁴ Adam represents humanity enslaved to sin and under condemnation. Christ represents humanity set free and made righteous by grace.

How can one man represent the many? Josh McNall appeals to Irenaeus’s understanding of recapitulation in order to claim that Christ’s identity as the Last Adam and the True Israel is what enables him to represent humanity in his atoning work.²⁵ The Son of God became man so that he could re-live the story of Adam and Israel, being perfectly faithful where humanity was unfaithful. Joshua Jipp adds that kings in ancient cultures functioned as representatives of the people. Christ is king and his people participate in his kingship.²⁶

Union with Christ helps shape the doctrine of atonement in such a way that Christ is seen as substitute *and* representative. One need not choose between the two. As Jeannine Michele Graham concludes, “Jesus as Representative Substitute is seen both as exclusive place-taker in the sense of acting in place of sinful humanity while in another nuanced sense also as inclusive place-taker by acting on their behalf in a way that includes them.”²⁷

²² In this sense, John Murray’s point is especially insightful: Union with Christ “is not simply a phase of the application of redemption; it underlies every aspect of redemption both in its accomplishment and in its application.” Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 165. While it is helpful to make the distinction between atonement accomplished and applied, representation helps hold them together in such a way that they are distinct but without division.

²³ Robert C. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 1.

²⁴ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 57.

²⁵ Joshua M. McNall, *The Mosaic of Atonement: An Integrated Approach to Christ’s Work* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 41.

²⁶ Joshua Jipp, *Christ Is King: Paul’s Royal Ideology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).

²⁷ Jeannine Michele Graham, “Substitution and Representation,” in *T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*, ed. Adam Johnson (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 766.

VI. ATONEMENT EXPERIENCED

To the categories of atonement accomplished and atonement applied, we add atonement experienced. Although the Spirit applies the finished work of Christ to the believer upon their conversion, it is still possible for believers not to feel or experience certain blessings that are truly theirs in salvation. For example, though a believer is already forgiven in Christ, they may still choose to wallow in guilt. The Spirit, however, not only applies the finished work of Christ, he also empowers believers to experience the benefits of the gospel in ever-deepening ways throughout their lives.

Perhaps a story can help illustrate the importance of experiencing what is already ours in Christ. There was once a woman in Tel Aviv who had a very old mattress. Her daughter, Anat, decided to surprise her mother by getting her a brand new mattress and disposing of the old one. What Anat did not realize, however, is that her mother had been storing her life savings inside of her old mattress, and at this point, she had saved up to \$1,000,000. By the time Anat and her mother realized what had happened, the mattress was buried in a landfill and never to be found again.²⁸ Anat's mother had been sleeping on riches for much of her life and yet was never able to truly experience the benefits.

Far too many Christians today are sleeping on the immeasurable riches of God's grace and therefore not experiencing the reality of what Christ accomplished for them in his atoning work. And unlike Anat's mother, these riches are not beneath them but rather in them. The good news of the gospel is that all of the benefits of Christ's atoning work are *already* ours because the Spirit has united us to the Son. The Spirit then also takes what we know to be true in our heads and helps us to experience it in our hearts and in our lives.

Paul speaks of such an experience of the gospel in his prayer in Eph 3:14–21. He prays for the saints in Ephesus “to know the love of Christ” (v. 19). Of course, since he is writing this letter to “the saints who are in Ephesus” (Eph 1:1), they are already intellectually aware of the love of Christ. Paul, therefore, is praying not merely for a cognitive knowledge of God's love but for an experiential knowledge of God's love. Just as it is possible to know *about* someone without knowing them, Paul wants Christians to know and experience God in a personal way.

Furthermore, Paul prays “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Eph 3:17), a reference to union with Christ. However, Paul has already made it clear in the book of Ephesians that they are already in union with Christ (Eph 1:3–14). So, in Eph 3:17, he is not referring to an initial awareness of union at salvation, nor is he speaking merely of an intellectual knowledge of union. Paul is praying that they would experience what they know is truth of them—Christ really is dwelling in their hearts. With greater intimacy than husband and wife and a more vital connection

²⁸ Maev Kennedy, “Daughter Throws Away Mattress Stuffed with Mother's \$1M Life Savings,” June 10, 2009, *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/10/million-dollar-mattress-thrown-away>>.

than a head and a body, God desires not only for his people to *be* in union with Christ but to *experience* union with him.

Jonathan Edwards expounds upon this twofold understanding of knowledge in one of his sermons.²⁹ On the one hand, there is a type of knowledge that engages the rational faculty and aims at intellectual understanding. On the other hand, there is a knowledge that engages the senses and ultimately the heart. For example, according to Edwards, “There is a difference between having an *opinion*, that God is holy and gracious, and having a *sense* of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and grace.”³⁰ Edwards gives a more down-to-earth example by explaining how there are two different ways to know that honey tastes good. One way is to research the properties of honey and have a scientific understanding of how they would engage with the taste buds of a person’s tongue. But another way to “know” the taste of honey would be to simply taste it. Edwards uses this analogy to make the point that it is far different to have an intellectual understanding of the excellence of a thing than it is to have a sensible experience of “the loveliness of a thing.”³¹

The goal of the doctrine of atonement is not merely that believers would understand what they have in Christ but that they would taste it. Because atonement has been accomplished and applied, it can truly be experienced in the Christian life. Once again, this is the work of the Spirit. The Spirit leads the believer into a deeper awareness and experience of what he or she already has in Christ. The Spirit opens our eyes to the glorious riches that are ours because of Christ’s atoning work.

To experience the atonement, however, does not only involve feelings. Take for example, the experience of reconciliation. Through Christ’s atoning work on the cross, sinners are reconciled to God and to one another. The dividing wall of hostility has been torn down and there is now a new humanity, bound together not by DNA but by the blood of Christ (Eph 2:14–16). This reconciliation—both the vertical and horizontal—is a gift of God’s grace. It cannot be earned. Therefore, the people of God are not called to attain unity but to “maintain the unity of the church” (Eph 4:3). As Kevin Vanhoozer says, “The church does not have to achieve reconciliation so much as display and exhibit the reconciliation already achieved through the death of Christ.”³² In other words, we do not accomplish reconciliation. We receive it, maintain it, and display it to a world divided by sin. The Spirit leads the church into experiencing their true identity as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Pt 2:9).

We have shown how union with Christ fills the gap between atonement theology and the Christian life. But what does this look like in practice? We

²⁹ Jonathan Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light” in *WJE*, 17:405–24.

³⁰ Jonathan Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light” in *WJE*, 17:414.

³¹ Jonathan Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light” in *WJE*, 17:414. To be clear, Edwards (nor myself) intends to pit intellectual knowledge and experiential knowledge against one another. The two are both essential and mutually reinforcing.

³² Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 435.

will now explore three truths that undergird much of the Christian's daily life: We share in Christ's identity, Christ's suffering, and Christ's mission.

VII. SHARING IN CHRIST'S IDENTITY

The most important question a person will ever answer is "Who is Jesus?" The second most important question, however, is inseparable from the first: "Who am I?" When it comes to identity, Jesus laid a foundation for his followers and union with Christ is at the bottom of it.

For Christians, it is not only that Jesus gives a new identity. Jesus invites us to share in *his* identity through union by the Spirit.

Jesus is the beloved Son of God (Mt 4:17).
In him, we are children of God (Jn 1:12).

Jesus is the light of the world (Jn 8:12).
In him, we are the light of the world (Mt 5:14).

Jesus is a royal priest (Heb 7:15-17).
In him, we are a royal priesthood (1 Pt 2:9).

The Heidelberg Catechism, written by Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus, asserts that Jesus is called the Christ because he is anointed as prophet, priest, and king. The catechism, however, moves from the identity of Jesus to the identity of his followers. In explaining why believers are called "Christians," it demonstrates how those who are "in Christ" participate in Christ's threefold office:

Because by faith I am a member of Christ, and thus a partaker of His anointing; in order that I also may confess His name; may present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him; and may with free conscience fight against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter, in eternity, reign with Him over all creatures.³³

Union with Christ is the fountainhead for Christian identity. And this identity is shaped by the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. In the Gospel of Mark, after Jesus is recognized as the messiah, he goes on to redefine his identity as a king who will be crucified and resurrected (the three passion predictions are Mark 8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34). But what readers often miss is that each time Jesus foretells his crucifixion, he immediately follows it up by teaching his disciples how they too will live cruciform lives (Mark 8:34-37; 9:33-37; 10:35-45). To be in union with their crucified and resurrected Lord, the disciples must deny themselves, be servants of all, and use their influence for the good of others.

³³ *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 31, 32. See also, Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (1852; repr. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, n.d.), 178. See also Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994), 2:375-499.

Identity is deeply connected to growth and change, but not in the way most people think. Most religions say that change is about becoming what you are not. If you are not pure, become pure. If you are selfish, become selfless. But Christianity says something different: *be who you already truly are in Christ*. Because our identity is given to us by faith, when God declares us righteous in Christ, we must learn who we are and then live out of that identity. In Christ you are pure, so live purely. In Christ you are light, so let your light shine. Because of grace, my identity is built not on what I do for God but on what he has done for me. Christian growth is not a matter of changing into something you are not but is about becoming who you truly are “in Christ.”

VIII. SHARING IN CHRIST'S SUFFERING

A true test of theology is whether it helps the church learn to suffer well. How can the doctrine of atonement paired with union with Christ speak to a cancer diagnosis, a broken marriage, or chronic physical pain? At one level, the doctrine of atonement teaches that Christ has accomplished all that is necessary for our full healing and that one day we will be delivered from all suffering. But in between the “already” and the “not yet” of the kingdom of God, suffering clearly plays a role in God’s sovereign purposes. Union with Christ teaches at least three key truths about suffering in this life.

First, the Christian never suffers alone. When Christians suffer, we share in the suffering of Christ (Php 3:10). It is not enough to say that Christ modeled suffering for us. We do not merely suffer like him. We suffer *with* him (Ro 8:17). As Campbell says, “suffering is to be viewed as *participatio Christi* and not as an *imitatio Christi* only.”³⁴ Furthermore, the Christian never suffers alone because our union with Christ includes a union with his body, the church. Followers of Jesus are called to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2) and “weep with those who weep” (Ro 12:15). This call to suffering together is exemplified in a beautiful way at the end of the book of Hebrews: “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body” (Heb 13:3). One of the most difficult aspects of suffering is the isolation and loneliness that often comes with it. But because of union with Christ, the Christian never suffers alone.

Second, the Christian never suffers without purpose. The Apostle Paul compares the suffering of humanity and creation to “the pains of childbirth” (Ro 8:22). It is hard to imagine a better analogy than labor pains to prove the point that pain can have purpose. And while we cannot always know God’s purpose in the moment (or season) of suffering, God has made clear his plan for eternity: the redemption of his people as part of his renewal of heaven and earth. From this perspective, Paul can affirm, “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Co 4:17). Notice that he does not

³⁴ Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, 381.

merely say that affliction will be followed by glory. He says our affliction is “preparing for us” an eternal glory. The Greek word used for “preparing” (*κατεργάζεται*) literally means “to bring about” or “to cause.”³⁵ In other words, our affliction is producing for us something of eternal glory. And if one doubts this in their own life, they need only look to the cross of Christ. The crucifixion is the greatest proof that God is working out his purposes in and through suffering. Because our suffering is with Christ, our suffering is never without purpose.

Third, the Christian never suffers without hope. Romans 8:17 says, “[W]e suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” And for this reason, Christians can face suffering with courage. Jesus said, “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33). We share in Christ’s suffering and in his victory. And while the power of his kingdom is hidden beneath the cross in this age, we can also look forward to the full revealing of his glory in the age to come.

Charles Williams, a member of the Inklings, told a story from the early church of how union with Christ gives hope even amidst the worst suffering imaginable.

Her name was Felicitas; she was a Carthaginian; she lay in prison; there she bore a child. In her pain she screamed. The jailers asked her how, if she shrieked at *that*, she expected to endure death by the beasts. She said, ‘Now *I* suffer what *I* suffer; then another will be in me who will suffer for me, as I shall suffer for him.’³⁶

IX. SHARING IN CHRIST’S MISSION

After Jesus suffered on the cross and rose from the grave, he ascended into heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father. But while Christ’s atoning work is finished, his mission continues. In Acts 1:1 Luke refers to all of Jesus’ earthly ministry (including his life, death, and resurrection) as “all that Jesus began to do”. Reigning from his throne in heaven, the mission of Jesus continues. Now, however, Christ’s mission advances through the Spirit-empowered church. As Daniel L. Migliore says, “The missionary activity of the church should be understood as participation in the mission of Jesus Christ.”³⁷

Jesus saves. We do not. And yet, we participate in his saving work as heralds of the gospel and witnesses to a better kingdom. Furthermore, just as Jesus was “mighty in deed and word” (Lk 24:19), we too are called to share in Christ’s mission in both word and deed. And one key aspect of Christ’s mission that we share in (and that requires our deeds) is justice.

Jesus came as the promised messiah who would “bring forth justice to the nations” (Is 42:1) and who particularly focused his mission on the poor,

³⁵ “κατεργάζομαι,” BDAG, 531.

³⁶ Charles Williams, *Descent of the Dove* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 28.

³⁷ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 266.

the captives, the blind, and the oppressed (Lk 4:18). And yet, through his atoning work and union by the Spirit, Jesus draws us into his work of justice.

Christ has brought peace (Eph 2:14).
In Christ, we are peacemakers (Mt 5:9).

Christ has achieved reconciliation (Ro 5:11).
In Christ, we are ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Co 5:20).

Christ has established his kingdom (Mk 1:15).
In Christ, we witness to his kingdom (Acts 1:8).

To speak of sharing in Christ's mission of justice requires nuance, however, lest we confuse whose mission it is. J. Todd Billings explains:

In ourselves, we are not the source of this good—our actions of justice are not the good news of the gospel. Rather, our actions that display love of God and neighbor reflect the gift of new life received in Christ through the Spirit... This new life in union with Christ displays itself in a life of justice.³⁸

The mission belongs to Jesus. But through union with Christ, we are able to share in his mission.

X. A GREATER UNION

We have seen that union with Christ is the key to bringing one's understanding of Christ's atoning work to bear on the Christian life. All that Christ has accomplished for us in his atonement is applied through union with Christ by the Spirit. Furthermore, Christ not only died and rose *for* us, we also died and rose *with* him. Christ's work for us must be coupled with Christ's person in us. I will close by zooming out and showing how this nexus between atonement and union with Christ points toward a higher aim (union with God) within a broader story (the union of heaven and earth).

Union with Christ points to the even greater reality of participation in the life of the triune God. As Rankin Wilbourne says, "Union with Christ is the doorway to communion with God."³⁹ While many Protestants are skeptical of Eastern views of *theosis*, the bible clearly talks about how

³⁸ Billings, *Union with Christ*, 108; Billings applies this to contemporary trends in a powerful way: "If we accept the claim that justice must ultimately be christologically defined as it is pursued in union with Christ, the liberal Protestant program of reducing the gospel to our acts of justice will not do. Neither will it do to fall into an evangelical reduction of justice to an optional add-on for Christians who want extra credit after properly performing 'essential' Christian duties that relate to the life of the soul." Billings, *Union with Christ*, 115.

³⁹ Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2016), 85.

Christians have a union or oneness with God (1 Co 6:17) and will be “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4).⁴⁰

Athanasius represents the early church’s thinking about communion with God. He makes the following claim about Christ: “He became man that we might become God.”⁴¹ Athanasius does not imply that humanity ceases to be human or that a distinction between the creator and creatures is obliterated. Rather, he is referring to communion with the persons of the Trinity as the apex of salvation. Norman Russell explains how, for Athanasius, *theosis* must be understood along with the many facets of biblical redemption such as adoption, renewal, salvation, sanctification, transcendence, and illumination. Russell says that, according to Athanasius,

Deification is certainly liberation from death and corruption, but it is also adoptions as sons, the renewal of our nature by participation in the divine nature, a sharing in the bond of love of the Father and the Son, and finally entry into the kingdom of heaven in the likeness of Christ.⁴²

An emphasis on union with God is not confined to the early church or Eastern Orthodoxy. The Reformer, John Calvin, says, “we shall be partakers of divine and blessed immortality and glory, so as to be as it were one with God as far as our capacities will allow.”⁴³ Jonathan Edwards, says, “The ultimate end of creation, then, is union in love between God and loving creatures.”⁴⁴

Even union with God, however, comes within the broader context of the story of the union of heaven and earth. Traditionally, the doctrine of atonement addresses how God has reconciled sinners to himself through Christ’s death on the cross. Christ’s work deals with sin in such a way that brings about at-one-ment between God and sinners. I would like to uphold the centrality of that approach but also expand it to include more. The atoning work of Christ reconciles God and sinners *and* brings about the union of heaven and earth. As Colossians 1:19–20 says, “For in him

⁴⁰ Robert Letham explains why some Christians have often been suspicious of theosis: “Reformed commentators have frequently considered theosis to entail the pagan notion of apotheosis, humanity being elevated to divine status, undergoing ontological change. Such an idea would carry with it an inevitable blurring of the Creator-creature distinction, foundational to the whole of biblical revelation.” Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2011), 91.

⁴¹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 54.

⁴² Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 178.

⁴³ Calvin, *Commentary on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1996), 371. Of course, there are differences in Calvin’s view and that of Eastern Orthodoxy or the early church. See J. Todd Billings, “United to God through Christ: Assessing Calvin on the Question of Deification,” *Harvard Theological Review* 98, no. 3 (2005): 315–34.

⁴⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World in WJE*, 8:533.

all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”

The renewing effects of Christ’s atoning death reach as far as the effects of sin to which it is a response. Sin not only separated God and humanity. It also rent asunder heaven (the dwelling place of God) and earth (the dwelling place of humanity). Throughout the Old Testament, the temple was the place where heaven and earth would meet through the provision of sacrifices of atonement. When Jesus died on the cross, however, the temple curtain was torn from top to bottom, symbolizing that because of Christ’s atoning death, heaven was breaking in and God would now dwell with his people (although not yet in a fully realized way). Only when Christ returns will heaven and earth come together, visualized in the book of Revelation as the heavenly city descending upon earth in grace, with the declaration, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man” (Rev 21:3). The atonement brings about the union of God and sinners within the story of the union of heaven and earth.