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Local Church Revitalization Through Christological Discipleship

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

LOCAL CHURCH REVITALIZATION
THROUGH CHRISTOLOGICAL DISCIPLESHIP

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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BY

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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ABSTRACT

Evangelical churches, in stagnation or decline, can find greater effectiveness by theologically reframing their goals and processes of formation to a Christological discipleship method based on union with Christ. Recent attempts, by Evangelical churches, to spiritually mature its members are proving to be ineffective. Data indicates Evangelical churches desire to disciple their members, however; current approaches initiate congregants into the programs of the church rather than the body of Christ.

The results indicate a growing number of people love the Lord and dislike the church. Studies affirm this to be true and identify growth in America's religious landscape with those who have lost trust in the church to encourage their faith. It is the objective of this project to explain the terminology of union with Christ and argue its advantages in disciple-making.

Chapter One will examine the research related to the Evangelical community and the implications of the findings. Chapter Two will provide theological insight to define the idiomatic expression, union with Christ. Union with Christ will be viewed from a Biblical and historical perspective in Chapter Three. Chapter Four will address the significance of a church's culture in spiritually maturing the church. Chapter Five presents a leadership dynamic to enhance the union with Christ experience.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

They call it stormy Monday, but Tuesday's just as bad
They call it stormy Monday, but Tuesday's just as bad
Wednesday's worse, and Thursday's also sad

Yes the eagle flies on Friday, and Saturday I go out to play
Eagle flies on Friday, and Saturday I go out to play
Sunday I go to church, then I kneel down and pray

Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy on me
Lord have mercy, my hearts in misery
Crazy about my baby, yes, send her back to me
T. Bone Walker¹

In 1947, T-Bone Walker wrote and recorded “Call it Stormy Monday.” The song has become an enduring blues classic performed by numerous artists over the years. The lyrics share emotional turbulence, a plea for mercy, and a petition for God to bring his, “baby back.” The man described in “Stormy Monday” is confident that his misery and prayerful plea, will find hope from meaningful interaction with God, in church, on Sunday. Although the story and emotions of this Blues classic have universal appeal, the implication of church as the place where we meet with God can no longer be confidently assumed.

There is a significant shift in America’s spiritual frame of reference uncovering disturbing findings for those in local church ministry. Current research indicates the

¹ “Call It Stormy Monday Lyrics - T-Bone Walker,” accessed August 13, 2018, https://www.lyricsfreak.com/t/t+bone+walker/call+it+stormy+monday_20169179.html.

movement away from organized religion is not motivated by finding a more satisfying spiritual experience, but by a desire to remove themselves from a religious experience deemed to be unfulfilling and inconsequential. These findings raise serious concerns that demand further examination. T-Bone Walker's story of human frailty and desire for God's merciful intervention still connects with the hearts of his listeners. However, the path to God's mercy is no longer as strongly linked to Sunday services at a local church.

We will argue for a method of discipleship that matures believers through their union with Christ rather than their indoctrination to a particular local church's culture, traditions, and programs. We will demonstrate through Scripture and Church history that union with Christ is foundational to the Gospel message and the centerpiece of discipleship. Also, we will conclude with a proposal for the theological reframing of discipleship methods and a system for implementation in a local Evangelical church.

Narrative

Kelly and Logan went into marriage with a well thought out plan. Both had good, well-paying jobs and wanted to start a life together on the right trajectory. The first order of business was to find a church home.

They knew what they wanted in a church, an excellent nursery and children's ministry along with excellent teaching from the pulpit. Their search was fueled by a strong desire to grow spiritually along with their children. Also, they did not want to be pew sitters, and they intended to engage in the life of the church showing their children that faith is a life commitment, not merely a Sunday morning activity.

Kelly and Logan found what they were looking for at Grace Baptist Church. They immediately joined a New Member's Class, and it was here that they learned of the church's theological perspective, the cultural and worship preferences, the leadership structure and confusing teaching on church discipline. The two topics that received the most emphasis were tithing and serving in the ministries of the church, or using spiritual gifts. For them, the real blessing of the class was to meet other new people and to begin feeling a part of the community.

The church also offered a Discipleship Class, and of course, Kelly and Logan were eager to sign up. The curriculum of the Discipleship Class was not much different from the New Member Class. Teachings on personal Bible studies, prayer and small groups replaced a survey of the organizational structure. Once again, tithing and serving received the most emphasis, and that is where Logan and Kelly began their relationship with the church.

Time passed, and their family grew. Kelly loved being a Mom to her active growing family. However, church commitments were increasing as well. At church, Kelly, respected for her servant's heart and willingness to help where she was needed. She was now one of the leaders in the children's ministry and asked to help re-energize the Jr. High Ministry. Logan excelled at work, earning several promotions that called for more extended hours and heavier workload. He was now one of the elders at church and, he and Kelly served on various church committees that required a few nights out a week. They were both beginning to lose a sense of control over their lives and struggled to find a comfortable balance. However, they were considered models of Christian service at church, admired for their faithfulness to the Lord.

Life was overwhelming, and church expectations felt more like work than worship. Both Kelly and Logan were frustrated, exhausted and didn't see an end in sight. They were surprised at how critical and disinterested they had become, by serving the church rather than the Lord, the joy of serving drifted away. Unknowingly, they were disciplined into the life of Grace Baptist Church rather than life in Christ and confused religious activity and leadership positions with spiritual growth. Realizing Grace Baptist had nothing more to challenge their faith, they made the heartbreaking decision to leave.

It did not take long until Kelly and Logan found a new church to join. They were determined to keep life balanced between home, work, and church. However, they began to tithe and served in ministries the church valued, just as the New Members Class had emphasized. Every church has its own personality, theological perspectives, and of course, ecclesiastical preferences. It had not occurred to them that, once again, they were being trained to maneuver in their new church's personality and organization. However, it felt new to Kelly and Logan, immediately giving them the perception of growth.

Life does not always go as planned, and the unexpected news from their doctor was heartbreaking. Their middle child, Brady, had a life-threatening illness that would require strong medication, numerous medical procedures, and prayer for a full recovery. On a parallel track, Logan's company was downsizing, and despite an excellent reputation as a productive team player, he lost his position to a drinking buddy of his new manager.

Medical bills were adding up, and Logan's severance was running out. Things got so severe that they were in danger of losing their home. At that point, Kelly went back to work and wasn't making enough to keep them current with their bills. Logan, on

the other hand, had no success in finding another job and grew increasingly depressed and anxious. If asked, they could not recall a more troubling time in their lives.

Kelly and Logan's friends at church were supportive, bringing them meals and praying with them. Whether it was caring for Brady illness or Logan's depression, it was getting more difficult for Kelly and Logan to get to church, until finally, they did not attend at all. Also, the church's connection with them, in time, fell off as well.

Kelly and Logan knew God was the source of peace, that He was always present and He comforted those in need, but that was not their experience. Kelly and Logan had invested in two churches, spent countless hours at church and responded immediately when called upon but were ill-equipped to meet with Jesus in a way that would comfort them during this time of pain, fear, and confusion. It is painfully incongruent to have a relationship with Christ and not know how the relationship works.

In time, Kelly and Logan's situation turned around, and they were again feeling hopeful and encouraged. They could not remember the last time they went to church or the last time someone from the church reached out to them. So, when they were ready to get involved in church again, they looked for a new one.

Once they found a church with sound preaching and worship, they began attending the New Members Class. Although it was a new place, they were experiencing the same old story. The indoctrination to the church and its preferences did not satisfy their hunger for Christ. Kelly and Logan continued to attend but never joined, served or got involved. They came to church late and left early, until one day they just left.

Ironically, their deep longing for God is what led them away from the church. They still

prayed together, read about spirituality, discussed what they read, but attending church was no longer an option.

This fictional story is general and not intended to describe any specific person or situation. However, the point is valid that churches have not disciplined their members into an intimate relationship of union with Christ. Another new church method or program of discipleship is not needed but rather a new approach, one that provides theological praxis for our union with Christ, and our formation into the image of Christ, as an essential to our experience in a church.

American Religious Trends

The urgency for church revitalization or revival is evident by the number of books, ministries, conferences, and consultants that call for reinventing church organization and programs focused on reviving stagnant churches. Despite unprecedented access to a growing number of well thought out and carefully explained designs for maximum church effectiveness, studies indicate a sustainable solution is elusive. Offering another new program for church revitalization will exacerbate the problem. This project suggests recovery of the Biblical theology of union with Christ, making Christ the mechanism and intention of discipleship. Union with Christ carries significant implications for the individual believer and the local church in the areas of spiritual maturity and evangelism.

Living in our union with Christ realigns the church with the overarching narrative of God's redeeming grace. Allowing the small story of the church to be characterized by the overarching Redemptive story of God's love, through Christ, recovering the doctrine

of union with Christ is the link that tethers the local church to God's presence and eschatological promises to His people.

Summarizing Rankin Wilbourne, union with Christ is debated in academic circles but the place where it most needs to be practiced in the local church. Implementing another new design as a means for revitalizing a church has been tried with minimal results. However, reexamining the eternal promise of union and communion with Christ carries greater hope and also greater complexity when implementing in a local evangelical church.²

The contention of this project is to address an assortment of contributing factors interfering with a local church's effectiveness and finds a resolution for spiritually maturing believers through discipleship that has our union with Christ as the goal and process. This theological reframing will be centered on our position, individually and corporately, in Christ. We will demonstrate our union with Christ is Biblically supported and emphasized by some of the greatest theologians in church history. We will begin in this chapter by viewing the giant portrait of America's religious landscape, locate evangelical's position in the portrait and introduce a solution. enough to press on when it feels as though the winds have stilled and you

General Religious Trends in American

The Pew Research Center surveyed 35,000 adults in 2007, identifying the religious trends of Americans. This 2007 study will serve as a baseline when compared to

² Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook), Kindle.

an extensive new survey by Pew Research Center in 2014 of over 35,000 adults. The new findings reveal the trends identified in 2007 have persisted. Pew Research Center provides this summary of its latest report by Michael Lipka, “Between 2007 and 2014, the Christian share of the population fell from 78.4% to 70.6%, driven mainly by declines among mainline Protestants and Catholics. The unaffiliated experienced the most growth, and the share of Americans who belong to non-Christian faiths also increased.”³

Those adults who identify themselves as Christians have dropped eight percentage points in just seven years, during that same period those who identify themselves as having no religious affiliation or “Religious Nones” has risen from 16.1% to 22.8%.⁴ That is an increase of approximately 19 million adults added to the religiously unaffiliated in just seven years. This data is even more disturbing to local church pastors when placed against the background of the growth of the United States adult population:

“In 2007, there were 227 million adults in the United States, and a little more than 78% of them – or roughly 178 million – identified as Christians. Between 2007 and 2014, the overall size of the U.S. adult population grew by about 18 million people, to nearly 245 million. However, the share of adults who identify as Christians fell to just under 71%, or approximately 173 million Americans, a net decline of about 5 million.”⁵

During this same period, only two subsets showed increasing numbers. Those that identified as unaffiliated or the religious “nones” grew at a significant rate of 6.7%. The

³ Michael Lipka, “5 Key Findings about the Changing U.S. Religious Landscape.” Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/5-key-findings-u-s-religious-landscape/>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

non-Christian faiths, such as Islam and Hinduism among others, grew at a lesser rate of 1.2%.⁶ The disturbing summary statement of this data, in a general sense, indicates only Christianity is on the decline.

Benjamin Wormald compares Pew Research Centers' 2007 and 2014 surveys and summarizes the movement of America's religious reshaping. He condenses his finding into five clarifying statements:

Christians are declining, both as a share of the U.S. population and in total number...within Christianity, the biggest declines have been in the mainline Protestant tradition and among Catholics...the continued rise in the share of Americans with no religious affiliation (religious "nones")...the decline of Christians and rise of the "nones" – have occurred in some form across many demographic groups.⁷

The Pew Forum Survey also reports that U.S. adults believe overwhelmingly in God (92%), and 58% say they pray at least once a day.⁸ They recognize a decline in church attendance without a corresponding decrease in those seeking a meaningful connection with God. These findings are noteworthy as the survey respondents were able to distinguish a difference between a significant relationship with God, and the organized practice of religion.

Concerning Christianity, the sample is large enough to distinguish three subcategories under the label of Christian: Evangelical Protestantism, Mainline Protestantism, and Catholicism. Lipka's summary has pointed out the most substantial

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Benjamin Wormald, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, May 12, 2015, <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

⁸ Ibid.

decline is seen in Mainline Protestantism and Catholicism, losses of 3.4% and 3.1% respectively. However, Evangelicalism reported a slight decline of 0.9%.⁹ Evangelicalism is the segment of Christianity addressed in this project.

Despite the overall decline in Christianity, there may be good news for Evangelicals,

The new survey indicates that churches in the evangelical Protestant tradition – including the Southern Baptist Convention, the Assemblies of God, Churches of Christ, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the Presbyterian Church in America, other evangelical denominations and many nondenominational congregations – now have a total of about 62 million adult adherents. That is an increase of roughly 2 million since 2007, depending on the formula used to calculate the results, it is possible that the number of evangelicals may have risen by as many as 5 million or remained virtually unchanged.¹⁰

Pew Research Center explains the formulas used to account for the discrepancy in the evangelical numbers,

The estimate that the number of evangelical Protestants may have grown by as many as 5 million comes from subtracting the low end of the 2007 estimate (58.6 million) from the high end of the 2014 range (63.6 million). The estimate that the number of evangelical Protestants may have remained virtually unchanged comes from subtracting the high end of the 2007 range (60.9 million) from the low end of the 2014 range (60.8 million).¹¹

The numbers for Evangelicals are divided even further recognizing two segments of Evangelicalism. Pew Forum observed, “Since 2007, the share of evangelical Protestants who identify with Baptist denominations has shrunk from 41% to 36%.

⁹ Michael Lipka, “Religious ‘Nones’ Are Not Only Growing, They’re Becoming More Secular,” *Pew Research Center*, November 11, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/11/religious-nones-are-not-only-growing-theyre-becoming-more-secular/>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “report2-Religious-Landscape-Study-Full.pdf,” Pew Research Center, accessed July 26, 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2008/06/report2-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>.

Meanwhile, the share of evangelicals identifying with nondenominational churches has grown from 13% to 19%.¹²

Both Baptists and nondenominational churches come under the umbrella of evangelicalism along with other faith traditions, making evangelicals challenging to define. As a result, there are complications for the researcher's and the local evangelical churches as well. We will consider both of these situations and find placing union with Christ, as the essential core of discipleship is the hope of evangelical congregations.

A Closer Look at Evangelical Protestantism

Evangelicalism is an energetic movement with great diversity, making it difficult to limit them to a single faith tradition. Evangelicals include, but are not limited to, Baptists, Reformed, Holiness, Presbyterian, Charismatic, Nondenominational and Pentecostal theology and practice, it is difficult for essentials that unite in such diversity. It is, primarily, their belief in Christ as Savior, regard for the Bible and theology of God that solidifies the movement. However, it is the different shades of religious and doctrinal practice that dilutes tighter unity in the movement. Along these lines, The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) provides this insight, "What all evangelicals share in common does not require an organizational connection, denominational affiliations or shared leadership. Our common bond is personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord... Our identity is in our faith in the midst of our diversity."¹³

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Evangelicals — Shared Faith in Broad Diversity," National Association of Evangelicals, May 22, 2018, <https://www.nae.net/sharedfaith/>.

NAE captures the shared faith and diversity of evangelicals and also points out similarities and disparity in social justice concerns.

Throughout history and ongoing today are the compassion and care that evangelical Christians have for others. This has led to sending missionaries, founding colleges, building hospitals, feeding the hungry, seeking justice for the poor and serving as the agents of Jesus in a broken world. The variety of evangelicals and our many causes have led evangelicals to approaches that differ from one another and that even cause conflict — both with society at large and with other evangelicals. We have both succeeded and failed, but we have not given up. We return to the teaching of the Bible and the leadership of Jesus in our quest to be faithful to our callings to love God, love our neighbors and share our faith.¹⁴

Despite the diversity and occasional conflict, evangelicalism is often the subject of research due to influence on culture and politics. They are a group often courted by Republican politicians; they keep an active presence opposing moral issues and same-sex marriage, and also, faithful consumers of Christian goods and services, a lucrative industry.

As encouraging as it is to see evangelical's commitment to living what they believe, it can be equally discouraging to establish a clear and agreeable definition. Researchers want to present accurate and useable information from their work, however, "...outcomes of that research vary due to differences in the methods used to identify evangelicals."¹⁵

NAE/LifeWay Research developed four theological convictions, which respondents need to agree to be evangelical strongly. They are as follows,

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "What Is an Evangelical?" National Association of Evangelicals, accessed July 27, 2018, <https://www.nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/>.

The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe...It is very important for me to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior...Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin...Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's gift of eternal salvation.¹⁶

The Barna Research Group is also interested in understanding evangelicalism and provides a means of defining the movement that is consistent with NAE/LifeWay Research with a few additions. Barna also includes: Jesus lived a sinless life on earth, Satan is real and exists, God is sovereign; all-powerful; all-knowing, Creator and Lord. Also, the respondents were not asked to describe themselves as Evangelical, and their church attendance did not alter the labeling.¹⁷ Respondents were only asked to agree with these beliefs as opposed to self-identifying as evangelicals.

Generally speaking, at the core of their definitions, both Barna Research Center and NAE/LifeWay see faith in Christ alone for salvation, Biblical authority and God sovereignty as essential; these elements represent their defining beliefs. This can add further confusion to understanding Evangelicals in exact terms.

For example, Baptists and Pentecostals are both considered evangelical, but a discussion of the Holy Spirit will often lead to heated debates. Both groups believe the Holy Spirit is God and sent by Christ to comfort and empower His disciples. However, there is a hardened divide in the areas of healing, tongues, words of prophecy or words of knowledge making fellowship in Christ between the two groups delicate at best and contentious at worst. The contrast can be experienced in routine Christian activities like

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Glossary of Barna's Theographics & Demographics," Barna Group, January 20, 2016, <https://www.barna.com/glossary/>.

worship services and prayer meetings. The defining criterion for unity among evangelicals is living in union with Christ.

At times evangelicals are defined by their activities further complicating definitional clarity. When the average non-church goer encounters an evangelical, it can be confusing. Do they understand the term to mean you attend church, perhaps you vote Republican or are Pro-Life, and maybe you are involved in social justice causes or worse yet, judgmental, extreme and exclusive? Or is it possible that you are one of those born again people? Given evangelicals influence in society, when named in news reports it could be under some of those headings.

Trevin Wax, writing for The Gospel Coalition explains the dilemma in these terms,

Right now, I've got a two-track understanding of evangelicalism, a way of holding together an aspirational definition and a cultural one. There is evangelicalism as a renewal movement based on shared beliefs and distinctive and evangelicalism as a sociological and political phenomenon. The first is more aspirational and more closely aligned to the movement's roots (as well as its global connections), while the second is a sociological manifestation of varying traits of evangelical culture (even if the core beliefs and distinctive are no longer present).¹⁸

Wax adds,

Now, I would be the last person to deny the serious and persistent problems within the evangelical movement. It is true that many denominations (including my own) are in statistical decline. It's also true that much of what passes for Christianity today is just a spiritualized version of moralistic therapeutic deism. And sadly, the sociological and political connotations to the word "evangelical" often engulf the significance of this renewal movement, inserting a wedge between its cultural and aspirational definitions.¹⁹

¹⁸ "On the Evangelical Identity Crisis," The Gospel Coalition, accessed August 5, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/evangelical-identity-crisis/>.

¹⁹ "On the Imminent Collapse of Evangelical Christianity," The Gospel Coalition, accessed August 1, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/imminent-collapse-evangelical-christianity/>.

The dual tracks for understanding evangelicals allow some to pick and choose what they believe under the movement's banner. Consequently, Wax's observation that moralistic therapeutic deism (MTD)²⁰ is substituting for Biblical Christianity is alarming. Morally MTD's place a high value on God's desire for people to be good and the ultimate goal is to feel good about oneself. They believe good people go to heaven when they die, undermining the Gospel and they reduce God's involvement in our lives to only problem solving.²¹ It is a popular theology among teens and young adults, many of whom attend evangelical churches. A shifting theology among some evangelicals increases the challenge of researchers seeking accurate information and conclusions.

These comments are not designed to take away from the reputation of The Pew Research Center and The Barna Group. It is meant to make us aware of the challenges they involved in researching evangelicals and also to inform our conclusions. The Pew Research Center and The Barna Group were aware of these variables and adjusted for them, presenting us with reliable results. These variables require consideration when interpreting the findings.

As congregants move from one church to another, they bring with them the theological perspectives from their former church. Differing views of theology, social justice, politics, and cultural issues all converging on one congregation can be

²⁰ Moralistic therapeutic deism or MTD: moralistic (high value on being good), therapeutic (feeling good about oneself), deism (God exists, is the Creator but remains relatively uninvolved).

²¹ "What Is Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD)?" Got Questions, accessed August 14, 2018, <https://www.gotquestions.org/Moralistic-Therapeutic-Deism.html>.

problematic and impact the church's unity. Unfortunately, individuals can take their theological perspectives and serve them as a primary objective in the church and demand that others follow. Examples of conflicts are expressed in worship wars, doctrinal disputes, and church splits, all too common in evangelical churches.

The unifying principle of our union with Christ provides a solution to the diversity of evangelicalism and requires Christological discipleship. Those who hold teaching positions in evangelical churches are standing before a mixed multitude and need to explain the implications of Christ in us and us in Christ.

Summary of Evangelical Beliefs

Evangelical beliefs and faith practices have been a focus of Barna Research Center. The findings encourage local Evangelical churches and also identify areas for spiritual growth. The first survey concerns faith, evangelicals believe 100% in an orthodox view of God, that the Bible is accurate in all it teaches, and both religion and evangelism are important to them today. Only 2% of Evangelicals believe Satan is a symbol and not a living being, and they were unanimous in their belief that Jesus did not sin during His time on earth. Despite holding an orthodox view of God and believe the Bible is accurate in all it teaches, only 86% of Evangelicals believe in absolute moral truth.²²

The slight growth among Evangelical churches corresponds to their strong beliefs about God, Scripture, evangelism and seeing their faith as a priority. A full understanding of the relationship of God, Scripture and moral absolutes would conclude seeing them as

²² "How We Got Here: Spiritual and Political Profiles of America," Barna Group, May 23, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/got-spiritual-political-profiles-america/>.

integral, not all of the Evangelicals surveyed see it that way. God is holy, perfect and immutable. Scripture is a revelation of God, including attributes and character, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Most people would be pleased with a grade of 86 on a test, but this is eternal truth providing answers to life's fundamental questions. It also indicates relativism, secularism, and the culture's embracing of inclusivity and suspicion of authority has a voice in a segment of evangelicalism.

Similar inconsistencies are evident in a Barna Research Center's survey of churchgoers understanding of the Great Commission. They isolated the findings of Evangelicals and here is their summary,

Evangelicals are the most likely churchgoing group to state that they have heard of the Great Commission and remember what it is (60%), which generally aligns with their theological disposition and the criteria to be characterized as "evangelical" in the first place...When selecting the Great Commission from the series of verses, three of four churchgoing evangelicals (74%) correctly identify it, the most considerable portion among churchgoing groups. Fittingly, American evangelicals also appear to be more Bible-minded, are more likely to be active in their churches and have in-depth knowledge of gospel context and the New Testament.²³

Evangelicals have not lost their core values but have not mastered them either. Last words are famous words, and the Great Commission constitutes the last words of Jesus to His disciples before His Ascension. These are critical words if we are to follow Jesus or be disciples. This Barna Research Center survey reveals evangelicals are more engaged in their faith than most churchgoers, which speaks well of them. However, only 60% of Evangelicals have heard of the Great Commission and remembered what it's content compares well to other faith traditions, but weak when compared to Biblical priorities. Of that 60%, only 3 in 4 could select the Great Commission from a series of

²³ "51% of Churchgoers Don't Know of the Great Commission," Barna Group, March 27, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/half-churchgoers-not-heard-great-commission/>.

verses and correctly identify it. Once again, theologically reframing the content of discipleship to union with Christ produces great unity and consistency.

Barna Research Center also surveyed the spiritual practices of evangelicals. Similar patterns found in their faith beliefs are seen in their practices as well. Large percentages of Evangelicals pray and read Scripture regularly, 98% and 82% respectively. When it comes to seeking knowledge and spiritual experiences in community, approximately one-third read books on spiritual topics, and another one-third attended groups or retreats. However, in the area of personal disciplines, 9% of Evangelicals practiced silence or solitude, 16% engaged in journaling and only 5% meditated.²⁴

The contention that discipleship in evangelical churches immerses believers into the life of the church rather than union with Christ explains the inconsistency in these results. The diversity of evangelicals makes them hard to define and, as a result, incongruent in the beliefs and practices. Without union with Christ as the process and goal of our discipleship, we lack the unifying principle that gives consistency and spiritual maturity to all of our Christian life.

Addressing the Problem

This dissertation argues that local churches are not in need of another “new way” but instead, a Biblical and relevant praxis of discipleship that accomplishes its Scriptural goals. Too often, in current local church ministries, the Biblical edges of discipleship are lost in the structures, programs and cultural adaptations of the specific congregation.

²⁴ “Meet Those Who ‘Love Jesus but Not the Church,’” Barna Group, March 30, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/meet-love-jesus-not-church/>.

Consequently, once individuals have submitted themselves to the formative expectations of their congregation, they are considered mature believers or disciples. However, has this conformed them to the image of Christ or the image of a particular church's ministry?

Regrettably, the expectations the church has for a mature disciple in Christ may not be in harmony with the Biblical goal of discipleship. As a result, when they could be experiencing a Spirit-filled journey in Christ, congregants are instead learning to live in the conventions, theological preferences, rules, traditions, power structures, financial concerns and political leanings of the church they attend. It is critical that discipleship in Christ reshape the church.

Urging the church to revisit discipleship is not an original premise, as various authors have voiced this concern for many years. In 1978, speaking of Christ's vocation and lifestyle of making disciples, LeRoy Eims sees a lack of understanding on the part of the church and its leadership to effectively disciple. "...Few Christians seem to understand what this means, at least when it comes to daily living. Even persons who are in leadership positions in the church often have no idea how to go about teaching others to observe all things that Christ commanded."²⁵

Ten years later, Bill Hull put out his call to discipleship. He also sees it as a lost art and identifies a second hindrance, "I have thrown down the gauntlet. I maintain that the evangelical church is weak, self-indulgent, and superficial, that it has been thoroughly disciplined by its culture."²⁶ There are two crucial insights from Hull's statement. The first

²⁵ LeRoy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Corp., 1978), 6.

is implied, we need to be disciplined. Moreover, if we are not Biblically intentional in our approach to discipleship, the void will be filled by a competing and unrewarding philosophy.

Merging the thinking of Eims and Hull, in 1997 Michael Wilkins offered this assessment of the state of discipleship. “When we consider the possibility of changing, of becoming like Jesus, our unrealistic expectations, our experiences, our lack of training not to mention our current cultural climate, can all work against us. We lack an understanding of spiritual growth and how it comes about in real life.”²⁷ With this statement, Wilkins has identified outcomes of discipleship as growing in Christ-likeness which is consistent with the statement of Jesus in Luke 6:40, “...everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher” (NKJV). However, he notes a tension between theory and practice that derails the process and disfigures the outcome of genuine Christ-likeness. Wilkins also implies the void created by a lack of Christ-centered discipleship makes us vulnerable to a culture centered discipleship.

In addition to these observations, Anthony Robinson sees the need for refocusing on discipleship and acknowledges the evangelical community has attempted to address the situation but has disrupted itself with a limited theology. He writes, “For evangelicals the turn to discipleship represents a growing awareness that they have too often promoted a gospel reductionism, focusing primarily on conversion and eternal salvation and neglecting a way of life here and now.”²⁸ Although each author attributes a different

²⁶ Bill Hull, *The Disciple Making Pastor* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1988).

²⁷ Michael J. Wilkins, *In His Image: Reflecting Christ in Everyday Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997).

cause to the problem, they all agree that a precise definition and theological praxis of discipleship is the great need of the church.

The findings of these authors and their call to discipleship are supported by a 2008 survey conducted by the Barna Group. In a summary statement of their results, they observe that what hinders us from capitalizing on the well-resourced ecclesiastical structure available to us is a lack of understanding of how mature disciples of Christ mature:

America may possess the world's largest infrastructure for nurturing human spirituality, complete with hundreds of thousands of houses of worship, thousands of parachurch organizations and schools, and seemingly unlimited products, resources and experts...the Barna Group identifies an underlying reason why there is little progress in helping people develop spiritually: many churchgoers and clergy struggle to articulate a basic understanding of spiritual maturity.... they are often not clearly defining the goals or the outcomes of the process.²⁹

The details of the Barna survey are insightful and beneficial to this project. Here is a summary of the findings that are most applicable. When churchgoers were asked to describe how their church defined a “healthy, spiritually mature follower of Christ,” 50% said they were unsure and unable to venture a guess, and among born-again Christians, 40% said they were not able to identify how their church defined spiritual maturity. When asked for a definition of a spiritually mature disciple of Jesus, 20% of self-described Christians were unable to provide an answer and, 30% of born-again Christians said ‘a relationship with Jesus’ and when pressed for greater clarity were failed to do so.

Among pastors, 90% felt that a lack of spiritual maturity was a significant problem, yet a minority of pastors claimed to have a written statement describing the

²⁸ Anthony B. Robinson, “Follow Me,” *Christian Century* 124, no. 18 (2007): 23-25.

²⁹ Michael Lipka, “5 Key Findings about the Changing U.S. Religious Landscape.”

outcomes of a discipleship process. Adding to the problem, pastors favored visible service over character development in the comments they provided. A widely embraced notion of spiritual health is “trying hard to follow the rules described in the Bible.” It is interesting to note, 81% of self-identified Christians endorse this statement, and a majority (53%) agreed strongly. Also, “...a huge portion of pastors gave generic responses when asked to identify the most important portions of the Bible that identify spiritual maturity.”³⁰

In 2015, Barna Research surveyed U.S. churches to see how effectively they are discipling. Christian adults feel the church is doing very well in discipling its congregants: 52% felt the church did well in helping people grow spiritually, and 40% say it probably does well. Pastors felt differently:

Church leaders, by stark contrast, tend not to believe churches are useful in this area. Only 1 percent say “today’s churches are doing very well at discipling new and young believers.” A sizable majority—six in 10—feels that churches are discipling “not too well” (60%). Looking at their church, only 8 percent say they are doing “very well” and 56 percent “somewhat well at discipling new and young believers.” Thus, pastors give their own church higher marks than churches overall, but few believe churches—their own or in general—are excelling in discipleship.³¹

Both pastors and congregants are unsure of the goals, outcomes, and processes of discipleship. Barna also points out that only 2 in 10 Christians are involved in some discipleship activity.³²

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ “Is Discipleship Effective in U.S. Churches?” Barna Group, December 21, 2015, <https://www.barna.com/is-discipleship-effective-in-u-s-churches/>.

³² “New Research on the State of Discipleship,” Barna Group, accessed March 2, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/new-research-on-the-state-of-discipleship/>.

The church's lack of understanding as to how to make mature disciples of Jesus Christ is supported in findings of a survey conducted by the Willow Creek Association published in 2007. They found that the local church is a productive community for spiritual maturity in the early stages of a person's growth in faith but, to their surprise, "More than 25 percent of those surveyed described themselves as spiritually 'stalled' or 'dissatisfied' with the role of the church in their spiritual growth."³³ They noted the church took on too much of the responsibility for spiritual growth leaving the congregation ill-equipped to find their way spiritually through challenging times in life. They made the following observation concerning the stalled segment:

[It] seems to include people at the beginning of the faith journey who have run into difficult life circumstances or come face to face with a personal weakness that is incompatible with following Christ. Because their Christian walk is not deeply rooted in spiritual practices (daily prayer and Bible Study, etc.), they feel rudderless – and consequently dissatisfied with their spiritual life.³⁴

As Jesus calls us to make disciples, He instructs us to teach them to observe all things He has commanded us (Matt 28:20). Those surveyed found themselves unprepared to draw from the presence, love, and life of Christ at critical moments. Considering this in light of the other survey material presented, we can conclude that the "stalled" have been disciplined to observe all things that the local church culture has commanded rather than all that Christ has commanded.

This is even clearer with those described as "dissatisfied" by the Willow Creek Association. They are active in the church, and among those most likely to discontinue their relationship with the church. They claimed their unfulfilling spiritual experience

³³ Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal*, Willow Creek Association, 2007, 47.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

was related to the church's failure to keep them on track with their spiritual life and to help them find a spiritual mentor.³⁵ In other words, the religious activity level of the church was prompted by the needs of the church and regular urging to get involved in ministry. Our service is to the Lord and our ministry response should be at His leading. Like the religious "Nones," there is a desire for a meaningful spiritual experience, but its fulfillment is fleeting and not found in a local congregation. This is similar to Barna's findings that the church's leadership is unable to define the goals and processes of developing mature disciples of Christ.

There is no doubt that these statistics are troubling to those in local church ministries and require an examination of existing spiritual practices and their effectiveness. If local congregations are perceptive and pliable enough to make appropriate modifications in linking existing spiritual hunger with an authentic encounter with God, they can, again, become an energized and relatable community of faith. However, superficial restructuring of current church programs and traditions will not be suitable for people who are longing for genuine spiritual experiences and have demonstrated an ability to discern the difference.

In light of the findings presented, this dissertation argues that without a Scriptural understanding of our union with Christ and depth of the Gospel message, churches are inadequate in developing mature believers in Christ. The spirituality promoted in any local church's discipleship structure must move beyond adherence to church's programs, vision statements, activities, cultural expectations and behavioral conventions to a spiritual journey energized by the presence, life, and love of Christ.

³⁵ Ibid., 53.

The working definition for this project is, “Union with Christ is a mutually abiding relationship between the Lord and his redeemed. Our position in Christ is the location of every spiritual blessing given from the Father, by Christ and through Christ. Additionally it includes our participation in experiences and events with Christ, our incorporation into the body of Christ and our new identity as a child of God, in Christ, actualized in our lives by the Holy Spirit.”

CHAPTER TWO

UNION WITH CHRIST: THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.”

John 17:1-5 (ESV)

Introduction: The Centrality of Union with Christ

Union with Christ is the unifying theme in Scripture, the centering theme in the Christian experience, and the predominate supposition in Paul’s epistles. Using the terminology, “in Christ,” Paul declares Christ to be the conduit of all of the Father’s blessings to us (Eph. 1:3), the one who reveals the mystery of the Father’s will (Eph.1:9) and the unifying agent of all things (Eph.1:10). The Apostle Paul taught about this union, referring to it notably with the statement, “in Christ.” Along with other prepositions, used with Christ as the object, we can make this summary statement of Paul’s Christology: Union with Christ consists of our position in Christ and our participation with Christ, as the location of our blessings from the Father, which are given by Christ and through Christ, actualized in our lives by the Holy Spirit. Our union with Christ is the nucleus of our spiritual experience by placing us in fellowship with the Trinity.

In his commentary of Galatians, Richard N. Longenecker writes, “Being ‘in Christ’ is the essence of Christian proclamation and experience. One may discuss legalism, nomism, and even justification by faith, but without treating the ‘in Christ’ motif we miss the heart of the Christian message.”³⁶ These verses from Paul’s letter to the church at Colossae support Longenecker’s claim, 1:15-20 and 2:9-10,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him 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... For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

This passage is rich in theology proper, soteriology, ecclesiology and more specifically; a theology of kingdom and authority, incarnational theology, and the deity of Christ. Jesus is preeminent in this passage and the focus of all its theology. He is the central figure, Jesus took on human form, made peace through his sacrifice for all in heaven and earth. Jesus is the fullness of deity and believers are filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. Jesus is the central figure in God’s revelation and the focus of our salvation, sanctification, and glorification.

“One of the significant problems in contemporary Christianity,” wrote Donald Fairbairn, “is that people unwittingly drive a wedge between theology and the living of the Christian life.”³⁷ The Pharisees of Jesus’ day had a similar problem; they studied the

³⁶ Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Vol. 41 Word Biblical Commentary, 159.

Scriptures and set the bar high for performing religious works believing they would inherit eternal life, but Jesus pointed out, that they missed a relationship with Christ and as a result, failed to achieve eternal life (John 5:39).³⁸ The Pharisees neglected the most critical hermeneutical element; they failed to see Jesus as the Living Word and the key to understanding the unity of God's redemptive story. They neglected union with Jesus, through participation in his death and resurrection, and immersion into fellowship with the Trinity. The story of salvation is a relational one and fully experienced in union with Christ.

Jesus said, "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). Christianity is relationally oriented, and there is no spiritual gain to religious works that are not divinely initiated. Union with Christ is the sine qua non of the Christian life.

A person arrives at the church and is given information: the times of the services, the location of small groups, the title of the new sermon series, membership information, how to get saved, baptism, tithing and plenty of information about God from the Bible. He is unaware his relationship is developing with the church's organizational system instead of Christ. It is not that Evangelical churches eliminate Jesus from the content of discipleship, quite the opposite; he is referred to in exalted terms and descriptions. As believers, we intend to glorify Christ in all things, and although discipleship in churches emphasizes a relationship with Christ, discipleship efforts fall short of explaining why it is central to the Gospel, central to our Christian experience and how it is realized.

³⁷ Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), Kindle.

³⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *English Standard Version*.

Evangelical churches emphasize the sovereignty and sufficiency of Christ, yet many express their faith through church activity and relationships. As a result, an individual's service is directed by personnel vacancies in the church's programs that need to be filled, rather than the Holy Spirit. During challenging times, strength and care can be experienced through relationships at church. However, many are ill equipped to find comfort from the Lord of peace himself who is with us in all situations (2 Thess 3:16) and never satisfy their deep longing for healing. There is no doubt, excellent service to others and supportive relationships enhance our sense of joy and purpose in life. However, Jesus promised us abundant life (John 10:10) as an outcome of our union with him. In union with Christ, our service will be to the Lord, and our relationships will be of the same quality as the Father and Son.

Union and participation with Christ are central to the ministry of all three persons of the Godhead. John 14:25-26 records the words of Christ, "These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." Generally speaking, the Father, who sent the Son for our redemption, sends the Holy Spirit for our sanctification. The Godhead is three distinct personalities and yet one. Consequently, having a relationship with one member of the Trinity unavoidably puts us in association with all three. It is by the will of the God that the Son was sent to reconcile us back to the Father. Therefore, it is through Christ that we have access to the Father and Spirit.

Also, in this passage, Jesus is explaining to his disciples how they will experience his presence after his death, resurrection, and ascension. In John 14:18-20, Jesus is

speaking, and he says, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live you will also live. In that day you will know that I am in my father, and you in me, and I in you." Jesus wants to assure his disciples that he will not leave them as orphans. Our union with Christ is not dependent upon his incarnational presence. The promised Holy Spirit will maintain, secure and empower their relationship with Christ, which he promised after he was glorified (John 7:39).

Our position in Christ is the source of all spiritual blessings (Eph. 1:3). God setting his affection on us and choosing us before the foundations of the world, forgiveness, adoption, redemption, the revealing of the mystery of God's will, the seal of the Spirit and guarantee of our inheritance are all presented to us, "in Christ," (Eph. 1:3-14). All redemptive and sanctifying grace comes to the believer through union with Christ. God passes through our union with Christ all that he desires us to enjoy. Just as nutrients and moisture from the ground moving through the vine enrich a branch, all that God has for us comes through union with Christ that is central to our participation in the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4).

The argument of this chapter is to elevate union with Christ as the primary means through which we have access to God and fellowship with the Trinity. It is only through Jesus that we experience all God has for us as his adopted (in Christ) children.

It is critical that the theology of union with Christ precedes the practice of union with Christ. We will first begin with a description of several critical theological components to enhance our understanding.

Key Theological Themes

Soteriological Considerations

Among evangelicals the gospel of Jesus Christ is often communicated with this basic structure: God loves you, we are all sinners separated from God, Christ died for our sins, and we must accept him by faith if we are to have eternal life and a personal relationship with God. There are slight variations to this evangelistic presentation, but these four issues will be at the core of the appeal. The content in this approach is correct; however, it does not describe the fullness of what it means to be in Christ.

Billings comments,

“Union with Christ is a central New Testament description of Christian identity, the life of salvation in Christ. It entails the giving of a new identity such that in Christ, forgiveness and new life are received through the Spirit. Union with Christ involves abiding in Christ the Vine. It means that through the Spirit, sinners are adopted into the household of God as co-heirs with Christ. It means that God’s Spirit is poured out to make the life and teaching of Jesus real to us. It implicates our worship, our vocation in the world, and our witness as the church. Union with Christ is theological shorthand for the gospel itself—a key image that pulls together numerous motifs in the biblical witness.”³⁹

Admittedly, the complexities of union with Christ are not suited for the typical evangelical expression of the Gospel. However, re-structuring our current presentation of the Gospel is necessary if the fullness and core of the Gospel are to be embraced. As we will see in this chapter, the topic of union with Christ is expansive and cannot be contained to a conversation or even a discipleship class. It is a life long pursuit of God that reaches its crescendo when we see Christ face to face (1 John 3:2). Jonathan Edwards

³⁹ J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 1, Kindle.

thoughts are helpful, “The union of the heart of a believer to Christ begins when it is drawn to him by the first discovery of divine excellency, at conversion; and consequent on this drawing and closing of his heart with Christ, is established a vital mutual union with Christ; whereby the believer becomes a living branch of the true vine.”⁴⁰

Union with Christ is established and made secure through the soteriological concepts of justification and adoption. By faith in Christ, we are declared righteous or justified. Our justification is purely a work of Christ and becomes ours by faith. Adoption makes us a joint heir with Christ and all spiritual riches are accessible to us in Christ. We explore both terms briefly.

Justification

Above all else, justification is a work of Christ in which those who belong to him are declared righteous. It is, “God’s act of deliverance wrought through Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.”⁴¹ We are incapable of obtaining the righteousness of God by our efforts, and therefore, only through our participation in Christ’s death and resurrection are we justified. Paul writes in Gal. 2:15-16, “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”

⁴⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 28.

⁴¹ Richard B. Hays, “Justification,” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1130.

As a work of Christ, justification is a vindication of himself and those who belong to him. Paul says it this way in Romans 3:26, “It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (Rom. 3:26). Notably, Christ is both just and justifier.

Christ’s justice is explained by Paul in I Corinthians 5:17, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Jesus is righteous and paid for our sins in full (Heb. 7:27). Having no sin of his own, he can be a sacrificial substitute for us. No accusations can be brought before Christ claiming he was not a proper sacrifice or neglected to pay for all our sins. Sealing his vindication is the resurrection. Letham writes, “In his resurrection, Christ himself was justified, or vindicated, as the second Adam.”⁴² Therefore, Jesus is just and the justifier of all who comes to him by faith.

Union with Christ includes our participation in his divine nature. When he died we died, and when he rose we rose (Rom. 6:5-11), as a result, our vindication is found in his vindication. Campbell writes, “If the justification of Christ occurs through his resurrection, it can be argued that the justification of believers occurs by their participation with him...The justification of believers stems from their participation in the death and resurrection of Christ; his vindicating resurrection becomes the vindication and righteousness of those united to him.”⁴³

⁴² Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History and Theology* (Philipsburg: Crossway, 2011).

⁴³ Constantine R. Campbell. *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), Kindle, 10782-10783

Justified in Christ, we are free to continue our participation in Christ, and a basis for sanctification and unity in the body of Christ. In declaring us righteous, we are confident of our union with Christ throughout the sanctification process. We will never have to work, in salvation or sanctification for our righteousness; it is a settled issue in Christ. Justification is a legal declaration of righteousness and not the beginning of a process of being justified. Justification declares us righteous, while sanctification matures us in righteousness.

Campbell observes, “Justification belongs to the future, but through union with Christ believers may partake in it ahead of time. Righteousness ‘can only be considered as already attained as a consequence of the being-in-Christ, by means of which believers possess in advance the state of existence proper to the Messianic Kingdom.’”⁴⁴

Justification is a present and continuing reality that equips us for continued participation in Christ’s nature and work.

Additionally, our justification puts us in union with Christ and all those who belong to him. The unity of the church is a consequence of our justification and considered precious in God’s sight (Ps. 133). Hays explains, “Consequently, the doctrine of justification by faith became Paul’s theological warrant for an understanding of the Church as a new people of God in which Jews and gentiles could be united in table fellowship.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid., 10783-10789.

⁴⁵ Richard B. Hays, “*Justification*,” 1131.

Adoption

Like justification, adoption is a legal declaration that is secured by Christ and sets the groundwork for us to continue our participation and union with Christ. Because of the efficacy of Christ's work, the declaration is made once, and we are adopted becoming fellow heirs with Christ. Paul writes, "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom. 8:16-17).

Also in Romans 8, Paul highlights our adoption in Christ, along with a description of life in the Spirit. In verse 9 he writes, "You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact, the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him." In other words, the result of our faith in Christ is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in us, without the Spirit in us we are still separate from God. Jonathan Edwards explains, "Those that are not in Christ, or are not united to him, can have no degree of communion with him; for union with Christ or a being in Christ, is the foundation of all communion with him."⁴⁶

Adoption and justification secure our union with Christ for participation in sanctification and glorification. Participation in the divine nature includes fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Through this fellowship, we are loved and conformed to the image of Christ.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 564.

Sanctification

Our sharing in the Father and Son, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is at the center of what it means to partake in his divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). If our union with the Godhead is the priority of our salvation, it must also be the priority in our sanctification. Donald Fairbairn makes the following remark concerning our fellowship with God:

It is also true to speak of salvation (especially what Protestants call the process of sanctification) regarding acquiring and developing the qualities of God, although most evangelicals would prefer to describe this process using the more directly biblical phrase “being conformed to the image of Christ.” But I suggest that neither of these is the central aspect of Christian life. Instead, both forgiveness and becoming Christlike flow from our participation in a relationship, from our becoming sons and daughters by adoption to share in the communion that the natural Son has with God the Father.⁴⁷

In Christ is where we find the riches of our inheritance and the renewing of our mind to be transformed after the one who created us. We are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works (Eph. 2:10). If God is the workman then what is our responsibility? We will address more fully in chapter 4, but at this point, we can say trust and obey. In Mark 1:17 Jesus said, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." In this statement, Jesus is telling us he takes on the responsibility of what we become, and we have the responsibility of following. As followers of Christ, we are in submission to his will as a demonstration of our trust and obedience.

John Calvin addresses the sanctifying benefit of our union with Christ with these quotes, “...by our participation in it, his death mortifies our earthly members so that they

⁴⁷ Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers*.

may no longer perform their functions; and it kills the old man in us that he may not flourish and bear fruit.”⁴⁸

He continues,

Yet more: we experience such participation in him that, although we are still foolish in ourselves, he is our wisdom before God; while we are sinners, he is our righteousness; while we are unclean, he is our purity; while we are weak, while we are unarmed and exposed to Satan, yet ours is that power which has been given him in heaven and on earth [Matt. 28:18], by which to crush Satan for us and shatter the gates of hell; while we still bear about with us the body of death, he is yet our life.”⁴⁹

Scripture informs us that our justification is solely a work of Christ. He is the only one sent by the Father who is qualified to be both just and justifier of those who believes in him. The same is true of our sanctification. Consider a quote from Paul’s pastoral letter to Titus located in chapter 2: 11-14.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

The grace of God that brought salvation to us is the grace that disciplines us in Godliness. Having been established as children of God through justification and adoption, we have the present work of Christ purifying us as a “people for his own

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion & 2*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 512.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 793.

possession.” Both salvation and sanctification are both realized in union with Christ and our participation in his divine nature.

Trinitarian Fellowship: The Joy of Our Salvation

In describing our spiritual blessings in Christ (Eph. 1:3), Paul begins by revealing the work of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:4-14). It is a beautiful passage that reads like a Psalm of praise, reaching back into eternity past and looking into the future where all things are brought together in Christ.

The role each member of the Trinity in our redemption is described. The Father set his affection on us in Christ before the foundations of the world, we have redemption through Christ’s blood, and we are sealed with the Spirit. Also, we are lavished upon with wisdom and insight to know the mystery of His will, according to God's purpose. Three times we are told in this passage that the activity performed by each member of the Trinity was to the praise of His glory. As believers in the body of Christ, our fellowship with one another grows from our relationship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Trinity fellowships in a pure and loving relationship enjoying perfect oneness; the Godhead exists and functions as one in perfect harmony. When making a decision, there is no need to vote. They are not three to break ties. All three members of the Trinity share the same essence in perichoretic personhood, also known as circumincession. Stanley Grenz explains, “Circumincession also affirms that the action of one of the persons of the Trinity is also fully the action of the other two persons.”⁵⁰ The

⁵⁰ Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 26.

concept of perichoresis also states the three persons of the Trinity share the same divine essence without diminishing individual distinctions among them.

It is hard to imagine the purity and beauty of this community, and even more remarkably, through Christ, we are invited to participate in this community. Donald Fairbairn observed from his study of theological history, “The conviction of many of the church fathers was that all of Christian life was meant to be a reflection of and a participation in that central relationship between the Father and the Son. The prayer of Jesus in John 17 affirms this idea, and in union with Christ, we are not deified and yet, do not lose our distinctiveness.

Viewing our participation in the divine nature in the context of the body of Christ, we see that unity is essential. Although union in Christ is intensely personal, it is not an exclusive relationship. Each, in union with Christ, is a member of the unified body of Christ. The church is considered the household of God and a Holy Temple where God dwells in the Spirit.

The Fellowship we share is an extension of our relationship with the Godhead. Gerald L. Borchert expresses the idea in these terms, “But what becomes exceedingly striking here is the significant clause in the petition, “may they also be in us.” The petition thus suggests that the oneness of the community is predicated on a direct relationship of the believers with the Godhead.”⁵¹

Borchert continues,

This oneness with the Godhead is not to be viewed as a mystical flight of the hermit to be alone with God or to be mystically absorbed into the divine. Nor is this relationship to be

⁵¹ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12–21*, vol. 25B, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 206.

understood as individualized self-centered salvation that has developed in many churches as a result of the subjective, individualistic philosophies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This relationship of believers with God is premised on a community who together experience oneness with God.⁵²

The Gospel reductionism, “of the subjective, individualistic philosophies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,” has also reduced our awareness of God’s redemptive purpose. Believers in Christ are not only partakers of the divine nature but also of God’s divine purpose. Merrell C. Tenney explains it this way,

The “glory” the Father had given Jesus was the triumphant task of redeeming men to God. As Hebrews states, he was “crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death” in the process of “bringing many sons to glory” (Heb. 2:9–10). By sharing in his calling, they participate in his glory and are united with him and with one another. God and man are together involved in bringing the new creation into being. The effect of this united testimony is a confirmation of the divine mission of Jesus and God’s love for believers.⁵³

The body of Christ is equipped to participate in God's divine plan and in the Trinitarian community that existed before the foundations of the world. We engage by invitation into a relationship with the Godhead where there is an abundance of love and purity. Ephesians will inform us about life in community with the Godhead; Paul will unpack the theology in the first three chapters and then address the practical aspects in the last three.

John Owen’s great work, *Of Communion with God the Father, And Holy Ghost*, addresses our fellowship directly with the Trinity and grounds his thesis on I John 1:3. Our fellowship with one another, through our union with Christ, is essentially, fellowship with the Father and the Son. Also, he recognizes the Trinity as three distinct personalities,

⁵² Ibid., 207.

⁵³ Merrill C. Tenney, “John,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: John and Acts*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 167.

yet so pure and loving that they exist and function as one. Owen emphasizes in his work that fellowship with the Trinity only comes through Jesus and is empowered by the Spirit. A compelling element of Owen's thesis is fellowship with the Trinity is an individual relationship with the three distinct personalities of the Godhead. He explains,

In respect of the distinct persons of the Godhead with whom they have this fellowship, it is either distinct and peculiar or else obtained and exercised jointly and in common... the saints have distinct communion with the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit (that is, distinctly with the Father, and distinctly with the Son, and distinctly with the Holy Spirit)⁵⁴

Therefore, at the time of our conversion, we establish a union with Christ and simultaneously, union with the Trinity that we can be filled with the fullness of God (Eph. 3:19, 4:13). The goal of our salvation is not a selected location in eternity but accomplishes a restored relationship with the Godhead. Jesus prays in John 17:3, "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Further, in his prayer, Jesus prays in verse 21, "That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." Rightmire says, "Union with Christ is union with God. Paul's Christocentric theology is grounded on the premise that "God was in Christ...reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19).⁵⁵

The theological topics of salvation, sanctification and Trinitarian fellowship will assist us in defining the term, "union with Christ."

⁵⁴ John Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*, ed. William Henry Goold, n.d.

⁵⁵ R. David Rightmire, "Union with Christ," *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), 792.

Union With Christ Defined

The phrase union with Christ by itself does not adequately define our life in Christ. In Pauline literature, he uses many prepositional phrases: in Christ, by Christ, through Christ, and with Christ are the most often used, to describe our union with Christ. Union with Christ is viewed as an idiomatic expression, and the various subtleties contribute to a fuller definition.

Union with Christ can be understood as we are in Christ (Eph. 1) and he dwells in us (I Cor. 3:16). Although it is simply worded, it is not simplistic but rather quite profound and vital to understanding our life in Christ. The theology behind our union with Christ and the experience of communion with Christ are not common topics of sermons or Bible studies. However, union with Christ is a sophisticated theology and worthy of our attention.

The simple definition that we are in Christ and he indwells us is right, weighty, and yet incomplete. The Old Testament does not use the terminology associated with union with Christ, therefore, offers little by way of definition. It is a New Testament phrase related to the person and work of Christ. R. David Rightmire provides a fuller meaning,

According to the New Testament, the religious experience of the earliest Christians was derived from and dependent upon Christ. Christian experience is more than an imitation of the life and teaching of Jesus. It is the present experience of the risen Christ indwelling the believer's heart by the Spirit. Both Johannine and Pauline literature refer to this reality by emphasizing the inclusive and corporate personality of Christ.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Ibid., 798.

In his definition, Rightmire traces the term, union with Christ, to the earliest Christians and their dependency on Christ. He acknowledges the Christian experience as a personal indwelling of the risen Christ in the deepest part of our being by the Holy Spirit. Rightmire also incorporates the community aspects of union with Christ. Although more detailed than the simple expression, we are in him, and he is in us, goes to the definition's core but leaves many questions unanswered.

Despite the challenges of creating a clear definition, all that union with Christ can be found in his person, work and role in the Trinity. Constantine R. Campbell acknowledges, "While a plethora of approaches to the theme of union with Christ abound—with its multivariate descriptions, its relative significance debated, and its implications variously conceived—one fact remains constant: in the mind of Paul, union with Christ is inextricably linked to the work of Christ."⁵⁷

Also, another essential in defining a union with Christ is the efficacy and consolidation of Christ's person and work on behalf of the believer. John Calvin remarks,

How do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only-begotten Son—not for Christ's own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men? First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.⁵⁸

The synthesis of a believer to the person and work of Christ is critical to understanding our union with Christ, but it is not a full description of the relationship between Christ and the redeemed. The topic is addressed often in the New Testament,

⁵⁷ Constantine R. Campbell, 9033-9035.

⁵⁸ John Calvin, 537.

most notably Paul and John. We will look at their writings from the lenses of prepositional phrases and metaphors.

Prepositions

A preposition typically precedes a noun or pronoun and suggests a relationship to another person or object. By themselves, prepositions are insignificant but linked with an object of the preposition, and a modifier of the subject, they provide meaningful descriptions. We can know the location of a woman's speech by adding the prepositional phrase, "on the platform." That is helpful information, but typically with little value over time. However, using a preposition preceding the name of Christ, the object of the preposition is lifted to reality and place where pure, eternal love overwhelms us in our union with Christ. For instance, "...[He] raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus..." Through the use of prepositions, the inspired New Testament writers and Paul, in particular, reveal the fullness and depth of the idiomatic expression, union with Christ.

More than other New Testament writers, Paul uses the "in Christ" motif as a way of expressing aspects of a believer's relationship with Christ. However, the bond between a believer and Christ, intrinsically, is a participation in the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4) and not human generated religious activity. Our new life in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17) is a shared life in the Trinity. Christ's redemptive and sanctifying story interweaves with our story enabling us to share in the oneness the Father and Son enjoy (John 17:21-22).

Expressing the dimensions and mystery of this spiritual union is difficult. As a result, while examining the particulars of our union with Christ, it is mandatory that we recognize the ministry of the Holy Spirit to facilitate its actualization (1 Cor. 6:11). Our

salvation, sanctification, and union with Christ are not accomplished by human effort, but by the empowering of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Another difficulty in expressing the breath and depth of the “in Christ” motif is the inadequacy of capturing its definition with the use of one preposition or prepositions at all. Paul will also use: “in Christ,” “by Christ,” “through Christ,” and “with Christ.” Union with Christ is an umbrella term with varied and full theological expression.

We will discuss detailed descriptions in Chapter 4 while exploring the goals and processes of maturing in union with Christ. However, brief descriptions are stated here to support what has been presented thus far. Every spiritual blessing from the Father is ours in Christ (Eph. 1:3), our redemption and eternal life (Rom. 3:23; 6:23; 2 Tim. 1:1), forgiveness (Eph. 4:32), the gift of grace (1 Cor. 1:4; 2 Tim. 1:9), our freedom (Gal. 2:4), sanctification (1 Cor. 1:2) and the blessing of Abraham to the Gentiles (Gal. 3:14).

Our union with Christ gives us shared experiences in Christ. We are crucified, buried and raised in Christ (Rom. 6:5-11); we have been raised to sit in the heavens in Christ (Eph. 2:6). We share suffering with Christ and our comfort as well (2 Cor. 1:5). Our shared experiences with Christ links us to our position in Christ. If we placed a pen in a book and then, mail the book to a friend on the other side of the country, where the book is and what the book experiences are identical to the location and circumstances of the pen.

We become a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). We are made holy and perfect in Christ (Col. 1:2; Col. 1:28). In Christ is the location of our maturity (Col. 2:6) and transformation (2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 4:19). We can be faithful because Christ is faithful and we are in him (Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:2). These are just a few of the many references to our

union with Christ. When speaking of our position in Christ we include all that it means to be in him as he is in us. It is an immersion into the life of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The use of prepositional phrases, as descriptive as they are, only represents a segment of its grandeur.

Metaphors

Paul, along with the Apostle John, metaphorically expresses the nuances of union with Christ in their writings. We will examine a few images to assist in arriving at a definition, but a fuller discussion and application will be made in Chapter 4. The benefit of metaphors is they can demonstrate movement and relationship. Prepositional phrases insightfully communicate location; identity and gifts but are not as helpful in showing progress. The terminology, union with Christ, can be seen as static and set. The use of images reminds us that our union with Christ is a spiritual reality that is dynamic.

The imagery of the body of Christ (Rom. 12:4-5; Eph. 4:12-16 and I Cor. 12:12-27) demonstrates the Lordship of Christ over his church. The church is a Christocracy, not a democracy or dictatorship. Therefore, its function and organization should be aligned to hear God's voice and move in concert with him. God is not a God of confusion (I Cor. 14:33), and as a result, the structure of the church should reflect Biblical authority in Christ. The structure needs to serve the body of Christ as they serve the Lord. Also, every member of the body of Christ is uniquely gifted to witness the fullness of God (Eph. 1:22).

Another image presented by Paul is that of Jesus is the cornerstone (Eph. 2:19-22), the teaching of the Apostles and Prophets are the foundation of the holy temple that Jesus is putting together and maturing. The temple is to be a dwelling place for God by

the Holy Spirit. As the cornerstone, Jesus establishes the shape and construction of the building. Similar to the body of Christ, the holy temple's shape and function are formed by Christ and rendering every role in the temple meaningful. If even one of the building stones is not in line with the cornerstone then, the temple will not reflect the fullness of Christ.

In chapter 15 of his Gospel, John records an account of Jesus comparing himself to a vine and the disciples to branches. One of Christ's compelling applications is a branch separated from the vine is unfruitful, so is a disciple who does not abide in Christ. The strong union of the branch and vine allows the vine to bring nutrients and moisture from the ground to nourish the branch. In the same way, all the Father has for us flows through our union with Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our abiding or union with Christ is conditional to our life in Christ.

The use of images adds movement to our relationship with Christ. The prepositional phrases convey essential theology to our understanding of union with Christ while; the metaphors add a relational dynamic. The imagery of the body of Christ declares Christ as the head of the body and the members as vital in their roles, through their submission to the head. Paul's metaphor, Christ as the cornerstone suggests the alignment of the individual building stones is critical to Christ's function and purpose of his temple. The Apostle John's depiction of Christ's teaching concerning the vine and branches stresses the necessity of abiding with Christ.

Definition

Union with Christ is an ambiguous term to define in a clear and concise way. It is expressed in Scripture didactically, metaphorically and locational (in, by through and

with Christ), all in an attempt to convey the shades of meaning. Union with Christ is an idiomatic statement that is at the core of our salvation and sanctification in Christ.

R. Constantine Campbell's concluded the fullest definition of union with Christ is achieved by identifying its four characteristics. He says,

To do justice to the full spectrum of Paul's thought and language, the terms union, participation, identification, incorporation are adopted, in place of previous terminology. These four umbrella terms successfully capture the full range of prepositional phraseology, metaphorical conceptualisations, and theological interactions that Paul draws on to communicate what it means to be united to Christ. Some of the characteristics of the metatheme of union, participation, identification, incorporation include locality, instrumentality, trinitarianism, eschatology, and spiritual reality.⁵⁹

This project accepts Campbell's definition through characteristics as profitable to its objective of identifying the goals and processes of Christological discipleship. Union with Christ is more than theological information it, represents a spiritual reality that has past, present and future aspects for the believer's new life in Christ and their relationship with Christ. Most importantly, it defines our participation in the divine nature and transformation into the image of Christ, including our intellect, emotions, will, and spirituality.

The fullness of union with Christ is the fullness of God himself (Eph. 1:22; 3:19; Col.2:9-10), and a meaningful definition with words alone is impossible. Union with Christ is a way of expressing the reality of our life in Christ (Col. 3:1-4). Therefore, when we consider the content of Christological discipleship Campbell's four characteristics provide a portion of the curriculum, presented didactically and experientially. The details of this approach are given in chapter 5.

⁵⁹ Constantine R. Campbell, 613-618.

At this point, we will review the four characteristics and provide a brief definition of each:

Union

We are in Christ and he dwells in us describes our union with Christ; established at salvation and matured through sanctification. The simplicity of this definition does not adequately explain how uniting with Christ brings about in the life of a believer. In reality, it touches on every aspect of our being and life. Campbell states, “This is complex and therefore difficult because of the many ways in which Paul employs ‘union’ language and because of the intricate web of connections between union with Christ and other themes in Paul’s theological framework.”⁶⁰

Billings writes,

A theology of union with Christ centers Christian identity in Jesus Christ himself, and in the claim of the Triune God upon the Christian. Salvation is not self-centered but is a renewal and restoration of the self precisely through orienting the self toward God, toward the church as the body of Christ, and toward the neighbor. Individual believers discover their true identity in communion rather than in a pragmatic, individualistic approach to salvation, and tinkering is replaced by a posture of humble gratitude before God. The God encountered in union with Jesus Christ is at once more majestic and more intimate than the deistic-tending God of the West.⁶¹

Union with Christ identifies us with Christ and describes the location in which God bestows all spiritual blessings upon us (Eph. 1:3). Like the vine and the branches to be separate from Christ, separates us from our source of life and renewal.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 11128-11130.

⁶¹ J. Todd Billings, 9.

Participation

The mystery of our participation in Christ describes events we can know including justification, regeneration, forgiveness, and redemption which we receive and experience its reality by faith. Campbell writes, “union with Christ involves the participation of believers in the events of Christ’s narrative, including his death and burial, resurrection, ascension, and glorification.”⁶²

John Calvin comments on our participation in Christ described in Romans 6 with these comments, “As we participate in Christ’s death our old nature is crucified, and as we share in his resurrection we are renewed in the image of God. We enlist, so to speak, in a new spiritual enterprise, the progressive approach to a perfection that in this life is never fully attained.”⁶³ He continues, “We were buried with him by baptism, we were engrafted into participation in his death, that sharing in his resurrection we may walk in newness of life.”⁶⁴ Our participation in Christ includes the events, experiences, and benefits of Christ’s person and salvific work.

Identification

Campbell explains, “Related to location, union with Christ involves the identification of believers with Christ. Situated within the realm of his rule, believers’ identity is shaped by their belonging to Christ, the Second Adam.”⁶⁵ Through the sin of

⁶² Constantine R. Campbell, 11147-11149.

⁶³ John Calvin, 539.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 397.

the First Adam, sin identified us leading to separation from God (Rom. 5:12-14).

However, the Second Adam, Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:15-21), though he had no sin of his own, paid our sin debt and now we can be identified by his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension.

Paul comments on a major change upon a person's salvation. He writes, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17). This is a revolutionary and disorienting change until a new identify in Christ is integrated.

Incorporation

Campbell explains, "Union with Christ also involves the incorporation of believers into his body, temple, church, and building. Believers are grafted into a community that is founded, shaped, and directed by Christ." Our union with Christ includes our union with others who have put their trust in him. This principle is expressed through the church or body of Christ in our love for God, self, and others (Matt. 22:34-40).⁶⁶

The ability to love and be loved as Jesus and the Father share love is a benefit of grace and the Holy Spirit. John Calvin offers this insight,

Likewise, he asks "the grace of ... Christ and the love of God" for believers, at the same time coupling with it "participation in the ... Spirit" [2 Cor. 13:14], without which no one can taste either the fatherly favor of God or the beneficence of Christ; just as he also says in another passage, "The love of God has been

⁶⁵ Constantine R. Campbell, 11141-11143.

⁶⁶ Constantine R. Campbell, 11141-11143.

poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us” [Rom. 5:5].⁶⁷

These gifts from the Father are a present and future reality, again Calvin explains,

The church is called “catholic,” or “universal,” because there could not be two or three churches unless Christ be torn asunder [cf. 1 Cor. 1:13]—which cannot happen! But all the elect are so united in Christ [cf. Eph. 1:22–23] that as they are dependent on one Head, they also grow together into one body, being joined and knit together [cf. Eph. 4:16] as are the limbs of a body [Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 10:17; 12:12, 27]. They are made truly one since they live together in one faith, hope, and love, and in the same Spirit of God. For they have been called not only into the same inheritance of eternal life but also to participate in one God and Christ [Eph. 5:30].⁶⁸

Although our faith is a personal experience, it is not a private. Those who belong to Christ share the same Lord, faith, baptism, and Father (Eph. 4:5-6). Together as his Holy Temple, we are a people of worship and proclamation in our union with Christ.

In our search for a working definition of the terminology, union with Christ, we can use the one mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. “Union with Christ is a mutually abiding relationship between the Lord and his redeemed. Our position in Christ is the location of every spiritual blessing given from the Father, by Christ and through Christ. Additionally it includes our participation in the experiences and events of Christ, our incorporation into the body of Christ and our new identity as a child of God, in Christ, actualized by the ministry of the Holy Spirit.” This definition is expanded from saying Christ is in us and we are in him. Still is inadequate to determine all that is captured by the term.

The contention of this project recognizes union with Christ as participation in his life, by his power. It is a life we live and not a Bible study or church service we attend.

⁶⁷ John Calvin, 539.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 1014.

Churches will benefit from moving from short termed, topic-oriented discipleship classes and adopt continuing Christological discipleship that is theologically praxis and grounding.

CHAPTER THREE

UNION WITH CHRIST: HISTORICAL AND BIBLICAL TRADITIONS

Union With Christ in the Historical Tradition

A summation of evangelical historical theology would conclude union with Christ to be the essence of the gospel message and the critical principle of evangelical hermeneutics. Due to gospel reductionism and feel good, consumer-driven homiletics, the same cannot be said for today's churches. Filtering Scripture through the lens of union with Christ would revitalize preaching and dramatically alter the content, process, and goals of discipleship in the local evangelical church, a core concern of this project.

The theology of union with Christ is the heart of Christianity. Robert Letham, a professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, sums up theological history by saying, "Union with Christ is right at the center of the Christian doctrine of salvation."⁶⁹ J. Todd Billings adds, "Union with Christ is theological shorthand for the gospel itself—a key image that pulls together numerous motifs in the biblical witness."⁷⁰ Union with Christ or the Pauline phrase, "in Christ," is the focal point of the Christian life and evangelism. Any discussion of theological themes outside of the "in Christ" motif misses the power of its redemptive and sanctifying message.

⁶⁹ Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology*.

⁷⁰ J. Todd Billings. *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church*.

John Calvin speaks of the centrality of union with Christ in the life of a believer this way:

We are deprived of this utterly incomparable good until Christ is made ours. Therefore, that joining together of heads and members, that the indwelling Christ in our hearts in short that mystical union are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed.⁷¹

However, the development of the evangelical theology of union with Christ is not without rigorous debate. Many theologians will understand Paul's "in Christ" motif as participating in the divine nature and most would agree it is understood as the locale of our participation with Christ, but how is it experienced? Some will argue it's a practical experience available to us through obedience. Others argue for a mystical experience that adds another layer of discussion; how will mysticism be defined? Others we see it as both, pragmatic and mystical. The debate is often centered on Paul's understanding of mysticism, and whether or not he was influenced by Jewish or Hellenistic concepts, and to what degree?

These are core questions to this project, if we are to develop an acceptable theological praxis for Christological discipleship. There is agreement among theologians that fellowship with Christ links our fellowship with the Trinity. Consequently we will look at the contributions of John Owen, a Puritan theologian, for a Trinitarian perspective of understanding union with Christ. In addition, we will briefly survey of the Twentieth century discussion of our topic will follow and the chapter will conclude with a Biblical history of union with Christ.

⁷¹ John Calvin, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, *The Library of Christian Classics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 736–737.

John Owen

J.I.Packer observes, “The thought of communion with God takes us to the very heart of Puritan theology and religion.”⁷² As a result, we will focus on Puritan John Owen and his writings, particularly *Of Communion with God the Father, Son And Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*. Focusing on one theologian will allow for a greater depth of understanding and a greater appreciation of our life in Christ.

“Born into the golden age of British Puritanism,” wrote Ryan L. Rippee, “John Owen (1616-1683) would grow to become arguably its greatest theologian.”⁷³ J. I. Packer adds to Rippee’s assessment of John Owen, “Here I need only say that he is by common consent...the greatest among Puritan theologians. For solidity, profundity, massiveness and majesty in exhibiting from Scripture God’s ways with sinful mankind there is no one to touch him.”⁷⁴

Although he is not as well known today as other Puritan theologians, such as Jonathan Edwards or John Baxter, “In his own day he was seen as England’s foremost bastion and champion of Reformed evangelical orthodoxy, and he did not doubt that God

⁷² J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*, Reprint edition. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 201.

⁷³ J. Todd Billings. *Union with Christ*.

⁷⁴ J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*.

had given him this role...⁷⁵ John Owen is respected by theologians as a result of his commitment to Scripture as the revelation of Jesus Christ.

John Owen's thoroughness and depth regarding God's communion with man is what connects him to this project. He describes fellowship with God as a mutual exchange, all three members of the Trinity overwhelming us with love, and requiring our worshipful response of loving obedience. John Owen is a practical theologian; emphasizing theology before practice, who recognizes the energy to live a Godly life comes from the Holy Spirit.

A Brief Description of John Owen's Theological Presuppositions

Essential to the shaping of John Owen's theology was an assurance of the trustworthiness of God's Word. He recognized it to be authoritative and worthy of careful exegesis. In addition, Owen filtered his thinking about God through a Trinitarian framework. Ryan M. McGraw comments on how central it was to Owen's theology:

The Father revealed his counsel to his Son who, in turn, revealed it to mankind. The Spirit takes the Father's revelation, both through reading and preaching the word, and he applies it to his people. Though all three persons work simultaneously, they do not act in the same way. However, they do not contribute to three parts of a single work. They accomplish a single work in a threefold manner. It is clear that this observation parallels his treatment of true theology. It shows where the objective and subjective elements of theology converge in regenerate people.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ryan M McGraw, "Trinitarian Doxology: Reassessing John Owen's Contribution to Reformed Orthodox Trinitarian Theology," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 77, no. 2 (September 2015): 293–316.

McGraw points out, "Owen's Trinitarian theology was the foundation of his Trinitarian piety, and his Trinitarian piety permeated every area of his theology."⁷⁷ The Puritans used the words "spiritual affections" to refer to the soul of man, including the will. Consequently, a believer's interaction with God will affect her whole being. A regenerate soul will love what God commands, recognizing that his character, wisdom, and actions are benevolent. Owen considered loving obedience to God as the foremost evidence of regeneration and union with Christ.

It should be emphasized; that in Owen's theology, the ultimate priority was fellowship with God. Packer phrased it this way,

"The giving of spiritual understanding is not, of course, an end in itself; as Owen recognizes, it is always to be seen and valued as a means to something further—knowing and enjoying God."⁷⁸ Owen's rationalism dismissed mysticism, believing communion with God to be an actual and functional experience. Packer adds, "Owen, like Calvin, appears as a Christian rationalist, who would have condemned out of hand the irrationalism of the neo-orthodox idea of a 'knowledge' of God derived from noncommunicative 'encounters' with him."⁷⁹

In Owen's thinking, participation with God was a consequence of communion with God, which inspired religious affections. Here is how he phrased it,

Now, communion is the mutual communication of such good things as wherein the persons holding that communion are delighted, bottomed upon some union between them... Our communion, then, with God consisteth in his communication of himself unto us, with our returnal unto him of that which he requireth and accepteth, flowing from that union which in Jesus Christ we have with him.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ John Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*.

John Owen believed the Trinity to be one being in a perichoretic relationship. Perichoresis, often referred to as circumincession, is the theological idea that the three persons in the Trinity share the same divine essence without losing their distinctiveness. They share characteristics and actions, as they retain their individual personalities and roles. The love and purity of the Trinity makes them one while remaining diverse and relatable.

Consequently, Owen believed that our fellowship is with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (I John 1:3). Since the divine nature is what prompts our worship, to worship one member of the Trinity is to praise all three. Owen says,

The divine nature is the reason and cause of all worship; so that it is impossible to worship any one person, and not worship the whole Trinity. It is, and that not without ground, denied by the schoolmen, that the formal reason and object of divine worship is in the persons precisely considered; that is, under the formally-constitutive reason of their personality, which is their relation to each other.⁸¹

Owen is describing a mutual relationship that shares the same purpose, activities, and character and this presents a significant problem. Owen states it in this way, "By nature, since the entrance of sin, no man hath any communion with God. He is light, we darkness; and what communion hath light with darkness? He is life, we are dead, -- he is love, and we are enmity; and what agreement can there be between us?"⁸²

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 149-151.

Owen continues, “Whilst there is this distance between God and man, there is no walking together for them in any fellowship or communion. Our first interest in God was so lost by sin, as that there was left unto us (in ourselves) no possibility of a recovery.”⁸³

How can perfection be in a close mutual relationship with imperfection? The difficulty here is the Trinity fellowships together in the perfection of love and holiness. Their communion together is marked by its purity or oneness. McGraw comments, "Two overarching principles mark Owen's doctrine of communion with God. The first principle is that since the persons of the Godhead are inseparable yet distinct, they interpenetrate one another (perichoresis). The second is that the external works of the Godhead are undivided."⁸⁴

Jesus and the Father are one, and Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that we would be one with them (John 17). Owen saw the resolution in the sacrificial death of Christ as a matter of God's grace and mercy. He wrote, "The manifestation of grace and pardoning mercy, which is the only door of entrance into any such communion,"⁸⁵ means the only way to God is through Christ.

Owen wrote extensively about soteriological topics, and one of his better-known works is *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. Here he address the need for holiness or righteousness, and sees it satisfied in justification. Owen understood that God declared a believer justified through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Stephen G. Myers sums

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ryan M McGraw, 293–316.

⁸⁵ Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*. 157-158.

up Owens perspective with this comment, "In keeping with standard Protestant orthodoxy, Owen understood justification as a forensic, declarative act founded upon an imputed righteousness."⁸⁶

Justification is not a process, but an action occurring at conversion, declaring believers righteous through the imputed righteousness of Christ. The Biblical perspective teaches that works are not needed for salvation, as though the sacrifice of Christ was insufficient for our redemption. This is consistent with Paul's teaching that salvation is by grace, through faith and not of works (Eph. 2:8).

Owen recognized our need for imputed righteousness, God's provision through Christ's saving work, and our need to obey. Owen used the phrase "active obedience" as necessary for imputed righteousness. Meyers states, "While Owen strongly asserted the necessity of the imputation of Christ's righteousness, he just as strongly asserted that imputed righteousness necessarily included the active obedience of Christ."⁸⁷

The obedience of believers is not adding to our imputed righteousness or a qualification for keeping imputed righteousness. However, he did consider it a result of our union with Christ. As God in the flesh, Jesus was obedient unto death. He could only willingly submit to death because he is God and sinless, rendering death powerless over him. Meyers comments, "[Christ is] willingly rendering an obedience He is not obligated to render, thereby winning a righteousness that He can impute to others. In this, the entire category of the active obedience of Christ emerges not from a consideration of what a

⁸⁶ Stephen G. Myers, "God, Owen, and Justification : The Role of God's Nature in John Owen's Doctrine of Justification," *Puritan Reformed Journal Jul 2016* (July 1, 2016).

⁸⁷ Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*.

sinner needs to be justified, but rather from a consideration of the very person of Christ.”⁸⁸

Owen’s theological process began with Jesus. He understood the Father’s love for the world and sending Jesus as our redeeming hope. Imputed righteousness is dominant in Owen’s thinking because he realized the magnitude of man’s helplessness in contrast to the abundance of grace found in Christ. Therefore, he knew that at the heart of justification was righteousness provided for us in Christ. Meyers makes this comment of Owen’s interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:21, "...[There are] two parallel sections of the verse. In the first section, Paul writes of Christ being “made” sin; in the second section, of Christians being “made” righteousness—the very heart of justification.⁸⁹

Therefore, it is through Christ, the mediator between God and men, that the enmity between us has been replaced with forgiveness, reconciliation and peace. Owen explained it this way,

It is, then, I say, of that mutual communication in giving and receiving, after a most holy and spiritual manner, which is between God and the saints while they walk together in a covenant of peace, ratified in the blood of Jesus, whereof we are to treat. And this we shall do, if God permit; in the meantime praying the God and Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath, of the riches of his grace, recovered us from a state of enmity into a condition of communion and fellowship with himself, that both he that writes, and they that read the words of his mercy, may have such a taste of his sweetness and excellencies therein, as to be stirred up to a farther longing after the fullness of his salvation, and the eternal fruition of him in glory.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Myers, “God, Owen, and Justification.”

⁸⁹ Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Our fellowship with God is a shared experience or a participation in the divine nature. Kelly M. Kopic observes, “To experience communion there needs to be fellowship and communication—e.g., shared affections, response, delight, and satisfaction. In other words, when Owen speaks of our communion with God, he really means active communion, and not merely a state of passivity. “Communion consists in giving and receiving.”⁹¹

Our salvation and resulting union with Christ is an independent act by God. We were dead in trespasses and sins, yet by his grace, we've been made alive in Christ (Eph. 2). Believers are the recipients of God's grace, and through no work of their own can they establish or maintain that union. Jesus is "the founder and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2); therefore we can draw near to God with a pure heart in full assurance of our faith, having been made pure by the blood of Christ (Heb. 10:22).

Even though our salvation is an independent act by God, communion is a mutual relationship of giving and receiving. We enjoy the love of God through our obedience and devotion, as God presents himself to us as Father, Son, and Spirit. Kopic says, "Human communion with God presupposes the eternal communion of the divine persons in perfect unity and eternal distinction. Unity and distinction are crucial themes in Owen's approach to communion with God, for they tell us something about God and, consequently, something about how we are to approach him."⁹² Owen comments, “Our communion, then, with God consisteth in his communication of himself unto us, with our

⁹¹ Kelly M. Kopic and Justin Taylor, *Communion with the Triune God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007).

⁹² *Ibid.*

returnal unto him of that which he requireth and accepteth, flowing from that union which in Jesus Christ we have with him.”⁹³

Next, Owen references our active response. As an act of faith, we accept that God is giving himself to us through union with Christ and he mercifully forgives and regenerates. As an act of worship, we submit ourselves to God as a participant in his divine nature, (2 Pet 1:4). “We present ourselves as living sacrifices,” not by our initiative but, “by the mercies of God” (Rom. 12:1-2). Our response is not passive; rather we are presenting ourselves in active obedience.

One of the communication challenges in this project resides in Owen’s approach to God and our approach in evangelical churches today. Our consumer-driven, entertainment seeking, felt need approach to worship has created a man-centered approach to communion with God. Of course, there are exceptions, but there is no denying the culture has influenced the church. J. I. Packer contrasts current thought of communion with God to that of Owen’s day:

...Communion is a divine gift...the idea of communion with God is broader than in our common present-day usage. We tend always to think of communion with God subjectively and anthropocentrically; we limit it to our conscious experience of God, our deliberate approach to him and his felt dealings with us. But the Puritans thought of communion with God objectively and theocentrically...the context and cause of our experienced communion with God, said the Puritans, is God’s effective life-giving communion with us.⁹⁴

Biblically reframing the content, goal, and process of discipleship is necessary for evangelical churches to regain their spiritual influence. Owen’s theology of union with

⁹³ Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*.

⁹⁴ Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*. 204.

Christ and fellowship with the Trinity is a gateway to being filled with the fullness of God (Eph. 3:19). We will now explore Owen's insight regarding fellowship with the distinctiveness of each person of the Trinity:

By virtue of the believer's union with Christ, he doth really possess all things. That we know plainly from Scripture: but it may be asked, How he possesses all things; what is he the better for it; how is a true Christian so much richer than other men? To answer this, I will tell you what I mean by possessing all things. I mean that God, three in one, all that he is, and all that he has, and all that he does.⁹⁵

Communion with God the Father

The distinctiveness of the three persons in the Trinity and our distinctiveness in being created in God's image are essential elements in our communion with God. As a result, we can enjoy fellowship with God and each member of the Trinity individually. Kevin J. Vanhoozer quotes Owen referring to Gregory of Nazianzus' statement in the foreword of *Communion with the Triune God*, "No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the Splendour of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the One."⁹⁶

Owen states concerning our fellowship with the Father:

For through Christ we have access by one Spirit unto the Father," Eph. ii. 18. Our access unto God (wherein we have communion with him) is dia Christou, "through Christ," en Pneumati, "in the Spirit," and pros ton Patera, "unto the Father;" -- the persons being here considered as engaged distinctly unto the accomplishment of the counsel of the will of God revealed in the gospel.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Jonathan Edwards, 617.

⁹⁶ Kavic, *Communion with the Triune God*. 28.

Jonathan Edwards adds, “And by our union with Christ we have a greater union with God the Father.”⁹⁸

The character of the Godhead is such that their work is one, yet accomplished by the three. Owen holds to the truth that “God is love” (1 John 4) and concludes that love defines our fellowship with God. Owen wrote, “So in that distribution made by the apostle in his solemn parting benediction, 2 Cor. xiii. 14, ‘The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with you all.’ Ascribing sundry things unto the distinct persons, it is love that he peculiarly assigns to the Father.”⁹⁹

Owen continues,

The apostle teaches the same, Rom. v. 5, ‘The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, which is given unto us.’ God, whose love this is, is plainly distinguished from the Holy Ghost, who sheds abroad that love of his; and, verse 8, he is also distinguished from the Son, for it is from that love of his that the Son is sent: and therefore it is the Father of whom the apostle here specially speaketh. And what is it that he ascribes to him? Even love; which also, verse 8, he commendeth to us...¹⁰⁰

Commenting on Owen’s teaching of the believer’s communion with the Father, Paul Smalley writes,

The saints have particular communion with the Father in “his love—free, undeserved, and eternal love” (1 John 4:8–9; 2 Cor. 13:14; John 16:26–27; Rom. 5:6). The Father’s love is “the fountain from whence all other sweetness’s flow,”

⁹⁷ Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*.

⁹⁸ Jonathan Edwards, 150.

⁹⁹ Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 516.

the source of all grace. His love is bountiful, eternal, free, unchangeable, distinguishing, and fruitful in producing loveliness. The Father does not love the saints out of loneliness or need, but out of His abundant all-sufficiency and joy in His Son.¹⁰¹

The love of God was first extended to us in the sending of His Son to be the propitiation for our sins and ignites our love for Him. Owen surmises that if God had not loved us first, we would not turn our love toward Him. In his own words, “. . . in respect of the love of God. Never did creature turn his affections towards God, if the heart of God were not first set upon him.”¹⁰²

Paramount in Owen’s theology of the Father’s love is that it comes to us through Christ. Vanhoozer states it this way,

According to Owen, the whole movement of the biblical drama of redemption points in a different direction. Jesus is not the one who convinces the Father to love us, but, rather, the Son of God becomes incarnate in light of the Father’s eternal and free love toward us. The Father is not at odds with the Son, but rather, God the Father is love, and out of his love he sent his Son to die for our sins—“this love [of the Father] . . . is antecedent to the purchase of Christ.”¹⁰³

Owen writes, “The mutual love of God and the saints agrees in this, -- that the way of communicating the issues and fruits of these loves is only in Christ. The Father communicates no issue of his love unto us but through Christ; and we make no return of love unto him but through Christ.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Paul Smalley, *A Sweet Mystery: John Owen on the Trinity*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, Puritan Reformed Journal Volume 3, no. 1 (2011): 106

¹⁰² Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*.

¹⁰³ Kapic et al., *Communion with the Triune God*. 29

¹⁰⁴ Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*.

Owen identifies union with Christ as the means through which we worship the Father in the power of the Spirit. At the same time he highlights the unique interaction we have with each member of the Trinity - we receive love from the Father, grace from the Son and consolation from the Holy Spirit.

Communion with God the Son

Owen describes the believer's communion with Christ as a purifying encounter with the excellence of his love and grace. "We are called of God the Father, as the Father, in pursuit of his love, to communion with the Son, as our Lord...he refreshes himself with his own graces in them, by his Spirit bestowed on them."¹⁰⁵

In Owen's Christocentric perspective, he refers to Christ's refreshment of himself, "...With his own grace in them." The glory of the Father and Son are displayed in the adopted offspring of the Second Adam. The Father's love and the grace of the Son are seen in the fruit of the Father's redemptive plan and the beauty of the Son's obedience. The glory he shares with the Father and the redeemed refreshes the Son.

Believers are adopted and members of the household of God. They are children of God and a dwelling place of God, in the Spirit. In communion with believers, purchased with his blood, we also share in the redemptive glory of the Father and Son. We can commune with Jesus confidently as invited guests of the Father. Owen uses an intensely Christological hermeneutic, and writes insightfully of the excellency of Jesus:

There are three things in general wherein this personal excellency and grace of the Lord Christ doth consist:-- (1st.) His fitness to save, from the grace of union, and the proper necessary effects thereof. (2dly.) His fulness to save, from the grace of

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 1033.

communion; or the free consequences of the grace of union. (3dly.) His excellency to endear, from his complete suitableness to all the wants of the souls of men.¹⁰⁶

When Owen speaks of Jesus' grace, he identifies two categories, one being personal grace that focuses on the person of Christ and His spiritual beauty. The second purchased is grace that highlights his mediatorial work. Concerning personal grace, Owen writes,

Now, in this respect the Scripture describes him as exceeding excellent, comely, and desirable, -- far above comparison with the chiefest, choicest created good, or any endearment imaginable. Ps. xlv. 2, "Thou art fairer than the children of men: grace is poured into thy lips." He is, beyond comparison, more beautiful and gracious than any here below...¹⁰⁷

For Owen, the best description of the joy of personal grace is the Song of Solomon. He sees Jesus as the husband, and the bride is his church, in a conjugal relationship. Here's a sample of Owen's description of personal grace from the Song of Solomon:

The next thing that comes under consideration is, the way whereby we hold communion with the Lord Christ, in respect of that personal grace whereof we have spoken. Now, this the Scripture manifests to be by the way of a conjugal relation. He is married unto us, and we unto him; which spiritual relation is attended with suitable conjugal affections. And this gives us fellowship with him as to his personal excellencies.¹⁰⁸

As you can see, Owen describes our communion with Jesus as a mutual relationship. We receive His love and grace, and respond with loving obedience, worship and praise. Owen writes, "The Lord Christ is exceedingly delighted in tasting of the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 1269.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 1227.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 1368.

sweet fruits of the Spirit in the saints. Hence is that prayer of the spouse that she may have something for his entertainment when he comes to her.”¹⁰⁹

The believers are on the receiving end in this relationship and consequently, they carry the responsibility to receive or accept what is offered by God through Christ. Owen continues,

The accepting of Christ by the will, as its only husband, Lord, and Saviour. This is called "receiving" of Christ, John i. 12; and is not intended only for that solemn act whereby at first entrance we close with him, but also for the constant frame of the soul in abiding with him and owning of him as such... On the part of the saints, it is their free, willing consent to receive, embrace, and submit unto the Lord Jesus, as their husband, Lord, and Saviour, -- to abide with him, subject their souls unto him, and to be ruled by him for ever.¹¹⁰

Personal grace describes the spiritual beauty of Christ and the joy he has in caring for the redeemed. Owen says,

It is the gladness of the heart of Christ, the joy of his soul, to take poor sinners into this relation with himself... Because he loved his church... that he might enjoy his bride, -- that he might be for her, and she for him, and not for another... The soul faints with love, -- spiritual longings after the enjoyment of his presence; and Christ comes in with his embraces.¹¹¹

The work of Christ as mediator is the focus of purchased grace. Owen explains, “By purchased grace, I understand all that righteousness and grace which Christ hath procured, or wrought out for us, or doth by any means make us partakers of, or bestows on us for our benefit, by any thing that he hath done or suffered, or by any thing he continueth to do as mediator...”¹¹² Owen goes on to explain the contents of purchased

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 1034.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 1445-1448.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 1395-1396.

grace, “In particular, ‘purchased grace’ consists of the three graces of a) ‘acceptation with God’ (justification), b) ‘sanctification from God,’ and c) ‘privileges with and before God’ (adoption and its benefits).”¹¹³

Believers experience purchased grace through their union with Christ, being where he is and participating in what he's doing. Owen describes this relationship, “Now, that we have communion with Christ in this purchased grace, is evident on this single consideration, -- that there is almost nothing that Christ hath done, which is a spring of that grace whereof we speak, but we are said to do it with him.”¹¹⁴ When Jesus died we died, when he rose we rose (Rom 6) and when he was seated at the right hand of the Father we are sitting with him (Eph. 2:6).

Communion with God the Holy Spirit

Owen saw the primary ministry of the Holy Spirit as comforting the believer. It is the Holy Spirit who appropriates to us the love of the Father and the grace of the Son. As we experience suffering and joy in life, it is the Holy Spirit who keeps God present with us. The promises made to us by God find fulfillment in the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Owen writes,

All the consolations of the Holy Ghost consist in his acquainting us with, and communicating unto us, the love of the Father and the grace of the Son; nor is there any thing in the one or the other but he makes it a matter of consolation to

¹¹² Ibid., 3877.

¹¹³ Paul Smalley, 108.

¹¹⁴ Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*. 3890-3891.

us: so that, indeed, we have our communion with the Father in his love, and the Son in his grace, by the operation of the Holy Ghost.¹¹⁵

Motivated by love, the Holy Spirit brings us the beauty and purity of the

Godhead. Owen continues,

This is from the Holy Ghost; he is the Comforter, the God of all consolation; I know there is no joy, peace, hope, nor comfort, but what he works, gives, and bestows; and, that he might give me this consolation, he hath willingly condescended to this office of a comforter. His love was in it, and on that account doth he continue it.¹¹⁶

The Holy Spirit's indwelling ministry began when Jesus ascended. Owen sees the Spirit's indwelling bringing depth to our relationship with the Godhead that even the disciples were not able to realize before Pentecost:

When the Spirit came, how full of joy did he make all things to them! That which was his peculiar work, which belonged to him by virtue of his office, that he also might be glorified, was reserved for him. And this is his work to the end of the world, -- to bring the promises of Christ to our minds and hearts, to give us the comfort of them, the joy and sweetness of them, much beyond that which the disciples found in them, when Christ in person spake them to them; their gracious influence being then restrained, that, as was said, the dispensation of the Spirit might be glorified...his bringing the promises of Christ to remembrance, glorifying him in our hearts, shedding abroad the love of God in us, witnessing with us as to our spiritual estate and condition, sealing us to the day of redemption (being the earnest of our inheritance), anointing us with privileges as to their consolation, confirming our adoption, and being present with us in our supplications. Here is the wisdom of faith, -- to find out and meet with the Comforter in all these things; not to lose their sweetness.¹¹⁷

The Holy Spirit appropriates to us the very person of God, which is vital concerning our sanctification or our growth in Christ. The ultimate reward for believers is to one day see Christ and find that they are like Him (1 John 3:2). Our goal in

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 6463.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 6665.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 6167-6168.

sanctification is Christ-likeness and Owen considers the Holy Spirit as indispensable in this accomplishment:

Thus, then, the Holy Ghost communicates unto us his own likeness; which is also the image of the Father and the Son. ‘We are changed into this image by the Lord the Spirit,’ 2 Cor. iii. 18; and herein he brings us into fellowship with himself. Our likeness to him gives us boldness with him. His work we look for, his fruits we pray for; and when any effect of grace, any discovery of the image of Christ implanted in us, gives us a persuasion of our being separated and set apart for God, we have a communion with him therein.¹¹⁸

That we are being formed in the image of God is biblically well supported.

Theologically this is known as Theosis, and it is not without controversy. There are some who say being formed in the image of God is deification, and this is a primary doctrine in the Eastern Church. It is an awkward position to defend since created beings are not of the same essence as the Creator. As a result, Western Church distances itself from the doctrine of Theosis. McGraw observes, “Owen believed that being ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Pe. 1:4) entailed renewal in God’s image rather than deification.”¹¹⁹

John Owen expressed it this way, “In every thing wherein we are made partakers of the divine nature, there is a communication and receiving between God and us; so near are we unto him in Christ.”¹²⁰

Twentieth Century Discussions

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 6025.

¹¹⁹ McGraw, “Trinitarian Doxology.”

¹²⁰ Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*. 474.

The theological conversations of the last century concerning union with Christ, typically sought clarification in regards to mysticism, participation with Christ, theological pragmatism and to a lesser degree, understanding the Trinitarian nature of union with Christ. We will begin in the early 1900's with Adolf Deissmann and trace the conversational highlights chronologically through the century.

Campbell credits Adolf Deissmann for making the idiom, “in Christ” a popular topic in “twentieth-century New Testament scholarship” (Campbell, Locations 688-689). Deissmann described union with Christ as, “Christ mysticism, which he regarded as a response to Paul’s ‘mystical experience’ at Damascus—‘a mystical initiation arising from a divine initiative.’”¹²¹

Deissmann lifted union with Christ or “in Christ” terminology to the foreground but it was Albert Schweitzer who made it prominent in theological discussion. He viewed Paul’s mysticism through eschatological and ecclesiastical lenses. Schweitzer believed the “in Christ” motif to be a reference to the mystical body of Christ, which he viewed as a reality in Paul’s thought and not metaphorical (Campbell, 812).

Also, Schweitzer argued for a separation of Paul’s understanding of mysticism from that of Hellenistic mysticism. The influence Hellenistic and Jewish concepts mysticism on Paul is a common theme in these discussions.

Rudolf Buttmann reacted aggressively to Schweitzer mystical view and concluded; “‘in Christ’ terminology did not refer to mystic union, but was primarily an

¹²¹ Constantine R. Campbell, 689-691.

ecclesiological formula. It means the state of having been articulated into the “body of Christ” by baptism, although baptism need not be directly implied in every instance.”¹²²

Barth understood union with Christ in as participation in Christ both objective and subjective forms. Objectively he believed, “that human nature does not exist apart from its being in Christ”¹²³ Barth arrived at his conviction of subjective participation with Christ by concluding participation is experienced in obedience (Campbell, 998-999). Barth believed that there were roles in our participation with Christ and consequently, no loss of self in relation to Christ and others.

Barth rejected the use of the term, mysticism, believing unless it was clearly defined it should not be used. In other words, if there were no compelling reason its use should be avoided. He wrote about this in strong terms, and although he did not use Schweitzer’s name, he was undoubtedly who Barth had in mind. (Campbell, 539-540).

In addition, he believed in the Trinitarian nature of God as part of the in Christ terminology,

For Barth, the phenomenon of being in Christ stems from the trinitarian nature of God: ‘This historical being in Christ is decisively determined, of course, by the fact that first and supremely God was “in Christ” reconciling the world to Himself.’ In other words, being in Christ is not just a relationship between people and Christ; it is first a relationship between the Father and the Son.¹²⁴

In his writing, E. P. Sanders furthered the discussion of participation with Christ.

Though influenced by Schweitzer, Sanders replaced the term participation for

¹²² Ibid., 836-839.

¹²³ Ibid., 998-999.

¹²⁴ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics IV/3.2: The Doctrine of Reconciliation (ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; trans. G. W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), 546.

Schweitzer's mysticism. Sanders took a pragmatic approach to understanding union with Christ as participatory and not metaphorical (Campbell 1099).

In the late 1990's James D. G. Dunn, "affirmed Deissmann and Bousset's belief that 'in Christ' language refers to an experience of the risen Christ, not just a belief about Christ."¹²⁵ Furthermore, "While he was contented to adopt the term 'mysticism', Dunn acknowledged its inadequacy to indicate the profundity of the 'sense of participation with others in a great and cosmic movement of God centered on Christ and effected through his Spirit.'¹²⁶

Union With Christ in the Biblical Tradition

The theme of union with Christ is chiefly a New Testament doctrine. However, some foundational thoughts can be found in the Old Testament. Letham observes, "Union with Christ rests on the basis of the creation of man to be compatible with God."¹²⁷ Of course, the fall and the protevangelium pointed to the Jesus as the Messiah, and the Old Testament progressively revealed Jesus as the Savior; Jesus himself in Luke 24 gives a clear statement of the primacy of Jesus through the Old Testament.

During a trip to Emmaus, on the evening of his resurrection, Jesus met two disciples. They did not recognize Jesus and began to tell him of the events that took place in Jerusalem that day. Jesus listened, then, "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

¹²⁵ Constantine R. Campbell, 1178-1179.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Robert Letham, 9.

Union with Christ, as our hermeneutical point of convergence, allows the Bible to burn in our hearts as it did in the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:32). Owen believed, that understanding the Bible through union with Christ is what gave Scripture its continuity and capacity to transform. Wilbourne comments, “Union with Christ is how the Bible’s great unifying theme—communion with God—has come to pass... Union with Christ—not only is it in the Bible, but it’s what the Bible is all about!”¹²⁸

The Apostle Paul

The Apostle Paul uses the phrase “in Christ” or “in the beloved,” or a phrase closely related, to present the doctrine of union with Christ. Rightmire comments, “Paul more often than any other New Testament author combines the preposition “in” (*en*) with some designation for Christ. The phrase and its cognates occur some two hundred times in Pauline literature.”¹²⁹ In Ephesians 1:3-14 Paul declares to us that all spiritual blessings come to us through Christ, and in that long, single sentence he uses the phrase eleven times.

The letter to the Ephesians can divide into two sections; the first three chapters center on the theology of union with Christ and the last three on the practical issues of unity, spiritual maturity and Godliness based on our union with Christ. The Father set his love on us before the foundation of the world by choosing us in Christ, that we should be holy and blameless before him in Christ (Eph. 1:4). The theology of union with Christ sets the foundation for piety as a fruit of that union. Peter Thomas Obrien writes,

¹²⁸ Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ*.

¹²⁹ Rightmire, R. David, *Union with Christ*.

“Ephesians repeatedly draws attention to the sharp contrasts between believers’ former way of life and their new life in Christ.”¹³⁰

Paul uses the phrase “in Christ,” to unfold the spiritual blessings we have through union with Christ; others have tried to define it otherwise. Rightmire describes it this way,

Scholars have attempted to interpret the concept in a variety of ways (e.g., mystical, existential, sacramental, local, eschatological, and ecclesiastical). In places, the words “in Christ” can be understood as just another way of designating a Christian (Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 4:16). The idea of instrumentality or causality is an alternate usage of the phrase (Rom. 14:14; 2 Cor. 3:14; Gal. 2:17; Phil. 4:13). It is clear, however, that the words “in Christ” also have soteriological meaning for Paul (Rom. 8:1; 2 Cor. 5:19; Eph. 1:20). Being “in Christ” is presented as the only basis for justification and glorification (Col. 1:27). This is not a mysticism of absorption, the losing of human identity in the divine, but rather an intimate communion with God through Christ.¹³¹

In chapter four of this project, we will use the book of Ephesians to see how straight a line Paul draws between the doctrine of union with Christ and the practice of union with Christ. It will also provide content and structure for evangelical churches today in addressing the theology and experience of Christological discipleship.

The Gospel of John

Union with Christ is personal and dynamic in the gospel of John. Quoting Jesus in the Upper Room Discourse, John writes, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John

¹³⁰ Peter Thomas O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 2.

¹³¹ Rightmire, R. David, *Union with Christ*.

14:6). Truth is not a set of propositions or a collection of rules it is a person, the Lord Jesus Christ. John tells us if we know the truth, the person Jesus Christ, we will be free indeed (John 8:32). Jesus also said in the Gospel of John, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32).

John claims Jesus to be the living word and therefore, to abide in the word is to abide in Christ. Abiding is John's terminology for expressing union with Christ. John also uses the word abiding in 1 and 2 John as a way of describing our life in Christ. The imagery John uses in chapter 15 of his gospel, of the vine and the branches is a useful illustration to highlight our need for abiding relationship with Christ. A branch removed from the vine is of no use, it will become dry and brittle from the lack of water and nutrients that the vine draws from the soil to nourish the branch. Jesus speaks directly in this imagery that apart from the vine, or apart from union with him, we can do nothing. However, attached to the vine, the branches are nourished and fruitful.

The Synoptic Gospels

In the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke use the terminology of the kingdom of God. It is the central theme of the Gospels and declares the kingdom of God to be in our midst (Luke 17:21). In Peter's epistles, our union with Christ manifests in his salvific work, and we are said to be partakers of the divine nature (2 Pe. 1:4). In all of these references, faith or trust in Christ is necessary to live an abiding life in Christ, and our faith grows by the word of God (Rom. 10:17).

As this project moves toward the development of Christological discipleship, several of the topics discussed in this chapter, will need to find practical solutions. It has been established that union with Christ includes participation in his events, experiences and relationship with the Father. As a result, is it is certainly a spiritual experience but is it practical, mystical or a combination of the two? What is meant by mysticism in Biblical terms? How will we experience the distinctiveness and oneness of the Trinity in our worship and life?

Our practice of union with Christ needs to be grounded and balanced with the theology of union with Christ. The challenge of finding the balance is the topic of the chapter 4.

CHAPTER FOUR

ESSENTIALS OF CHRISTOLOGICAL DISCIPLESHIP: THEOLOGICAL REFRAMING

One of the contentions of this project considers the failure of the local Evangelical church to disciple their members into a vital relationship with Christ. Often in the face of temptation or suffering in life, believers find themselves ill equipped to recognize God's presence and care in their lives. This chapter will provide a critical piece for the solution to this problem.

The ability of the church to disciple members into union with Christ can be contributed to some factors. One of the most prevalent is the successful challenge of cultural shifts in America that are increasingly secular and individualized. Walter Truett Anderson considers America the “belief basket of the world.” He goes on to say,

Never before has any civilization made available to its populace such a smorgasbord of realities. Never before has a communications system like the contemporary mass media made information about religion—all religions—available to so many people. Never has a society allowed its people to become consumers of belief, and allowed belief—all beliefs—to become merchandise.” Anderson notes that America has become the “belief basket of the world.”¹³²

Fundamental churches were unsuccessful in pushing back against the influence of culture, in an effort to right that perceived wrong; Evangelicals began looking for ways to connect with the shifting American culture in an attempt to open a dialogue. Before long evangelism was replaced with marketing strategies, Biblical qualifications for leaders

¹³² Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What it Used to Be* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 188.

were replaced by good business minds and preaching was guided by consumer-driven/felt need sermons rather than the Holy Spirit directed ones.

This ministry shift produced changes in the church's vision, mission, culture and unwittingly, underlying theologies that supported their culture. The danger is the postmodern cultural shift offers Evangelical churches nothing of value. Veith comments, "For all its talk about culture, postmodernism lacks culture since the traditions, beliefs, and morals that define culture are all disabled."¹³³ He goes further in describing the progression of thinking that leads to loss, "The postmodern mindset can have a devastating impact on the human personality. If there are no absolutes, if truth is relative, then there can be no stability, no meaning in life. If reality is socially constructed, then moral guidelines are only masks for oppressive power and individual identity is an illusion."¹³⁴

There is no profit for an Evangelical church to follow this path, and the need is for revitalization of the doctrine of union with Christ. The critical need is to move believers into a union with Christ culture. This will require confronting the current culture and establishing new organizational culture and habits.

¹³³ Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994), 29.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

Establishing a Union With Christ Culture

Elements of Organizational Culture

Choosing one restaurant over another often goes beyond the quality of the menu, to atmosphere or ambiance. Although, most people will not deeply analyze why they are drawn to a particular restaurant, other than having it recommended to them. What they are often responding to is the culture or atmosphere of the restaurant. There is not a straightforward step that creates ambiance, but some issues like, the friendliness of the wait staff, values expressed in friendly service and, the tone and the general feel of the place can influence your decision. Often the explicit behavior is an expression of the culture's assumptions about human interaction, values, time, surroundings and priorities.

Local Evangelical churches are no different. Their vision statement, the theology that supports their vision, their expressed values and the way they relate to congregants and newcomers, all contribute to the feel or culture of the church. Kim S. Cameron, the William Russell Kelly Professor of Management and Organization at the Ross School of business at the University of Michigan explains it this way,

The reason organizational culture was ignored as an important factor in accounting for organizational performance is that it encompasses the taken-for-granted values, underlying assumptions, expectations, collective memories, and definitions present in an organization. It represents “how things are done around here.” It reflects the prevailing ideology that people carry inside their heads. It conveys a sense of identity to employees, provides unwritten and often unspoken guidelines for how to get along in the organization, and it helps to stabilize the social system that they experience.¹³⁵

Any church leadership team that initiated change has collided with the “how things are done around here” philosophy. The implicit assumptions that create the culture in an

¹³⁵ Kim S. Cameron, *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture, Third Edition: Based on the Competing Values Framework*, 3 edition. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

Evangelical church are particularly imbedded into the congregation's mindset because it represents their faith and how it is expressed. However, this can become an influential device if the culture communicates the values of union with Christ theology. This is particularly true of a local Evangelical church where the fellowship with one another is an extension of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. God's will is for members of the body of Christ to grow spiritually to the fullness of God in Christ. Intimate Godly fellowship and spiritual maturity requires vulnerability, trust, forgiveness, and love. If the church's culture does not communicate these attributes relationships will be shallow, and maturity will be defined outside of union with Christ.

Safety and trust can be established if the implicit assumptions of the church are tightly and consistently experienced in the teaching throughout the organization, articulated in vision and mission statements, applied in problem solving and practiced in decision-making. Edgar H. Schein comments, "Because of the human need for order and consistency, assumptions become patterned into what may be termed cultural "paradigms," which tie together the basic assumptions about humankind, nature, and activities. A cultural paradigm is a set of interrelated assumptions that form a coherent pattern."¹³⁶

As mentioned by Kim Cameron, most often implicit assumptions are only recognized when they are challenged in some way. Schein explains how to recognize when an implicit assumption is challenged, "Taken-for-granted assumptions are so powerful because they are less debatable and confrontable than espoused values. We

¹³⁶ Edgar H. Schein, *Coming to a New Awareness of Organizational Culture*, Sloan Management Review, 25.2, (1984, Winter) p.3

know when we encounter in our informants a refusal to discuss something, or when they consider us "insane" or "ignorant" for bring something up."¹³⁷

When there is a test of implicit assumptions, a member of the organization will feel as though the security of the organization has been challenged. Predictably, the emotional system of the organization is disturbed and anxiety increases and spreads. Insightful leaders will discern a controlling assumption is being tested. It gives the leadership an opportunity to reinforce the unspoken assumptions. However, failure to do so will begin to redefine the usefulness of the organization's current assumptions.

Church leaders should be aware that, "Cultural elements are defined as learned solutions to a problem (Schein)." Commenting on learning mechanisms in a culture's system, Schein states,

Structurally, there are two types of learning situations: [1] positive problem-solving situations that produce positive or negative reinforcement in terms of whether the attempted solution works or not; and [2] anxiety avoidance situations that produce positive or negative reinforcement in terms of whether the attempted solution does or does not avoid anxiety.¹³⁸

Many of the unrecognized assumptions are established and developed in the day-to-day problem-solving activities of the organization. That is where values are expressed in guiding decision making, and the anxiety of the individuals involved is apparent. Leaders need to guard the organization against allowing anxiety to overshadow the organization's core values. When a decision is made to avoid anxiety or solve a problem without the context of an organization's assumptions, core values are eroded, and a new

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

set of assumptions are starting to emerge. If this scenario is repeated regularly, the safety and trust in an organization will deteriorate, and anxiety will rise.

In a church organization, it is imperative that the core theologies and values of union with Christ be understood and continually reinforced. The longevity, quality, and strength of the church are dependent upon the members' commitment to the implicit assumptions. Schein adds,

The strength of a culture can be defined in terms of the homogeneity and stability of group membership and the length and intensity of the shared experience of the group. If a stable group has had a long, varied, intense history (i.e., if it has had to cope with many difficult survival problems and has succeeded), it will have a strong and highly differentiated culture. By the same token, if a group has had a constantly shifting membership or has been together for only a short time and has not faced many difficult issues, it will, by definition, have a weak culture. Although individuals within that group may have strong individual assumptions, there will not be enough shared experiences for the group as a whole to have a defined culture.¹³⁹

It is remarkable that culture is so profoundly effective in improving performance and yet, it is given so little attention. Cameron, writing for the business community, along with raising awareness of the importance of culture's influence on success, has identified four elements of organizational culture.

The first element is, "Implicit assumptions." Cameron observes that organizational culture is often taken for granted and unobservable. She continues, "At the most fundamental level, cultural is manifest as the implicit assumptions that define the human condition and its relationship to the environment... these assumptions are not recognized unless challenged by incompatible or contradictory assumptions."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Kim S. Cameron, 19.

For example, the NIV is the pew Bible and used weekly in the pulpit. A guest speaker arrives reading and preaching from an ESV. In the typical congregation, a minor adjustment will be made, knowing next Sunday “normalcy” returns. However, if the pastor who regularly uses an NIV begins to use an ESV, this is unsettling to most congregants. If a person in the church is asked to explain the problem, they would say, “It’s not what is normally done.”

The unspoken assumptions in a local church create the culture expressing how they will worship, serve and love. It is a church leadership imperative to identify the current assumptions, evaluate them and revise them as necessary. As a result, the leadership can move forward with intentionality, implementing a Christological discipleship culture.

The second element is, “Conscience contracts and norms.” Cameron explains it this way, “From assumptions emerge contracts and norms. These are the rules and procedures that govern human interaction.”¹⁴¹ Conscience contracts and norms give people permission to behave and express themselves congruently with the values and priorities of the organization.

According to Cameron, the third element concerns artifacts (Cameron, 21). In the church setting, they can reference many items, differing from church to church. Sometimes artifacts are represented by the style of worship, style of dress, mission statements, the arrangement of the pews or no pews at all. It is any tradition or symbol that represents an unspoken value in the culture of the church and frequently its history. It is often commented on with the phrase, “It’s just the way things are around here.”

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

This particular element should be approached carefully when leading change or replacing another pastor. There are strong underlying emotional connections to artifacts. It is troublesome to replace a pulpit in need of repair when the grandfather of a member built it. In other words, to lead change at a cultural level, it is necessary to proceed carefully while seeking out information and finding the perceived value of the item.

The final element Cameron identifies is specific behaviors. As the most visible expression of culture, he explains them this way, "...This is the way people interact, the amount of the whole self-invested in the organization, and the extent to which innovation or activity is tolerated or encouraged."¹⁴² In committing to an organization, members will connect with as much of the history and culture as they can. However, when it comes to change this element needs to be handled with compassion and wisdom. If not handled properly acute anxiety will spread through the congregation and a season of instability.

Implicit assumptions inform the conscience contracts and norms, the artifacts and explicit behavior. Consequently, church leadership needs to focus on the unspoken assumptions that inform the other elements if they are to craft the culture of their ministry. Evangelical churches will be better served to establish a culture of Christological discipleship or union with Christ.

A church's culture is an effective way to reinforce and communicate a church's Christological discipleship emphasis. Implicit assumptions should include the theology of Christ's headship in the church, spiritual authority, the elements of union with Christ (union, identification, participation and incorporation), immersion into the Trinity and the

¹⁴² Ibid.

believer's responsibility of abiding, trusting and obeying. These influencers would have a profound impact on the church's worship, fellowship and ministry.

The difficulty with a Christological discipleship culture is its ontological considerations. Becoming like Jesus is a transforming experience and not attained by merely doing what Jesus would do. Participating in the divine nature includes the imputation of righteousness, the rich provision of adoption, also, enjoying love and oneness in fellowship with the Trinity. There is a behavioral aspect that grows from our union with Christ and participates in the essence of his character and purpose of his activity.

Hans Weder wrote, "The disciple is not there merely to learn from the teacher but to share his whole life with him without reservation. Discipleship is characterized by establishing a fundamental life relationship to the person of Jesus (and not merely to his teaching)." ¹⁴³

Jesus is not a concept but a person, the second person of the Trinity, and we can enjoy a meaningful relationship with Him if we exercise our spiritual sensibilities through union with Christ. Union with Christ is a transformative renewing of our mind into the image of the one who created us (Col 3:10).

Our discipleship goal in each moment is to be in fellowship with God and responsive to His presence as a participant in his nature and purpose. We are grateful when we remember God's faithful work in our lives, and we find hope when we look ahead in complete trust that he will fulfill his promises. However, we can only experience

¹⁴³ Hans Weder, "Disciple, Discipleship," ed. David Noel Freedman, trans. Dennis Martin, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 208.

him in the present, our whole being in fellowship with his, exercising, as John Owen said, "an active obedience."

Breen writes, "Jesus wasn't able to compartmentalize teaching, theology, and doctrine into ethereal, cognitive realities. Teaching and theology were ways of describing reality, and then He showed his disciples how to live in that reality. "What is reality? The Kingdom of God! And if you do what I do, you can live fully in that reality."¹⁴⁴ It is life the way God intended it, under the rule and authority of God and in communion with the Trinity.

The work of putting Jesus back at the center of our lives is a difficult task because it asks individuals and churches to look at themselves critically and make the appropriate changes. Breen says,

Here's the thing that can be difficult to wrap our minds around: If you make disciples, you always get the church. But if you make a church, you rarely get disciples...we need to understand the church as the effect of discipleship and not the cause. If you set out to build the church, there is no guarantee you will make disciples. It is far more likely that you will create consumers who depend on the spiritual services that religious professionals provide.¹⁴⁵

The church was designed to function as a Christocracy, with Christ at the head and leaders and congregants carrying out his ministry in the authority that is delegated to them. For most churches, this is a significant and challenging change in direction. A church's traditions and symbols often take on sacred meanings, and people are willing to fight to hold onto these relics. They will form power blocks, make accusations, force people out of the church, including pastors.

¹⁴⁴ Mike Breen and Steve Cockram, *Building as Discipleship Culture*, (Pawleys Island, SC: 3 Dimension Ministries, 2011), 455.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

It's disheartening for many pastors because the change begins with honoring Jesus, and even for church leaders, this can be challenging. It's a matter of simple economics: as the congregation increased in number, so does the church budget. That allows for expansion, perhaps additions to the staff, additional church programs or a remodeled facility. Breen wrote, "Who is Jesus to you? How you answer that question has more to do with the growth of your church than any strategy or plan... What we see from Jesus is that success isn't thousands of people and an ever-expanding church. Success is obedience to what the Father asks."¹⁴⁶

Establishing a culture that is flowing from our union with Christ is complex given the current state of the church and the nature of cultural change. During his time on earth, Jesus challenged and changed the culture for his disciples. The actions he took are instructive for us, and he began by questioning the current religious assumptions.

The Sermon on the Mount is one of the lengthier teachings of Jesus found in Scripture. As recorded in Matthew 5, Jesus used several forms of the phrase, "you have heard it said, but I say to you," with the use of that statement he identified their assumptions and confronted them with a more profound sense of holiness. Those who heard his teaching knew that committing murder was punishable but Jesus anger in their hearts carried a judgment as well. They knew the physical act of adultery was a sin, and Jesus caused them to look at the lust in their hearts as a sin.

One of the aspects of challenging their assumptions was to introduce changes in the language. The Beatitudes are the introduction to the sermon on the Mount, Jesus says the blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn; hunger and thirst and those who are

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 102.

persecuted. Those definitions demand an explanation and present an invitation to embrace the new assumptions. Much like Starbucks has its language for a large coffee as an invitation to their community, Jesus invites his listeners to join him in a new culture.

Jesus communicated his message consistently and in numerous formats. There were formal teachings such as the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5), Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17) and the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24-25). He taught in the Temple as a child, in the synagogue, in homes and along the Sea of Galilee. He taught Peter, James, and John at his Transfiguration, he taught the disciples to pray, and he taught the multitudes. He spread his message with illustration, parable, metaphors, and teaching. Jesus knew the power of his message and shared at every opportunity. This is a good pattern to follow for church leadership in the process of establishing a union with Christ culture.

Although Jesus often spoke to multitudes, he willingly addressed individuals and met them where their faith wavered. He met Nicodemus at night, a Samaritan woman at a well and a Rich Young Ruler. He was sensitive to the individual in the communication of his message. Church leaders also need to be available and prepared to meet congregants at their point of confusion or disbelief. Jesus was involved with communicating his message at every level. However, most of his time and teaching was spent with the disciples, the ones that would continue spreading his message and culture once he ascended.

Cultural Talking Points To Reframe Implicit Assumptions

Schein observes, "Culture is perpetually being formed in the sense that there is constantly some learning going on about how to relate to the environment and to manage internal affairs. But this ongoing evolutionary process does not change those things that

are so thoroughly learned that they come to be a stable element of the group's life."¹⁴⁷ A church is being formed continually, either intentionally or unintentionally. An ongoing approach to discipleship that permeates the church's culture and the lives of individuals in the congregations is vital to a spiritually healthy environment. The primary task of church leaders is to intentionally maintain the connection of individuals and groupings in the church with the theology that informs the culture.

In light of this, care needs to be taken in the assimilating of new members into the group. Schein observes,

"...it must be taught to new members. It would not serve its function if every generation of new members could introduce new perceptions, language, thinking patterns, and rules of interaction. For culture to serve its function, it must be perceived as correct and valid, and if it is perceived that way, it automatically follows that it must be taught to newcomers."¹⁴⁸

It is common for churches to offer New Attendee Classes or New Member Classes to acclimate congregants to the life of the church, introduce them to others and help them to feel welcome. Although sincere and well-intentioned, those attending these classes are being immersed into the church's conventions rather than union with Christ.

The culture of an organization is seen in its overt behavior, and overt behavior will have its roots in our perceptions. Jesus taught that the mouth speaks out of the abundance of the heart (Luke 6:45). James illustrates the same principle when referring to a spring and its inability to produce both fresh and salt water (James 3:11). Our thoughts and feelings will find expression in our conduct, and it is our worldview or implicit assumptions that determine our thoughts and feelings. Consequently, it requires relentless

¹⁴⁷ Edgar H. Schein, 3.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

commitment on behalf of the church leaders to communicate the theology of union with Christ. Since it is more than a curriculum, it must be woven into the fabric or culture of the church.

In the course of developing a culture of union with Christ or Christological discipleship, certain doctrines set a context to give depth of understanding and texture to supporting Scripture. As the Word of God is studied, these presuppositions provide a stable hermeneutical frame of reference. Here is the theological umbrella that provides limitations for our experience and practice of union with Christ.

Spiritual Authority

When God speaks or acts from His Throne, He does so with authority. His Throne is, "Far above all rule and authority in power and dominion, in every name that is named, not only in this age but in the one to come (Eph 1:21)." It is helpful to make a distinction between God's authority and God's power. When we speak of God's authority, we are speaking of God himself, and when we speak of God's power, we are referring to the action he can accomplish.

Authoritative is what God is, it is not something that has been assigned to Him or something he achieves. God stands alone, and there is no one like Him. When the Bible gives us a description of heaven, God's authority is unchallenged by anyone or anything. It is always a scene of worship. At the name of Jesus every knee bows before Him recognition of His authority (Phil 2).

As we've made a distinction between God's power and authority, it is worth discussing how they come together in Christ and are made available to us through Christ. When God chooses to speak of His power in the Old Testament, he refers the crossing of the Red Sea. In the New Testament, God's power is illustrated in the resurrection, and the authority of Christ is seen in the Ascension and his seat at the right hand of the Father. Liefeld writes,

"Great as God's power was proved to be in the resurrection, in the ascension we see that power bringing Christ into the position of ultimate honor at the *right hand* of God, from where his authority is extended over all beings, specifically all the forces that could conceivably challenge Christ for supremacy"¹⁴⁹

This truth is also consistent with the preaching in the early church. O'Brien observes from Ephesians 1,

God's mighty strength was also *exerted* in the exaltation of Christ (vv. 20b–23). These verses allude to two different Psalm passages (110:1; 8:6), both of which were used in early Christian preaching. Christ's exaltation was God's mighty act of raising him... (*and*) His ascension to the right hand of God was an essential and regular element in the early apostolic preaching, finding echoes throughout the New Testament.¹⁵⁰

The preaching of Christ, in a position of unparalleled honor and universal authority, provided the early church with a clear understanding of the Lordship of Christ, which is affirmed repeatedly by the New Testament authors. Apparently, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they felt it essential that Christ is worshiped and understood from that exalted position. It is remarkable, and the Scriptures make it clear, that power has been given to us in Christ.

¹⁴⁹ Walter L. Liefeld, *Ephesians*, vol. 10, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), Eph 1:20.

¹⁵⁰ Peter Thomas O'Brien, 140.

It is through a believer's participation in Christ's nature and experiences that we seated with him in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6). That is why we can be strong in the Lord and stand against evil forces (Eph 6:10), our locale is in Christ, and the principalities and powers under his feet are under ours as well. Osborne explains,

The particular sphere within which we attain this spiritual victory is “his mighty power,” stressing the greatness of what Christ has made available for his followers. Paul stresses the extent of God’s strength in Ephesians 1:19–20, where we are told of “his incomparably great power” given to us. This is the same power God used to raise Christ from the dead and exalt him to his right hand. Paul is pulling out all the stops to help his readers understand what wondrous strength God has made available to them.¹⁵¹

It is critical to reemphasize that all power and authority belong to Christ, and what is delegated to His people requires submission to His Lordship. The distinction between power and authority from a human perspective is significantly different than from God's perspective. As created beings, our power and influence are extremely limited. However, what the Lord has delegated to us is incredibly powerful. This can be illustrated by pointing out a person on an interstate is not powerful enough to stop a car moving at 70 mph. If the person is wearing a state trooper uniform, a simple raised hand will have the car pulling over to the side, making a complete stop. On our own, we are not powerful enough to stand against principalities and powers. However, the one who holds all authority delegates our power. Therefore, we can genuinely, "...be strong in the Lord and the strength of his might" (Eph 6:10).

That God is authoritative, loving and kind requires our obedience. Jesus says in John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." This is entirely different

¹⁵¹ Grant R. Osborne, *Ephesians: Verse by Verse*, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 223.

than a human understanding that those in authority or power are restricting our freedom, not enhancing it. We can see from Jesus' statement in John 14 that obedience is part of a love relationship with Him. In following his commandments, we are enjoying his best.

As participants in God's divine nature, our disobedience is an offense against God himself since he is the one who is inherently holy, loving, authoritative and participating with us. It would be much easier to receive forgiveness or absolution for a sinful action. However, our sin is an offense against God's holy nature and hinders our communion with him. The opposite is true as well; when we obey his commandments, we are expressing our trust and love for him and his authoritative care for us.

The authority of Christ is over all creation, and yet, the church or body of Christ is singled out as a place where his authority is necessary for its proper functioning. Paul calls attention to Christ's headship in the church. Ephesians 1:22-23 says, "And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church,²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." This is a clear statement of the authority and supremacy of Christ over all of creation and specifically the church. Notice the words, "... Under his feet..." and "... Head over all things to the church."

O'Brien makes this observation,

"...Christ's headship has to do with his relation to the cosmos; then body is introduced (v. 23) as a description of the church to which Christ is given. The term 'head' expresses his ruling authority." Without the headship of Christ, the church itself would never have the capacity to demonstrate the "fullness of him who fills all in all."¹⁵²

The relationship of Christ and the church is one of love and purity. In Ephesians 5:22-27, Christ is again identified as the head of the church, His body, and this is

¹⁵² Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*.

followed by an illustration of the love and purity between husband and wife. Christ has not only been given to the church, He is the Savior of the church. It was in love that Christ offered himself as a sacrifice for the church, His Bride. His purpose in doing so is to one day present the church to Himself in the splendor of holiness.

As Christ, in love, sanctifies and purifies the church, we are once again plugged into an eternal perspective. The headship of Christ has a present reality and the future hope and is consistent with the purpose of God the Father when he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before Him (Eph. 1:4).

To deepen our understanding of Christ's relationship with the church, Paul writes in Ephesians 2:18-22,

For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him, you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Through the use of metaphors, Paul highlights the unity of the church under the headship of Christ. Despite the great divide between Jew and Gentile, Christ has brought both together through his sacrifice and establishment of righteousness, so that all who are redeemed in Him can enjoy the peace and unity that comes from the righteousness imputed to us through Christ (Eph. 2:14-18).

Consequently, in Christ, we no longer have reason to be at odds with one another but to enjoy being members of the household of God. There is a social dynamic to this new relationship that is described in specific detail in the second half of Paul's letter to

the Ephesians. It is there that we are told to walk worthy of our calling in love and righteousness.

Paul now takes the imagery of the family and begins to describe the place where the family will live. He points to the foundation, the cornerstone, and declares it to be a Holy Temple. Liefeld phrases it this way, “The image of a family or household thus turns into that of a building, and then the building becomes a temple, somewhat like the “morphing” of a computer-generated picture. Paul proceeds to enlarge on his imagery, specifying the foundation and cornerstone.”¹⁵³ In mentioning the, “... The foundations of the apostles and prophets...” first does not imply that Christ handed the church over to leaders and removed Himself from further involvement, making the apostles and prophets the foundation the church. Christ is the head of the body of Christ and it will function according to his purpose when his inherent and delegated authorities are lovingly received and obeyed.

The delegated leadership of the church also provides care for the congregation as the current culture is challenged and new guiding theologies are put in place. When the emotional system in an organization is being changed, planned or unplanned, the anxiety of the organization will be disrupted. It is optimum when the church’s leadership takes ownership of the culture. Schein comments, “There cannot be a culture unless there is a group that owns it. Culture is embedded in groups, hence the creating group must always be identified. If we want to define a cultural unit, therefore, we must be able to locate a group that is independently defined as the creator, host or owner of that culture.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Walter L. Liefeld, *Ephesians*.

The Sufficiency Of Christ

In chapter 15 of the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus is walking with his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. On their way, they came across a vineyard, and Jesus used it to illustrate the relationship between his Father, Himself and His disciples. He identified Himself as the vine, His Father as the vinedresser, and his disciples as the branches. He used this illustration to demonstrate how vital it was for the branches to abide in the vine. Of course, the imagery was explicit; Jesus is critical to a fruitful Christian life.

The union between the vine and the branches needs to be healthy. The vinedresser is attentive to any disease or pest that would compromise the union and prunes what is necessary; the same is true of our union or abiding in Christ. Jesus was clear that apart from Him we can do nothing. However, attached to the vine, it pulls up the moisture and nutrients from the soil and supplies the vine with all that is needed for abundant fruit. In the same way, all of God's spiritual blessings come to us through the Lord Jesus Christ, and He is sufficient for all we spiritually need.

This is what Paul writes in the greeting of his epistle in 1:3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places..." This verse tells us that Christ is our sufficiency; to be in union with Christ is to open access to all the fullness of Trinitarian life. It is God the Father who has blessed us in Christ, and He doesn't hold anything back. Grant R. Osborne remarks,

¹⁵⁴ Edgar H. Schein, 3.

There are two qualifications: it is *every* blessing, and each one is *spiritual*. God holds nothing back as he lavishes all his riches (1:7–8) upon us. Everything we need is poured out on us by divine generosity. When we shower God with our praise, it is our natural response to the God who has poured out his blessings on us.¹⁵⁵

A dominant theme throughout Ephesians is all that we have from God comes through Jesus Christ. In chapter 1:2-14 is a description of the salvific work of God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit, and Paul emphasizes throughout this passage that our redemption is achieved through Jesus Christ. Walter L. Liefeld comments,

Christ and the Spirit are depicted as the agents through whom the Father accomplished his purposes. Note the repeated wording, in Christ (1:3, 9), through Jesus Christ (1:5), in the One he loves (1:6), in him (1:4, 7, 11) and, through his blood (1:7). The Spirit is portrayed as a seal and a deposit (1:13–14). God is fully engaged in our salvation, but that salvation is communicated to us only in Christ.¹⁵⁶ The purpose of God’s gifts to us through Christ is, “...that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 2:20).

As a practical matter of discipleship, it is imperative to keep Christ at the center. He is the culmination of all things (Eph 1:11) and the one through whom God provides all that we need for redemption and sanctification. Since Christ is Lord, all we can do is respond. God spoke the first word, and every other comment after that is a response, every one of our actions is a response to his first action. As a result, since Christ is our sufficiency and Lord, we need to cultivate sensitivity to His presence and be prepared to respond to His promptings. Therefore, an essential element in discipleship is to encourage deepening awareness of the presence of Christ and the movement of his Spirit in our lives. Apart from him, we can do nothing.

¹⁵⁵ Grant R. Osborne, 16–17.

¹⁵⁶ Walter L. Liefeld, *Ephesians*, Eph 1:3.

Love

Matt 22:34-40 But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.

In this passage from Matthew 22, a lawyer is confronting Jesus as to what is the great commandment in the law? Jesus responds by telling him to love the Lord with all his heart soul and mind and his neighbor as himself. It is noteworthy that Jesus considered this law to be the greatest. It is also interesting that the commands loving the Lord, and your neighbor as yourself fulfill the law and the prophets.

Jesus made a similar comment in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matt 7:12). This is a powerful statement, as Jesus is claiming that these two commandments fulfill the law and the prophets. When you consider the Ten Commandments, the first three commandments focus on loving God, the last six commandments focus on loving our neighbor, and the 4th commandment is the sign of the Covenant. The rest of the Law is case law expanding on the Ten Commandments.

This is a significant statement about the value God places on love. God is love and once we are adopted and a child of God, the Holy Spirit sheds God's love abroad in our hearts (Rom 5:5). Remarkably, Jesus also sees love is an indication that we belong to him he said in the gospel of John, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one

another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

If we are distinguished by the love we have for one another as belonging to Christ, what is the quality of that love that sets it apart from other expressions of love? It is different from the love humans' share with one another. Some would say is to sacrificial nature of that love, however, through the centuries many have sacrificed for causes and other people. It would be unreasonable to claim that all those who have sacrificed themselves our followers of Christ.

God tells us that he is love (1 John 4:8, 16), God also declares himself to be holy (Ps 77, 99). These are ontological statements about God, and they are not titles assigned to him or a description of his activities. Holiness and love do not define God; it is the character of God that defines them. Therefore, it is the purity of God's love that sets his love apart from all other expressions of love, and it is his love in us that sets us apart as his children. This is an example of the transformative effect of being a participant of his nature.

Mystery

Rom 16:25 Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages
26 but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith.

Throughout church history, the mystery is one of the main topics of debate among theologians seeking to understand the idiom union with Christ. Marcus Barth gives a sufficient summary for this project,

This key term of Paul's theology ['in Christ'] is a puzzle that has been treated in any number of monographs and excurses. Mythical (Schlier in his commentary), mystical (Schweitzer), existential, sacramental (Bouttier), local (Deissmann), historical and eschatological (Lohmeyer, Neugebauer, Bouttier), juridicial (Parisius), and ecclesiastical (Grossouw) interpretations compete for recognition or are grouped together in various selections.¹⁵⁷

A mystery in Scripture is a hidden truth revealed by God. It is not a mystery in the sense it is a problem needing a solution, but it is a truth of God that he reveals at a time he chooses. Some mysteries are revealed through Christ; however, other aspects remain a mystery, like the incarnation and the Trinity. Mysteries are not questions looking for answers but are fully known by God and shared with us, through divine revelation. As a result, mysteries are not known through human discovery or investigation.

Paul affirms this point in Colossians 1:27, "The mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints." Also, Paul, speaking of the stewardship of God's grace says, Ephesians 3:3, "...how the mystery was made known to me by revelation..." Norman L. Geisler points out that although God reveals divine mysteries, "A mystery goes beyond reason but not against reason. There is no contradiction, yet we lack total comprehension."¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Marcus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3 and 4-6, 2 Volume Set* (Anchor/Doubleday, 1984), 69.

¹⁵⁸ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 1998).515-516.

The prophet Isaiah describes an aspect of God's greatness with these words, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8-9). The mysteries that God reveals to us are rational, yet beyond our ability to understand. We accept that God is one being and three distinct personalities but, how is that possible? How can Jesus be both fully God and fully man? That our comprehension is limited does not imply that God's thinking becomes irrational, mythical or existential.

Geisler provides a practical solution for those times when God's ways and thoughts are above ours. He writes,

A mystery is distinguished from a problem. A problem has a solution; a mystery is the object of meditation. A problem calls for extensive knowledge; a mystery for intensive concentration. Like a missing word in a crossword puzzle, a problem can be solved by more knowledge; a mystery cannot. If it could, it would not be a mystery. Mysteries do not call for answers, but for insights.¹⁵⁹

Geisler's counsel for engaging mystery is meditation or taking the posture of a listener rather than a researcher. A worshipful attitude allows God's Word and Spirit space to be heard in our souls. The tools of our education are limited for increasing in the knowledge of Christ. Our intellect is needed and also our heart and soul (Matt. 22). Experiencing God in the depths of our being is a movement of God. Our humility and brokenness also create space for God to dwell with us and transform our heart, soul, and mind. God can be found at two locations. The first is high and holy, and we experience

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

his presence through our praise and gratefulness. The other is brokenness and humility, and he promises to revive our spirit and heart.

The prophet Isaiah writes in 57:15,

For thus says the One who is high and lifted up,
 who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
 I dwell in the high and holy place,
 and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,
 to revive the spirit of the lowly,
 and to revive the heart of the contrite.

In other words, our sanctification is not a matter of human effort and good works it is a matter of brokenness, giving God a place to make himself known to us in personal ways.

In the first of Paul's prayers in Ephesians 1, he intercedes, "That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him" (Eph. 1:17). A deeper knowledge of Christ requires humility on our part to receive the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Paul explains, "Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual" (I Cor. 2:12-13).

Returning to Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1, he continues in verses 18-19, "Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints. And what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might." For us to enjoy the benefits of union with Christ, Paul uses the phrase, "eyes of your hearts," as the place to receive spiritual discernment. Therefore, a more in-

depth knowledge of Christ is not an intellectual endeavor but a spiritual interaction with the Holy Spirit. When our understanding of God moves beyond our comprehension, it provokes wonder, which is the heart and passion of worship.

Rightmire provides an insightful summary of this discussion of mystery,

Paul's teaching on union with Christ has often been labeled as Christian "mysticism." This is an appropriate term if understood in a qualified sense. Paul viewed communion with God as an act of divine grace, coming not by any spiritual exercises, but by God's self-revelation (Gal. 1:16). Thus, union with Christ is something to accept by faith, not something to achieve by human effort. Neither does being "in Christ" involve the loss of individuality, nor the absorption of the individual into the divine Spirit (Rom. 8:14, 16; Gal. 2:20), but the heightening of individual qualities and characteristics. Besides, being "in Christ" is more than mystical union; it involves a moral union that provides the ethical dynamic for Christian living. This is more than a gospel of ethical example (an impossible ideal), but the indwelling of Christ who provides the motive power to live in obedience to God.¹⁶⁰

An Expectation of Spiritual Growth

The redemptive purpose of God includes salvation, sanctification, and glorification. This statement is familiar in the Evangelical community. However, some of the subtle underpinnings disappear, and the main points are emphasized. In other words, Evangelicals have a justifiable tendency to accentuate and rejoice over the blessings of salvation, sanctification, and glorification and miss the subtleties of our union with Christ. There is attention given to the goal or outcome of God's redemptive work in our lives, but the implications regarding our union with Christ are not given the attention they

¹⁶⁰ R. David Rightmire, 792.

deserve. As a result, in church discipleship programs, maturity in Christ is determined by Biblical knowledge gained and religious activity accomplished.

This claim can be supported by a careful examination of several passages commenting on God's work of salvation, sanctification, and glorification.

Titus 3:4-7 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

As in other passages, justification and adoption are our ground for union with Christ not merely a description of our salvation. The Holy Spirit is the agent of our renewal and poured out on us richly all that is needed for us to live as children of God in the hope of eternal life. More than a statement about our works being insufficient for eternal life, it describes the work of the Trinity in which we participate. Unquestionably, we are saved by God's mercy but using the theme of union with Christ as a hermeneutical focal point, and we can connect with the person and process of our salvation. That can center our thinking and experience on the process or our participation in our salvation instead of merely connecting with the outcome.

The writer of Hebrews addresses the spiritual lethargy in their church and writes pointedly to them. They are unclear concerning the nature of spiritual growth, and it is treated as follows,

Hebrews 5:11-14, About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

Although they had been believers for an extended time they were, "unskilled in the word of righteousness." The author finds it difficult to explain the problem to them, not because the concept is beyond their understanding, but they had become, "dull of hearing." As a result, they need to be taught again rather than teach themselves. The understanding of increasing in discernment through the practice of the word of righteousness was missing and is the cause of their spiritual immaturity.

Our educational system teaches us to know information and then manipulate toward our desired outcome. This is not necessarily a bad thing a teacher needs the knowledge to, but knowledge alone does not make a teacher. Many in churches today would consider solid food or meat deep spiritual truth. However, solid food or meat is not deep theology, and it is theology applied.

As the culture in a church is being affirmed or established this understanding of growth is a necessary implicit assumption influencing the contract and norms, artifacts and explicit behavior of the life of the church? If these subtleties are not ingrained in the culture's assumptions, then the members are left to find their definition. A believer in Jesus Christ is expected to mature in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet 3:18).

We can conclude at this point that Jesus is the goal and process of our discipleship. The question remains, how do we know if we are maturing in Christ? There are many discipleship programs in churches that communicate information about God, but when it comes to practical expressions of faith, they describe life in the church. As a result, spiritual maturity is often determined by the amount of involvement in the church, any leadership positions obtained, stewardship, and bringing others to church. Admittedly

this is a broad generalization, for those who disagree, many would still struggle to answer the question as to how spiritual growth should be evaluated.

Eph 4:11, And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Considering the Ephesians 4 passage, we see wording that indicates that spiritual maturity is a process that will not reach its fulfillment until we are face-to-face with Christ (1 John 3:2). Notice the wording through the passage, "to equip... For building up the body of Christ... Until we all attain the unity of the faith... To a mature manhood... that we may no longer be children... We are to grow up in every way into Him who is the Head... Makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." In these six verses seven references are indicating spiritual growth in Christ as an ongoing process.

Our focal point in growth in Christ, Ephesians 4:13 makes this clear, "...until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ..." In Philippians 1:6, Paul tells us that we can be assured that the work that God has begun in us will be continued until we are with him in eternity. God sees our conformity to Christlikeness as an ongoing process, with a promise of fulfillment.

Therefore, it would be appropriate for a discipleship structure in a church to be Christ-centered, since He is the means and the goal of our sanctification. The Holy Spirit, who is the best teacher of Christ as he brings to remembrance everything the Christ has

taught, should provide its energy (John 14:26). The language used in the body of Christ, to describe our growth in Christ needs to incorporate the fullness of our union with Christ.

God expects that his children grow spiritually. He supplies all we need for life and Godliness but does not override our free will. He leaves us with the responsibility of trusting, obeying and abiding.

Jesus is responsible for what we become, but we are responsible for engaging in the process. It is the disciple's responsibility to put herself in communion with the Lord. The first thought of those who participate with the Lord in fellowship will think of their quiet place or the spiritual disciplines they engage in when they're alone with God. That's a great start, but it's not the whole story, which only speaks of location and activity. The condition of our hearts is primary when we come before God. In Isaiah 57:15, it says, "For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.'"

This is quite a contrast: God dwells in the glories of heaven and also with the person who is heartbroken and humble. God is not impressed with our religious works, but He is in fellowship with those who know they're broken without Him and humbly submit themselves before Him. King David is an example of one who fellowships with God in his soul.

David wrote in Psalm 131:1, "O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.² But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a

weaned child is my soul within me. ³ O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore.”

In the second verse of this Psalm, David declares, "I have calmed and quieted my soul." David is telling us that in his inner man he is at peace. The inner man is that part of us that no one will see unless we choose to reveal it. So it's possible to give the appearance of peace and not be at peace at all.

David also says that it wasn't an accident, "I have stilled and quieted my soul." In other words, he took deliberate action and made decisions. David was intentional about establishing deep inner peace, and that thought is reflected in the imagery David chose. He compared himself to a weaned child with its mother. For a weaned child, a mother is no longer a necessity for food, so he is choosing to be with his mother. In the past, the child has experienced the peace, security, and acceptance of his mother's love. David says his soul is like a weaned child, but instead he is hungering for what God can do for him, and instead he is hungering for God.

David's description in verse two has not always been his experience. In verse one he speaks of his pride and how it prompted him to take on challenges that overwhelmed him. In other words, David has gone through something to get to the place where his soul is at peace. David has wrestled through his issues of pride to come to the simplicity of God's love and care. Psalm 131 presents a picture of simplicity on the other side of complexity.

In the second verse of Psalm 131, David is enjoying the simplicity of God's love and care, and he is at rest. He took his pride before the Lord, knowing it was putting a wedge between him and the peace that only God can give. David went through the disorientation, anxiety, fear, and anger that accompanied letting go of what had become a

part of his identity. If we attempt to find the simplicity of David's presence before the Lord without going through to complexity of changing in the inner man, it is only simplistic; it's not childlike, it's childish.

A mature faith has been tested, and the level of trust has increased but only after the struggle. In Psalm 131:3, David found in his struggle hope in God, and he desires for others to find it as well. To put your confidence in God is to put your expectations in God and to see Him as your sufficiency. Before we can genuinely submit ourselves before the Lord, we need to untangle the deception of prideful thinking that leads us to believe we don't need God.

Our communion with God is transforming, remodeling our souls to reflect the beauty of Jesus. Humbling ourselves before God gives us peace, and the inner struggle we had being conformed to the image of Christ will produce a deeper trust and a greater sense of God's love and care. We need to be aggressively passive in putting ourselves before God and staying in the struggle until God's has given us rest. Jesus is responsible for what we become, and we are accountable for humbling ourselves before Him and obey.

In the same way, you can't send someone else to the gym so you can have bigger muscles, no one can grow spiritually for you. Being active in the church and listening to sermons each week is not a guarantee of spiritual growth. Until we become intentional in allowing God into the deepest places of our inner man, we will be unable to experience the fullness of all that God has for us. Believers will need to be instructed in the as to their responsibilities concerning spiritual maturity.

The Believer's Responsibility in Christological Discipleship: Trust and Obey

Trust and Obey
 When we walk with the Lord
 In the light of His Word
 What a glory He sheds on our way!
 While we do His good will;
 He abides with us still,
 And with all who will trust and obey.

Rev. John H. Sammis

Isaiah 57:15 is clear, there are two places where God loves to meet with us, one is in a high and lofty, the other broken and humble. When we are humble before the Lord, he will meet us there, and exalt us to a high and lofty place (Jas 4:10). Describing our brokenness before God in practical terms is to trust and obey. The double action of trust and obedience is how we follow him down paths of righteous, how our steps are directed and his purpose for our lives is accomplished.

Trust

Scripture calls us to put our faith in Christ, to believe what he says and trust him. Faith and belief are easier to work with, you can study them, repeat them and teach them; but trust requires an action. It puts our beliefs and faith to work and trust is a relational word. Beliefs can be held in our thoughts, but trust needs a relationship.

Richard J. Foster comments, “We want to pin down the nature of belief, reduce it to a series of propositions to which we can sign our names, use it as a way to control who is in and who is out. But trusting Jesus is not a matter of assenting to various propositions; it is an act of relationship.”¹⁶¹

The doctrine of union with Christ includes our participation with him. Fairbairn states, “Doctrines are statements designed to point us to God; they are not meant as objects of faith themselves. To state this another way, we believe that the doctrine of justification by faith is true because we trust in the God who has justified us.”¹⁶²

Trust is a necessary function in our participation with Christ, Billings agrees,

To act in communion with God—to obey the law—is to be truly and fully human. To disobey the law is to trust in oneself, in the flesh. Indeed, the polarity between acting “in oneself” versus “in Christ” or “in God” is not only a general orienting polarity for Calvin’s view of the law but also provides much of the structure for his practical advice on neighbor-love and justice.¹⁶³

Obey

Jesus glorified the Father by accomplishing the work the Father gave him to do (John 17:4). This is a statement as to how he lived his life on this earth. Often Jesus commented in the Gospel of John, that his work was to do the will of the one who sent him. The Father and Son enjoyed pure love and oneness. As a result, the action of one was the action of the other. Our union with Christ allows us to experience the same quality of love and oneness with the Trinity. Fairbairn explains,

Jesus says, "Now remain in my love." We are to remain in the very same love with which Christ has loved us, which is, in fact, the very same love with which the Father has loved Christ. Somehow we are called to do more than merely

¹⁶¹ Richard J. Foster and Kathryn A. Helmers, *Life with God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation* (New York: HarperCollins), (p. 50).

¹⁶² Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*.

¹⁶³ J. Todd Billings, 110-111.

imitate God's love. We are called to remain in and to carry forward to the world the very love with which the Father has loved his Son from all eternity. The loving relationship between Father and Son, the glorious presence of the Father with the Son, is not merely a model that we are to follow. That relationship is the substance of what Jesus says Christians are to possess. Christ is not only giving us an example; he is offering himself to us as a person, that we might share in his most intensely personal relationship, the relationship he has with God the Father.¹⁶⁴

If we were unable to participate in the divine nature of the Godhead, we would be unable to love others. We could not love in a Godly way if we were not participating in Godly love. God is majestic, immortal and infinite and our fellowship in his love opens our eyes to know him more. Wilbourne writes,

‘I will love him and manifest myself to him’ (John 14:21). Jesus is saying that the way we respond to God will affect our experience of him. If we trust God and obey him, then Jesus promises he will “manifest” himself to us. He will make himself more apparent. Jesus couldn’t be clearer that we will know God better by obeying him more.¹⁶⁵

Our participation with God through our loving obedience purifies us, as he is pure. Wilbourne adds, “God wants us to grow in holiness, not as some sort of test or punishment, not even just as preparation for the future, but because he wants us to enjoy life with him more. The more we grow in holiness, the more we can enjoy his presence.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*.

¹⁶⁵ Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ*.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

As the bride of Christ his love for us cleanses, nourishes and purifies (Eph 5:25-27). Our obedience does not obligate God in any way, but it does bring the joy of fellowship with him and the purity of his love, transforming us into his likeness.

Abiding: Cultivating Communion With Christ

In John Owen's theology, he makes a distinction between union and communion with Christ. He sees union with Christ as an established and inevitable outcome of our salvation, while fellowship is where our union with Christ is experienced and matured. Communion can fluctuate depending on the quality of our relationship with God. In union we trust in Christ and fellowship is nurtured through our obedience to Christ.

Our union with Christ provides a fixed identity in our union with Christ. When we are justified in Christ, we are declared righteous as a consequence of the atoning work of Christ, in our trust in him. The redemptive work of Christ is complete; his sacrifice was once and for all (Heb 7:27). Christ's substitutionary death satisfied the righteous demands of God's holiness. As a result, we have an advocate with the father, Jesus Christ the righteous who is the propitiation for sins (1 John 2:1-2).

Our union with Christ is secure and, "we are accepted in the beloved" (Eph 1:6, NKJV), John 10 tells us he knows us by name and holds us in his hand that no one can take us away from him, and in Romans 8 we are assured that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Consequently, because of our secured union with Christ, we can come into God's presence with assurance and confidence to find help in a time of need (Heb 4:16).

The security of our union with Christ is a fixed position because of imputed righteousness, and also, we are sons and daughters and joint heirs with Christ because we've been adopted. Our adoption is a legal declaration giving full rights and privileges, as a child of God. We can be confident that God will not hold back any good things from us (Ps 84). This is our identity in union with Christ and the participants of his divine nature. From this secure platform, we engage in communion with Christ.

The salvific work accomplished by Christ on our behalf settled for all eternity. If there is any lack of assurance concerning our position and identity in Christ, it comes from our insecurities and not any insufficiencies in Christ's substitutionary sacrifice. Weakness in faith it is no reason for rejection from God's perspective. Therefore, cultivating our position and identity in union with Christ as necessary.

Wilbourne comments on failing to cultivate our union with Christ. He says, "Our neglect of union with Christ explains the gaps between our faith and our lives. When the work of Christ for us becomes abstracted from the person of Christ within us, is it any wonder there is a chasm between our heads and our hearts or between our beliefs and our experiences? Is it surprising that we feel frustrated and cynical or tossed to and fro?"¹⁶⁷

As long as Christ lives outside of us there is separation; however, Christ in us is our hope of glory (Col. 1:27). As we obey, we express our love for God and recognize his goodness to us. God loves us and takes pleasure in us because we are the fruit of Christ's substitutionary sacrifice declaring the glory of the Father. Owen also recognizes the delight God has in loving us. He writes, "Now, communion is the mutual communication of such good things as wherein the persons holding that communion are delighted,

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

bottomed upon some union between them.”¹⁶⁸ Christ is present in us in his fullness (Colossians 1:19-20), allowing us to enjoy all the love, grace, and comfort of the Godhead.

Rankin Wilbourne explains it this way,

Union with Christ gives you a new identity. That's one way to define the Christian faith: faith is finding your identity in Christ. Against the prevailing mindset of our day—you are what you make of yourself—union with Christ tells you that you can discover your real self only in relation to the One who made you. You cannot be, self-made. Union with Christ tells you that you can only understand who you are in communion with God and others. And that is a wildly countercultural claim.¹⁶⁹

The advantage of being secure in our union with Christ is the freedom we experience in our communion with Christ. The primary theme of our union with Christ is salvation, and the central issue by communion with Christ is sanctification. It should also be said that our union with Christ carries the eschatological expectation of being glorified when we experience in face to face.

The goal of sanctification is Christ-likeness, in other words, anything that is not like Jesus that is a part of our needing to be removed. God is merciful and gracious, forgives when we repent and delights we take pleasure in him. During the process of sanctification, we can be confident that the work God began in us he will faithfully complete (Phil 1:6). As a result, communion with God is secure although the intimacy of our relationship with God can fluctuate if we neglect our responsibility trust and obey.

Wilbourne explains,

¹⁶⁸ Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*.

¹⁶⁹ Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ*.

On the one hand, our union with Christ is fixed and unalterable. It does not rise and fall with our faith or the quality of our lives, with what we've done or failed to do. Our union with Christ is as inevitable as Christ's irrevocable love, which does not wax or wane. It is as sure as Christ's grip on our lives and his promise that nothing can snatch us from his hand (John 10:28). On the other hand, our communion with God does change and vary. It is affected by our faith and what we choose to do or not do. To be clear, the love of God for us does not change, but our experience of his love does.¹⁷⁰

Our expression of love and communion with God is obedience and as we obey our relationship with God becomes more intimate. Wilbourne describes it this way,

Jesus couldn't be more explicit that we will know God better by obeying him more. Our response to God is not the root of his love; it is the fruit. But the fruit is where the nourishment drawn from the root manifests in sweetness and beauty. And the presence of fruit will give us greater assurance that our lives are rooted in him: "By this, we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments" (1 John 2:3–6). Now, why is this distinction between union and communion so essential for us? Because we naturally fall into the trap of assessing the security of our union (Does God love me?) on the strength of our communion (How am I feeling? How am I doing?).¹⁷¹

Our responsibility in our communion with God it's a matter of trust and obedience, which will always be a response to God's initiative. One of the features of Christ ministry on earth is his eagerness to accomplish the will of the Father. They enjoyed and abiding relationship, and from that relationship, in his humanity, Jesus heard and did the will of the Father.

We can worship God in all that we do if we keep the posture of a responder. Jesus worshiped in spirit and truth (John 4), and the incarnate Christ was responsive to the direction of the Father. On the other hand, Jesus saved his harshest words for the

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

religious leaders of the day who were defining and initiating their religious works separate from the Father.

God is the first cause, he spoke and said, "Let there be light," and the inherent power of his word created something from nothing. God is a loving Creator and fully aware of what life was like before the fall. In his goodness and mercy, he has redeemed us and restored fellowship with us. The great blessing for Adam and Eve was not the beautiful garden that God had prepared for them but an intimate relationship with their Creator.

We have also explored theologies that are relevant to our union with Christ. The themes presented in this chapter the need to be presented clearly and continually to all sectors of the church. The leadership of the church should be familiar with these topics and teaching them in formal and informal settings. They should be made known from the pulpit, small groups, one-on-one discipleship moments, staff meetings and throughout all age groups. The truth in these theologies related to our union and communion with Christ is vital to our identity and life in Christ.

Sanctification

The Gospel message includes salvation, sanctification, and glorification. A person is saved when they recognize their need for Christ and trust him to save them. Paul describes it this way, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart, one believes and is justified, and with the mouth, one confesses and is saved" (Rom 10:9-10).

Glorification is the last stage of the salvation experience and realized in the future. A believer's resurrected body, at the Second Coming, will enter the Everlasting Kingdom of God. The believer's transformation to the image of Christ will be complete (1 John 3:2).

Sanctification is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ, and the process is being discussed in this project. We are discussing the practical aspects of the second stage of the salvation experience. This project's understanding of the theology of sanctification begins at the conversion experience. In the same way, we are saved by grace and not works, the same is true of our sanctification. It is a product of God's grace through the agency of the Holy Spirit and our union with Christ. As mentioned, our union with Christ is secured in our justification and adoption, and our communion with Christ can fluctuate based on the quality of our relationship with Christ. As Jesus takes on the responsibility of what we become we take on the responsibility to follow (Matt 4:19). Our obligation is to abide, trust and obey.

Sanctification is both positional and progressive. It is positional in Christ's efficacious atoning and our new position in Christ. As we participated with him in his death, burial, and resurrection; believers have also been raised together with Christ and seated with him in heavenly places (Eph 2:6). Upon conversion, a believer's positional sanctification is instantaneous, setting believers apart to God (Col2:11-12). Our progressive sanctification is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ; that is a summary statement of the discussion of this project.

In summary, the culture of the church expresses the values and core theology of union with Christ. An organizations culture becomes embedded in the congregation and becomes, "The way things are done around here." The discussion included a list of

theological values that shape a church's culture and an overarching definition of sanctification. Chapter 5 will examine the leadership perspective that will encourage Christological discipleship in the body of Christ.

CHAPTER FIVE

ESSENTIALS OF CHRISTOLOGICAL DISCIPLESHIP

Christological Discipleship

Gal 4:19, "...my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!"

2 Cor 3:18, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

Rom 8:29, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."

1 John 3:2, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."

Phil 1:6, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

Introduction

Christological discipleship is a complicated matter. Christian writers have addressed the topic for decades, and authors are still searching for an approach that is manageable and reproducible. James C. Wilhoit wrote, "Formation remains a messy and imprecise business, where character, wisdom, and faith play a greater role than theories and techniques... Spiritual formation is certainly a multifactorial process that requires us

to constantly ask God what we should be doing, rather than relying on our power and skill.”¹⁷²

Further complicating the process is the matter of our uniqueness, a product of being conformed in the image of God. It requires us to relinquish all the aspects of humanness that are not like Christ, and receive all God has provided for us, in our union with Christ. The details defining this transformation vary among individuals, as well as each local church, if it is to be driven by our uniqueness and personal relationship with the Trinity. As a result, Biblical and prayerful consideration must be given to determine what is manageable and transferable. If the approach becomes too programmatic then the spiritual dynamic, vital to maturing in Christ, is suppressed.

Maturing in Christ, at its essence, is defined by Jesus in Matthew 4:19, he said to His disciples, “...Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Instructing the disciples, Jesus makes two significant statements. First, his command is to "follow Him," by this Jesus means more than physical activity. He is inviting them into fellowship with the Godhead, participating in their divine nature and activity; incorporated into the body of Christ, forming a new identity in Christ; based on union with Christ. Our invitation to follow does not include a request to decide direction, purpose or outcomes. That is a by-product of abiding in Christ, hearing his voice and responding in trusting obedience. It is a spiritual dynamic cultivated in a spiritual relationship with the Trinity.

The second statement is "I will make you fishers of men." Jesus is telling us that He will take the responsibility of what we become. As a result, there is nothing for us to do but to submit to his Lordship and receive his transforming love. Motivated by love,

¹⁷² James C. Wilhoit and Dallas Willard, *Spiritual Formation as If the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

Jesus brings us into a spiritually forming relationship that will achieve His purpose. N. T.

Wright comments,

Therefore the risen Jesus says, in John 20.21: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' And he breathes on the disciples, as God breathed upon Adam and Eve in the beginning, and gives them his spirit, his breath of life. Do you get the point? The whole amazing story of Jesus, with all its multiple levels, is given to us to be our story as we follow him. This is John's ultimate vision of the nature of Christian discipleship.

Our union with Christ is the gift of God himself; an invitation participate in the oneness and love the Father and Son share (John 17). The process of discipleship is living in the presence of Christ and seeking deeper fellowship with Him.

N. T Wright paints this image,

When the Bible speaks of human beings and how they order or disorder their lives, the assumption is that we are all made in the image of God. This gift, however, is not a right, an automatic possession; it is the gift of God himself. It is like a wonderful instrument bequeathed to us by a loving parent or grandparent. And the way to keep the wonderful instrument in tune is to play it - to play it for all its worth; to practice reflecting the image of God, which you do through worship, and love and service to one another, rejoicing with the joyful and weeping with the mourners. You do it, in other words, by following Jesus.

Jesus said in Luke 6:40, "A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher." Since Jesus has taken on the responsibility for what we become, he is the teacher. Jesus does this in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, who brings to remembrance all the things Jesus has said (John 14), and the power or ability to accomplish his purpose. One aspect of the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to teach, implying that we are the learners. The teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit is more than the conveyance of information about Jesus. It is the ability to live in union with Christ through the gifts of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-24). The Holy Spirit is the one who appropriates what Jesus teaches. Breen writes,

He called twelve guys to follow him and be...his disciples ... to be learners of him. People who would learn to do all of the things he does and somehow learn to carry his very essence through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit... Learn to be disciples by becoming life-long learners of Jesus. The key to this is learning always to respond.

A common understanding of learning involves reading, researching, studying, writing and attending lectures on a particular subject. The goal is to master the content and use it to benefit others. However, becoming a learner or disciple of Jesus is allowing him to master us. It is through humble obedience and trust that the Holy Spirit empowers us to enjoy the fullness of Christ. Humility, trust, and obedience are critical to being a learner of Jesus, along with, self-introspection and repentance. Paul says it this way in Ephesians 4:19-23,

They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!— assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

The purity of the Godhead provides oneness in their fellowship. Even a minor blemish in their beings would disrupt their purity and unity. As a result, our purity is a significant matter in Christological discipleship. Following Christ requires that we give up our lives to Jesus so that He can live in us and through us. According to Wilkins, there are three influences as are necessary for genuine transformation to take place in a follower of Christ, "Our transformation is dependent upon balancing three influences that bring growth: The example of Jesus (Luke 6:40, Romans 8:29, 1 Corinthians 11:1). The work of the Spirit (John 14:12-17) and the obedience of the Christian (John 15:5)."

Concerning the example of Jesus, imitating his behavior and being transformed by his character are two different things. “What would Jesus do” faded out because it changed behavior and not character. We could spend our days doing what Jesus did and fall short of being formed to His likeness.

Wilkins made the following statement concerning the example of Christ,

Jesus had perfect fellowship with the Father. (John 17), Jesus obeyed the Father's will perfectly. (Luke 22:42; John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38), Jesus had unswayable determination to fulfill the work which the Father had sent Him to accomplish. (John 9:4), Jesus always displayed a strong love for humans, regardless of whether they were lost, sick, sorrowing, or sinful. (Matthew 9:36; 10:6; Mark 1:41; Luke 7:13) and Jesus' love was demonstrated by freely giving up His life for us. (John 15:13) This is the image of God in its purest sense, and as we imitate Jesus in these attitudes, it will form His likeness in us (Romans 8:29).

Jesus' love of the Father is what produces his desire to accomplish the Father's will. Additionally, God pours his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, as a result, we have the same provision from God that Christ has to obey the Father's will (Rom 5:5). Imitation is an exercise in human energy, but transformation is a work of the Holy Spirit in concert with the obedience of the believer. In John's Gospel, Jesus says he desires to do the will of the Father; being submissive to the Father is how Jesus glorified him (John 17:4), and that is his example to us.

In summary, discipleship is responding to the call of Christ to "follow Him" in humble submission with our heart, soul, and mind. We become God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works (Eph 2:20). It changes our character, and our lives reflect the Fruit of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit has shed God's love abroad in our hearts that has a twofold effect: first, communion with God is richer, and second, service to others is meaningful. God is sanctifying and preparing us for life with him in his eternal

kingdom. Wilkins defines it, "Discipleship is the Christian life. And the goal of the Christian life is to become like Jesus."

Regardless of the variations in congregants and complexity of the discipleship process, a comprehensive strategy needs to be put in place. It will require strong leaders filled with wisdom and the spirit of God who is willing to walk with others in a spiritually beneficial exchange. The leaders will need to put themselves aside and see Jesus as the one who disciples and followers of Jesus must be encouraged to maintain an abiding relationship with Christ, living in trusting obedience.

Aubrey Malphurs comments on the simplicity of discipleship, "In a general sense a disciple, according to Scripture, is a committed follower of a person, such as a teacher or master." While Dallas Willard reminds us of its complexity, "It will be challenging, I know of no current denomination or local congregation that has a concrete plan in practice for teaching people to do 'all things whatsoever I have commanded you.'" It is worth noting when Malphurs' comment on the simplicity of discipleship, it is centered and energized by Christ. However, in Willard's quote, the complexity is centered on and energized by the church's attempt to control the discipleship process. In other words, church-centered discipleship is inhibited by its limits and Christ's transforming power, although acknowledged, is for practical purposes, irrelevant.

It is the thrust of this chapter to identify an approach to Christological discipleship that is informed by our union with Christ. Weaved throughout this discussion will be applying the delegated authority of Christ and the parallel responsibilities of church leaders and congregants. We will discuss organizational issues only as they relate to and enhance Christological discipleship.

At the core of Christological discipleship in the church, is the ministry and spiritual passion of the leaders. Christ has commissioned leaders to equip the saints for the work of the ministry (Eph 4:11). This implies that leaders are cultivating communion with Christ passionately through active obedience. It is then there delegated responsibility to disciple believers in their union with Christ. The effectiveness of a church to establish, maintain and deepen the body of Christ's communion in the Trinity falls directly on the Godliness of the leadership. This follows the direction of Christ and maintains the exercise of spiritual authority in the church.

Spiritual Leadership in the Body of Christ

The Priority of Spiritual Authority

Col 1:15-18, He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him, all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

Leadership Authority in the Church is delegated

Authority in the body of Christ is not an exercise in authoritarianism but an environment to receive and express the love of God. The church is a “holy temple in the Lord” (Eph 2:21) to understand this declaration we need to consider the holiness of God. Throughout the Old Testament this statement is made often, “There is no one like our God,” (Ex 9:14; Deut. 33:26; 2 Sam. 7:22; 1 Chr. 17:20; Ps. 86:8; Isa. 46:9; Jer. 10:6, 7). This is a statement of God's holiness or separateness; he is different from all else. In

Exodus 8 Moses asks Pharaoh when he would like for him to intercede to God on his behalf, to remove the frogs from the land. Once the time is established Moses says, “Be it as you say, so that you may know that there is no one like the LORD our God” (Ex 8:10). Declaring the separateness of God is repeated often in the Old Testament through declaration and action.

That God is separate or holy in all that he does would indicate that the community of the redeemed in Christ would also be holy and separate, or a “holy temple in the Lord.” God stands alone and is different from everyone and everything; consequently, the holy temple is different from any other organization. The terminology we use for authority in the church is different than the same language used in secular settings. The concept of authority in our culture triggers thoughts of control, demands, possible abuse and privilege to those in authority. In contrast, authority in Scripture is an expression of love, care, safety, and provision. The Bible’s description of God’s authority condemns any hint of prideful authoritarianism.

Christ’s headship of the church is well documented in Paul’s epistles (Eph 1:22, 4:15, 5:23; Col 1:18, 2:10, 2:19). The body of Christ cannot be led similarly to any other organization. Primarily, the church is a spiritual organism, in union with Christ, the head of the body. Therefore the church is a Christocracy with all power and authority residing in Christ (Matt 28:18-20). Profits drive other organizations and they are organized for that purpose. However, the church stands alone from other organizations because of the headship and purity of Christ.

In delegating his authority to the church, Jesus retains his authority but entrusts it to faithful men and women who would serve the body of Christ rather than rule over it

with secular motives and goals. As a leader in the church, it is critical that Christ retain his Lordship and ability to rule in his church. Therefore, leaders are chosen for their spiritual qualifications. There is a great temptation in churches to select charismatic, successful and seasoned business or community leaders. The difficulty with this approach is that those selected, by these criteria may or may not meet the spiritual qualifications found in Paul's letters to 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Also, they are skilled at building organizations through branding, marketing, and strong leadership, which often competes with the authority of Christ. A.W. Tozer has observed, "Nominally He is head overall, but in every crisis, someone else makes the decisions."

It is critical, in the body of Christ that leaders understand and trust in Christ's delegated authority, guiding and forming the church. In Jesus' teaching of the vine and the branches, Jesus made it clear that apart from him nothing can be spiritually accomplished. Christ has created an authority structure for His church and delegated to leadership the authority they need for protection, and for what is needed for spiritual growth in the body of Christ. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the authors of the New Testament wrote concerning matters of authority and submission in the church. Unfortunately, cultural perceptions of authority have influenced the church's views and praxis of spiritual authority.

Secular and traditional views of authority and submission are troublesome when applied to the church setting. In Scripture, the words used, and the words avoided when discussing authority and submission focus on Godly relationships with the majority of the responsibility placed on the leaders. The emphasis is not on the power of the leader but their responsibility of caring and protecting the flock, in submission to the will of God

(Acts 20:28). The New Testament emphasizes their responsibility and not their power. The writer of Hebrews describes elder authority in this way. “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” Again, spiritual authority in the church is a matter of love, care, safety, and provision.

The submission of the congregation is for active ministry in the church, led by the elders. Church leaders are to persuade with use of the Word of God, spiritual disciplines and, prayer in unison with the Holy Spirit. The result of a Biblical understanding of authority and submission will keep the congregation in communion with Christ, inspiring their abiding relationship with him and nurturing trusting obedience to the will of God. The authors of the New Testament avoid wording that would speak of authoritarianism, which has been the prideful ruin of every authority structure.

The unquestioned authority of Christ over the universe is concentrated on the body of Christ (Eph 1:20–23; Col 1:6, 1:17-19). Christ does not give away his rule in delegating authority to elders and deacons. Christ is still the authority in the church and leaders are in union with Christ, leading a Christocracy, as opposed to a democracy and dictatorship. Consequently, leaders who devote themselves to prayer and dependence on the Word of God reveal their reliance on the Head. Christ delegated authority to church leaders, reminding us that church leaders do not possess power and authority; instead, it is vested in the offices of elder and deacon.

Church leaders can best serve the Lord by being bold in the authority that resides in the office and by being humbly submissive, limiting their authority to the will of God.

This is what Peter emphasizes in his appeal for elders to care for the flock according to the will of God. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Peter writes in I Peter 5:1-6,

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time.

The Purpose of Leadership Authority in the Body of Christ

First, we must make a distinction between the purpose of leadership authority and the purpose of the body of Christ. When we speak of the mission of the church, we are referring to the objectives God has for his church. For example, the church is to glorify God by being obedient to his will, the church is to worship God, and edify believers; fulfilling the Great Command (Matt 22) and the Great Commission (Matt 28). On the other hand, the purpose of leadership authority is to focus on the process that leads to the overall objectives of the body of Christ.

It is vital to note that the outcome of discipleship and ministry, for individuals and the local body of Christ, is God's responsibility. Regardless of how powerful, trusted and influential a leader or leadership team is, apart from the vine they can do nothing (John 15). However, Jesus has delegated to them the authority to effectively influence the process of maturing a believer in the knowledge of Christ. Church leaders in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, and in pursuit of God, can nurture believers in their union with

Christ. However, the leader's focus is solely on the process and in obedience to the Holy Spirit's movement.

Paul explains in Ephesians 4 the direction and activities of the process that sets a framework for Christological discipleship. The context of chapter 4 is relevant to the interpretation of verses 12-16. In the first three chapters of this epistle, Paul has articulated his theological argument for the body of Christ. He speaks of our Trinitarian redemption, our new identity in Christ; he emphasizes our union with Christ, unity in Christ and our participation in the nature and activities of Christ. The final three chapters, Paul applies the theological principles to the life of a believer. Chapter 4 begins with a plea for love, humility, and unity; based on their spiritual location in Christ, then moves to declare the giving of spiritual gifts to the believers in the church. He asserts in verse 4:11 that spiritual leaders have been given to the church and explains the interaction between the leaders and congregants that leads to spiritual maturity.

Here is how Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit details the process in Ephesians 4:12-16,

To equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

This passage addresses the building up of the body of Christ in love and describes the activity and direction of the leadership and believer's while maintaining Christ as the head of the church. At this point in Paul's discussion assumes that believers are in union

with Christ, a relationship that shapes their identity (i.e., “God’s workmanship, 2:10), and they are incorporated into the body of Christ, the Holy Temple.

It is critical to understand, and this passage describes the process of Christological discipleship in the body of Christ. We are not capable of conforming ourselves to the image of Christ; only he can produce in us. The radiance of the Bride at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb; it is the result of Christ’s work in us. These are eschatological promises only Jesus can fulfill (Eph 5:25-27).

Earlier in this project, union with Christ was defined by four principles: union, identification, participation, and incorporation. Ephesians 4:12-16 describes the process that matures us in Christ and informs these defining principles.

Equipping the Saints

Christ has given the spiritual church leaders, as mention in verse 11, and Paul is now making a powerful statement of the authority of spiritual leaders. It is also a breakdown of responsibilities in the church. The leaders equip the saints and in turn, the saints minister to and build up the body of Christ. Some interpret this phrase applying all three purposes as leadership responsibilities. However, Grant Osborne explains it this way, “Paul changes his preposition from *pros* in the first to *eis* in the second two. While these are synonyms (both mean “for” or “in order that”), Paul is probably intentional in making the second and third subordinate to the first.”

Paul’s first instruction in describing the process of Christological discipleship is to establish the leaders' responsibility of equipping the saints, implying the necessary spiritual authority to accomplish the task. It is not uncommon in Scripture to see God

work uniquely through an individual for the benefit of many. There was Moses, Noah, Joshua, Queen Esther, and Paul among many others. The identification of church leaders for a specific task is repeated often in Scripture.

The data presented in chapter one indicated most pastors are unable to articulate the process of discipleship clearly. However, Paul is informing leaders of their responsibility to equip believers to work in the ministry and build the body of Christ. This is a work that the leader performs in participation with the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and prayer.

The word used for equip in the original language provides further insight to the responsibility of the leader. Osborne says,

The leaders of the church are primarily responsible to “equip the saints” (NIV “his people”) for service. The verb means to train or prepare people. It is also a medical term for the setting of broken bones and thus can be understood as restoring people to their God-given task in the body of Christ. The meaning “equip” is particularly apt in light of Paul’s later discussion of the armor of God (6:10–20); it conveys the image of training God’s people in using God’s armor. There is also the idea of rendering a person fully trained and qualified for a task, as in Luke 6:40 and 2 Timothy 3:17.¹⁷³

What does this mean practically? First, it means the leader is prepared for the task and is functioning fully in union with Christ. Meeting the leadership qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 at a particular moment in time does not guarantee the leader is faithfully participating with the Holy Spirit in ministry and deepening their union with Christ. A leader’s theological understanding and experience in fellowship with Christ is a significant source for the wisdom and spiritual insight needed to disciple others.

¹⁷³ Grant R. Osborne, 128–129.

It is unfortunate that too many leaders in churches use the Bible for sermons and the Christian bookstore for advice on leadership, church organization, programs, and ministry. Since they have trained themselves for religious activity in the church, the default setting for discipling the flock is assimilation into the church's programs, traditions and preferences. Consequently, worship wars in a church are often, if not always, a conflict between two competing church discipleship programs. Viewing the leaders' role in the church through the lens of spiritual authority, once the leader becomes dependent upon sources other than union and participation with Christ, they have wandered beyond the limits of delegated authority and have defrauded the church. Wisdom, learning, and insight can be appreciated from all aspects of life; however, treating them as the primary source is damaging to the holy temple.

The theology of spiritual authority is the necessary mindset for a leader in the local church. It provides accountability and parameters for personal and corporate decisions and ministry under the Lordship of Christ. Therefore, how the leader manages their relationship with God determines how prepared they are to equip others for the work of the ministry and the building up of the body of Christ.

The Spiritual Leaders Life of Devotion

In union with Christ, we are new creatures, and the old unrepentant self has passed away (II Cor 5:17). We have participated with Christ in his death and resurrection and now live in the freshness of our new life in Christ (Rom 6:4). The blessings of God and our union with Christ are always fresh because they are always pure. There is no mechanism for change in God or the spiritual reality we have in Christ. Therefore, our

new life in Christ is always new and always fresh. There is nothing the reality of union with Christ that can fade, decay or corrupt. Our experiences of freshness and restoration are inseparably linked to our union with Christ. When a church leader enters the ministry, despite the pressures, the realities of union with Christ are immutable.

Jesus reminds us of the importance of union with him, in ministry as he addresses the apostles, recorded in Mark's Gospel says, "And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons" (Mark 3:13-15). First, the apostles are to be with him or abiding in Christ and then in trusting obedience they minister consistently with his will. This type of ministry glorifies God and has its origin and instruction growing out of union with Christ or fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Notice also in Mark's Gospel, Jesus delegates the authority necessary to fulfill the ministry they face.

The leadership duty of equipping or restoring the saints to faithful service in the body of Christ carries the responsibility of the leader to keep themselves revived and refreshed. Using terminology as morning devotions and quiet times typically speaks of time set aside to read the Bible, a devotional and prayer. These appointments with God are good, but at the cost of what's best. Church leaders need God to speak to them in specific ways to lead the flock as God desires. The best approach is for the leader to focus on abiding, trusting and obeying Christ. Developing ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church (Rev 2-3).

Abiding, Trust and Obedience

Abiding is an intimate and profound expression of love. Paul prays for this to be the believer's default setting, "So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:17-19).

Although personal, abiding also has a community element to it as well. The body of Christ is where the restorative love of God is shared and celebrated among believers in worship that flows out of personal worship. The love of Christ "surpasses knowledge" or is a mystery to us. It is important to remember that a mystery in Scripture is a truth that God reveals to us. When our personal or corporate worship emanates from abiding union with Christ, it moves beyond our understanding to wonder (mystery), which is the passion in worship.

Abiding is being immersed in the love of God and being refreshed and restored in the purity of his love. Because we are justified and adopted our union with Christ is irrevocably settled, but our fellowship or abiding with Christ can be hindered by not presenting our whole heart, soul, and mind. Even in times of temptation and sin, Jesus is still abiding with us and providing a way of escape (1 Cor 10:13) and restoration.

Abiding in union with Christ is a love relationship that emulates the love shared by the Father and the Son. Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (John 15:9-10).

Jesus's is clear that obeying his commandments and abiding in his love are indistinguishable. Andrew T. Lincoln explains,

On the one hand, the divine love between the Father and the Son is now the love that the Son extends to disciples, so that all disciples have to do is to remain in the love that embraces them. On the other hand, remaining in love is not automatic and will require the same sort of obedience to Jesus' words as was necessary in the case of the incarnate Son's conformity to his Father's commands. And in both cases, that of disciples and that of Jesus, obedience to commandments is evidenced in lives of love, so that their remaining in love is also a displaying of the love in which they are rooted.¹⁷⁴

In a difficult season, the prophet Jeremiah found the word of God digested it, and it became the joy and delight of his heart (Jer 15:16). The Word is alive and active (Heb 4:12) in the heart of someone who will digest it or allow it to dwell in their hearts. There are times when a leader in the body of Christ needs to prepare a sermon, Bible study or devotion; these interactions with the word of God build into the life of the leader. However, prayerful meditating on the Word of God adds a different experience. It is a spiritual discipline that keeps the leader sensitive to the movement of God in their lives.

Consider the impact of those who meditated on the Word. We've already seen it was the joy and delight of Jeremiah's life. Joshua was promised to dwell on the word of God would bring prosperity and success in his endeavors for God (Josh 1:8). The blessed man of Psalm 1 delights in God's word and finds himself like a tree planted and nourished, yielding fruit and not withering in the heat. The church leader needs to exercise consistent spiritual disciplines that feed their spirit and allow God's word to restore their soul.

¹⁷⁴ Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2005), 405.

The characteristics and effect of Scripture and Jesus are similar. As mentioned God's word restores our soul (Ps 19:7), we are also told the Lord our shepherd restores our soul (Ps 23:3). Jesus declares he is the truth (John 14:6) and as he prays in the garden he asks the Father to sanctify believers with the truth then adds, God's word is the truth. Allowing the word of God to dwell in us richly matures our communion with Christ (Col 3:16).

A practical approach to meditation will require a quiet, comfortable place free of distractions. After selecting a story from Scripture that is familiar, prayerfully think through the story using your five senses. In this way, you are placing yourself in the story. As an example consider the story in Matthew's Gospel when Jesus slept in the boat as a storm arises. The disciples are fearful and question Jesus' care for them (Mark 4:35-41). Consider their experience and it easy to find similar emotions. What does the movement of the boat feel like? How strong is the wind against your face? What can you see while trying to protect your eyes from rain pelting your face? What sounds is the storm making? How are the others reacting? How do you feel that Jesus is asleep?

The purpose of visualizing the story is to determine where you are spiritually and hear the voice of God; therefore staying close to the details is essential. The temptation may be to overemphasize some elements in the story and minimize interaction with the Holy Spirit. Upon leaving the quiet space take the experience with you, prayerfully processing what the Lord is revealing.

Another vital aspect of abiding in Christ is prayer. As Jesus was teaching the disciples how to pray, he begins with the words, "Our Father." A striking statement from the Son of God to the children of God, Jesus expects his disciples to pray in concert with

him. Because of our position in Christ, we are adopted children and joint heirs with Christ. We can approach the throne of God with confidence (Heb 4:16) and the assurance that our prayers are heard. Also, Jesus “lives to make intercession for us” (Heb 7:25). Jesus invites us to pray with him, and he is praying for us. In light of this, fellowship in prayer is praying with Jesus to the Father while being yielded to the Holy Spirit.

There are times when we can be patient in prayer and listen for God’s promptings. In union with Christ, God has equipped us to live as a participant in his divine nature, this is not an abstract concept, and it’s our reality in Christ. Unfortunately, there are also times when trials are sudden and devastating; during those times all we can do is cry out for the Lord’s help. Communion with Christ while suffering is exceptionally beneficial, to the depth of our maturity in Christ.

A parent wants to share in the successes and joys of their children. They also want to share in the suffering of their child. The depth of a parents love would not allow it to be any other way. The same is true of our heavenly Father. In union with Christ, we live a purposeful life and even in suffering God is conforming us to the image of his Son. Peter writes in his second epistle, “Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good” (1Pe 4:19). God is our faithful creator in suffering and suffering according to the will of God, assures us that it is purposeful.

Abiding in Christ will renew our minds (Rom 12:2, 2 Cor 4:16, Eph 4:23 and Col 3:10) and sharpen our ability to hear God. The opposite is true as well; therefore faithfully abiding in Christ is essential. The writer of Hebrews explains this to us in chapter five, but he hints of a problem in the early chapters of the letter. The author

repeats the idea that something is wrong spiritually with the recipients of his letter. He uses wording like, “Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it” (Heb 2:1), “hear his voice” and “do not harden your hearts” (Heb 3:15). He continues to hint at the problem of drifting away and becoming weak in the faith, until 5:11-14, and he explains,

About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

These believers should be at a point where they are capable and seasoned disciples. However, they need to be taught the basics again. The writer says he has a lot to explain to them but he can't, not because the concepts are too difficult for him to teach, but these believers have become, “dull of hearing.” The last sentence of this passage tells them where they should be in their spiritual lives. They should be wise, discerning and living a Godly life. In other words, they should be able to hear God's voice and live a life of obedience, but their hearing is dull. God's word has become spiritual elevator music to them; they cannot hear the notes, pitch or harmonies.

God has made believers spiritually alive in Christ and gave the indwelling Holy Spirit. The ability to communicate with God is possible if we train our senses to discern good and evil. God speaks to his children through the Word, prayer, the Holy Spirit, suffering, other believers, and burdens on our heart. Like the writer of Hebrews, God has no trouble getting the message to us and abiding in Christ gives us ears to hear (Matt 11:15).

Church leaders function under the principles of spiritual authority and love. Therefore, it is imperative to hear the voice of God and follow him. The primary activity in caring for and protecting the flock is for a leader to minister under the umbrella of God's authority. It is also critical once the voice of God is discerned; it is received with trust and obedience. This is an expansion of the simple abiding formula given by Christ in Matthew 4:19, we follow him, and he works to transform us.

An illustration of trust and obedience can be found in the feeding of the five thousand in Matthew 14. A crowd has gathered, it's getting late in the day, and their location along the Sea of Galilee is a distance from villages to provide food. The disciples gather five loaves and two fish and bring the problem to Jesus. The disciples' solution to the problem is to dismiss the crowd and let them find food on their own. Jesus replies, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat" (Matt 14:16). The disciples say the problem was too big for them to handle and on the other hand Jesus is not lying to them. Jesus instructs, "Bring them here to me" (Matt 14:18). Jesus blesses and breaks the bread until the entire crowd's hunger is satisfied.

There was a decisive moment for the disciples when Jesus instructed them to feed the crowd. Do they trust him or walk away frustrated? Jesus' desire is for them to participate with him in feeding the crowd. Once they bring the fish and loaves to him, they obey the instructions and witness a miracle. Despite their confusion, they continued to abide with him, and Jesus was able to reveal more of himself to them. Trust and obedience is the process of hearing his voice and obeying is how we continue to abide.

Training Leaders For Christological Discipleship

The context for leadership training has value for both the leadership team and the congregation. It provides greater cohesion and respect among members of the body for the leaders. A document of the responsibility of elders and deacons should be available and taught to the congregation. It should include a detailed interpretive understanding of the spiritual qualifications found in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1, a theology of spiritual authority and an understanding of the love and purity of the Trinity. It should also include a comprehensive explanation of Ephesians 4:11-16, specifying responsibilities of both leadership and congregation. Also, the unifying objective of oneness and maturity should be established as a priority. These are the principles that inform the structure and organization of the body of Christ. The systems should facilitate the values presented in the leadership document and provide the environment for Christological discipleship.

The benefits to the body of Christ are unifying. There should be no question as to the spiritual qualification of elders and deacons. Appointing an unqualified elder to the leadership team could result in difficulties that split the team. Regrettably, a split on the leadership team almost always becomes a split in the church. In addition, knowing the Biblical values that govern church polity brings understanding to decisions made by the elders. When the congregation is familiar with the ideas behind elder decisions, it reinforces an atmosphere of safety and trust. Another significant benefit is the church is prepared to disciple new believers into the life of Christ rather than the programs, ministries, and preferences of the local assembly.

It cannot be stressed enough that leaders need to meet spiritual qualifications. Any skills, talents, and accomplishments from other experiences are genuinely helpful, in the

hands of a humble, Godly leader. It is preferable for the church to have fewer elders than to reach a prescribed number of elders required in the church's by-laws. Elders and deacons dispatch their responsibilities under the delegated authority God has provided. Stepping outside the limits of that authority opens the church to spiritual danger and congregational disruption.

A story from the Old Testament makes this point. King Saul had disobeyed a clear commandment from the Lord, stepping outside of his delegated authority and responsibility. Upon hearing the prophet Samuel said,

Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,
as in obeying the voice of the LORD?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
and to listen than the fat of rams.
For rebellion is as the sin of divination,
and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.
Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
he has also rejected you from being king.” (1 Sam 15:22-23)

King Saul stepped outside of God's delegated authority and it opened him up to a world of “divination.” This can have devastating consequences in the body of Christ. In Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1 he gives a description of the relationships between Christ and the church, and Christ, the church and principalities and powers. Paul prays,

What is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph 1:19-23).

Believers have a place with Christ in heavenly places (Eph 2:6). Where the greatness of his immeasurable power is focused on those who believe, far above all other power, this is a glorious and protected place. However, once disobedience or rebellion

disrupts that relationship, it opens up a church to a spiritual world that can overwhelm them. It is mandatory that church leaders meet their spiritual qualifications.

The apostle Paul, advising Timothy, his son in the faith said this concerning leaders, “You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Ti 2:1–2). In other words, find leaders with a testimony of faithfulness to the Lord. This is critical to the body of Christ today.

Training new leaders is a reproduction of the life of devotion to the current leaders' experience. It is a reproducible process because it is devotion to the word of God, prayer, community, and suffering. However, it leaves room for God to work individually with each person. Being created in the image of God means we are relational, yet unique, like each member of the Trinity. This will train the new leader to hear God's voice which is indispensable in church leadership. Because of the level of intimacy connected with seeking God in a transformative way, it's optimal to keep leadership training to 2-4 people.

Active Obedience

Active obedience should be the description of every leaders life, expressing the passion in their hearts and energizing their pursuit of God. It is inadequate to say it is the leadership's example to the flock, although that is true, examples or modeling behaviors describes an activity but not always the passion that drives it. An effective influence on the congregation includes the spiritual maturing of the leaders, and the process is active obedience.

A believer's union with Christ or, salvation and sanctification, is a work of God. Humans are incapable of transforming themselves into the image of Christ. The scope and limit of a believer's duty in the maturing process are to abide, trust and obey. Jesus carries the responsibility of what we become.

This is a critical component of Christological discipleship – we are operating under the Lordship of Christ, the head of the body of Christ and the theology of spiritual authority. In the spiritual battle that takes place in and around believers each day (Eph 6:10-20); it is wise not to exceed the limits of our spiritual responsibilities. Christological disciples must guard themselves against stepping out of the process of maturing in Christ by focusing on outcomes rather than process. The tendency then is to become legalistic, judgmental or other pitfalls associated with spiritual pride.

The leader needs to think of a devoted life rather than a devotional time. This is accomplished by living life as a response to the Lord and participation in his nature and actions. As an illustration, Cain, and Abel were the first to have a set time, place and procedure for worship. Cain brought the fruit of the ground and Abel brought the firstborn of his flock (Gen 4:3). Abel's sacrifice was accepted because of his response to God's instructions. Cain's offering was not because he did not respond to God but initiated his understanding of worship. As a result, we can refer to Cain as the father of religion.

The initiators of religious activity in the days of Jesus' incarnation were the Pharisees. They were Biblically knowledgeable and devout in their faith. However, Jesus saved his harshest words for them because their faith was not a response to God. They lacked obedience and never gave God the worship that is rightfully his. Obedience is a

response to God and evidence of love for him. Jesus said in John 14:23-24, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me.” A spiritual leader’s life of devotion is lived in response or trusting obedience to the movement of God.

Active obedience is, by the mercies of God, presenting ourselves as a living sacrifice (Rom 12:1-2). Paul captures the idea in this instruction to Timothy, “Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work” (2 Ti 2:20–21).

Paul sees being set apart as holy, and he encourages Timothy to put himself before the purity of God with a spirit of repentance. King David was a man after God’s own heart (I Sam 13:14) not because he was perfect, because he knew how to repent. He was not afraid to invite God’s holy gaze to examine his heart. Here are three of David’s prayers,

Search me, O God, and know my heart!
 Try me and know my thoughts!
 And see if there be any grievous way in me,
 and lead me in the way everlasting! (Ps 139:23–24)

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
 whose sin is covered.
 Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity,
 and in whose spirit there is no deceit. (Ps 32:1–2)

Prove me, O LORD, and try me;
 test my heart and my mind.
 For your steadfast love is before my eyes,
 and I walk in your faithfulness. (Ps 26:2–3)

David's equates his thirst for God to a deer panting for a life-giving flowing stream (Ps 42:1), and the one thing David seeks is to dwell in God's presence. David prays, "One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple (Ps 27:4). Based on David's 32nd and 51st Psalms, he knows the damage sin does to our communion with God. He knows to truly recognize sin in his life he needs to see himself in the light of God's holiness. David trusts the mercy and loving-kindness of the lord. As a result, King David is actively obedient in his pursuit of God.

Trusting in the sovereignty of God is a second way to be actively obedient. If God is sovereign than nothing is outside his knowledge or control. Therefore, all that takes place in our lives; God caused or allowed to happen. Solomon wrote, "The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise (Pro 15:31). There are people, experiences and long-standing emotional hurts that trigger defensive behavior. Some experiences are unjust, mean and hurtful that we encounter. What is God saying to believers about our responses, and more importantly, what hinders us from trusting in God's care? Believers can have their place dwelling with the wise if they see God's hand in life and prayerfully respond.

Evaluating Spiritual Growth

Finding an accurate way to measure spiritual growth is problematic. First, there are varied approaches such as; evidence of the fruit of the Spirit, marking off the right number of spiritual habits on a list or, less formal, a person does considerable work in the

church. Second, all of the measurements are subjective. Who gets to say how many spiritual habits make you mature in Christ or how many hours of service at the church puts you over the spiritual maturity threshold? All of these methods certainly point to the idea that something good is going on, but it doesn't reveal the heart. When Samuel examined the sons of Jesse to find a successor to King Saul, God told him not to be moved by outward appearances, because God looks at the heart (1 Sam 16:7).

As mentioned earlier, the passage from Ephesians 4:11-16 shows spiritual maturity as a process, and we are God's workmanship (Eph 2:10). Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith (Heb 12:2), so we leave the outcome to him. Our responsibility is to seek him in active obedience. Jesus said you are blessed if you hunger and thirst after righteous, because in union with Christ, hunger and thirst are satisfied (Matt 5:6). Consequently, the only indicator of spiritual growth is hungering and thirsting after righteousness. As children of God, living a life of abiding, trusting and obeying we can have confidence the work God began in us he will bring to completion (Phil 1:6).

Curriculum for Christological Discipleship

This project has approached Christological discipleship by emphasizing union with Christ as our access the fellowship with the Trinity. Our union with Christ is secure because in Christ we have been justified, or declared righteous and adopted as a child of God in a joint heir with Christ. A distinction has been made between union and communion. The union is secured in Christ, but our communion with Christ needs to be nurtured and valued. Presenting ourselves to Christ and active obedience promotes healthy communion with the Trinity. More specifically, abiding with Christ, trusting him and obeying his promptings maintain our active obedience.

The elders and deacons of the church set a Christological culture in the church by functioning under the authority of Christ, loving one another and passionately seeking Christ through active obedience. It is critical that these principles are taught two potential leaders and that the church understands the qualifications for leadership that elders and deacons are required to meet. The use of the leadership document articulates for the leader and the congregation the Scriptural priorities for the body of Christ. It also keeps everyone informed of the criteria for decision-making and establishes a focus for ministry.

The church now has the necessary overarching theology for the body of Christ the function in spiritual health and fruitfulness. However, that is merely the framework for the church to minister. For the church to continue to grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, there needs to be a more detailed study. The book of Ephesians is a balanced discussion of theology and praxis that displays the glory and fullness of God in the church.

The working thesis statement of Ephesians for this project simply stated, and yet, covers the various topics addressed by the apostle Paul. Both old and New Testament passages can generously support the curriculum provided for us in Ephesians. The outline presented here identifies the significant themes caught in the book. It is the responsibility of the local churches elders to give the supporting details and applications that would best address the church they lead. Just as we as individuals are unique, so to churches are unique, and through prayer, meditation and detailed study elders can minister, in the spirit, their fellow saints.

Thesis Statement of Ephesians

Ephesians declares how powerfully God has provided for the church by blessing the church with all spiritual blessings in Christ, by establishing a new community in Christ, and glorifying God and resisting evil by the authority of Christ.

The Work of the Trinity in the World (Eph 1:3-14)

This unique passage identifies all three members of the Trinity and describes their involvement in redeeming humanity. As each member's activity is explained that section ends the statement of praise. The Father chose us in Christ so that we might be holy and blameless before him. God the Son redeems and forgives while making known to us the mystery of his will. The Holy Spirit, once we are saved, seals us as the guarantee of our inheritance.

Redemption and Sanctification (1:15-23, 3:14-21)

Along with our blessings in Christ is the provision Christ has made for our redemption and our sanctification. At the conclusion of chapter 1, Paul prays for our hearts to be enlightened to understand three transformative provisions. First, the hope we have in Christ, second the riches of our inheritance and third, the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe. The implication of these three provisions helps us to understand our identity in Christ better. In speaking of God's immeasurable power, we are assured that it is far above all other authority and power.

In Paul's second prayer found in Chapter 3, Paul petitions God on the believer's behalf to appreciate the depth of his love. He also highlights our union with Christ as he dwells in our hearts through faith. The requests of this prayer are so magnificent that Paul describes God as the one who can do far more abundantly anything that we might ask or think. These great provisions from God that Paul prayed for our powerful force for conforming us to the image of Christ.

The Authority of Christ (1:19-23, 2:6, 4:7-10, 6:10-11)

It is clear from these passages that the headship of Christ over the church is not a statement of origin but a declaration of his authority. It is clear that Christ's authority is established over all creation and in this epistle is focused on the body of Christ. The church can only enjoy the provision and protection of Christ when they are submitted to his authority.

Filling and Fullness (1:23, 3:19, 4:10, 5:18)

The goal of being filled with the fullness of God is a description of Christ dwelling in our hearts. He abides in us and is fully present in all his power and loves, equipping us to be in union with him, to be identified with him, to participate with him and to be incorporated enter the body of Christ.

The Holy Spirit (1:13-14, 2:18-22, 4:3-4, 30, 5:18-20, 6:17)

The Holy Spirit is God's agent for making his power and love real in our lives. The Holy Spirit is seen as the down payment of our inheritance and it is the Holy Spirit's presence that makes the body of Christ a holy Temple to God. He also is the primary agent for building up of the body of Christ.

Unity in Christ (2:11-22, 4:10-16, 6:19-20)

The reconciling work of Christ is the essence of the new community. Christ has eliminated the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile to form one new body in Christ. Our unity is the foundation for a peace. It is vital to the testimony of a church that they strive to keep the unity of the faith.

The Life of the New Community (4:1-6:24)

The first half of Ephesians is doctrine, the second half, beginning in chapter 4, is praxis that describes new life in the new community. There is a strong emphasis on relationships with one another in the body of Christ, in the home and at work. There is also an emphasis on walking in the light of God, in the love of God and being filled with the Spirit.

The Armor of God (6:10-20)

Despite the fact that we are in heavenly places in Christ, far above all principalities and powers, we still need to guard against the wickedness of evil. Christ has

provided for us, in redemption and sanctification, the power in him to stand above the spiritual warfare around us. We can be strong in the Lord in the power of his might the stand against these principalities and powers.

Conclusion

The trend of Evangelical churches in America indicates people are leaving churches to find a meaningful relationship with God. Unfortunately, some are leaving and looking in other avenues, for the answers to life's key questions. It is the argument of this project that it is due to a failure in discipleship. Rather than being disciple into the life of Christ; churches are discipling people into the life of the specific local church. They are taught a particular church's theological preferences, traditions, and; giving and serving. Christ is not eliminated but it is not clear how to relate with him in a meaningful way.

However, hope for Evangelical churches can be found in union with Christ. In Christ believers are justified, placing them in a right standing with God, and adopted, making them a joint-heir with Christ. In this way, Christ has equipped us for fellowship and participation in his divine nature. It now becomes the believer's responsibility to abide in Christ, while trusting and obeying his will. This is the core of the Christian experience and ministry of the body of Christ.

If the church is to express the fullness of Christ, who fills all things (Eph 2:21-22), it is imperative to work within the framework of the Scriptures teaching on spiritual authority. This structure defines roles and responsibilities in the body of Christ and keeps Christ in the ultimate position of authority. Consequently, Christ retains his authority and

demonstrates his glory through the church. In light of this, it would be difficult to overstate the significance of passionate spiritual leaders in the body of Christ.

Ephesians 4:11-16

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

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