

“A Note on Union with Christ”  
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In Honor of Ken Courtney and Lance Muir

*“Father, I have made Your name known to them, and I will make it known, that the love wherewith you love Me may be in them, and I in them.” —Jesus, John 17:26*

*“The Incarnation means that God Himself condescended to enter into our alienated human existence, to lay hold of it, to bind it in union with Himself...” —Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith**

The apostles lead us to contemplate the fact that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of the Father incarnate. Some of their statements about Jesus are quite astounding. It was fidelity to this apostolic witness to Jesus that expanded the mind of the early Church and led to the recognition that God is eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—three distinct persons, indivisibly one divine being. This vision of Trinitarian oneness led the fathers at Nicaea to proclaim with the apostles that all things were created from the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit, echoing John and Paul’s insistence that all things were created in and through and by and for the Son. A Trinitarian discussion of union with Christ begins here with the oneness of the Triune God and with the Son’s union with all creation as the Creator and Sustainer of all things—prior to the incarnation. It is striking that so much of what is said about union with Christ ignores this very proclamation and assumes separation, that is to say, assumes that creation and the human race within it have existence and being and life apart from the Son of God.

For the apostles and the Nicene theologians the Son as Creator is held together with his ongoing sustaining of creation, such that any rupture between the Son of God and creation threatens creation with nonbeing. The incarnation of the Son anointed in the Spirit is thus not to be viewed as the establishment of a previously non-existing relationship or union between the anointed Son and the human race. For the cosmos would vanish in an instant without him. To be sure, the Fall of Adam constitutes a rebellion from the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and a declaration of independence from the Son as the very source and meaning of human existence. The Fall is a denial of human participation in the life of blessed Trinity and thus threatened the union between Adam and Eve and the Triune God. As Athanasius said, the human race was on the road to ruin and lapsing into nonbeing. In its deepest sense, the incarnation addresses this threat of our ultimate disappearance from existence. In becoming flesh, the Son of God establishes his existing divine relationship or union with humanity, which was seriously jeopardized by Adam’s rejection, inside the very specific context of human alienation and rebellion. In an act of astonishing redemptive genius, the Son of God entered personally into the reality that threatened his union with us, namely, our rejection of him. By giving himself into the hands of wicked men he yielded to our great darkness and rebellion, suffering them personally, thereby using our alien vision and rebellion as the means of establishing his union with us *in our sin*. Bearing the insidious scorn of broken humanity, Jesus met us and accepted us precisely in our resistance and unwillingness to come to him, indeed in our hatred of him and of his exposing light. Therein the incarnate, crucified and resurrected Son secured his union with us by way of our unbelief, once and for all obliterating the threat of our nonexistence. For he is a merciful Creator who loves the human race.

The response of the human race to the presence of the Father’s Son and Creator incarnate was to damn him, and damn him with bitterness and enmity, giving him gall as his last drink. The stunning self-surrender of the Son of God to be despised and forsaken by sinners and to endure our hostility against him is our Creator’s personal entry into our deepest iniquity. Without our vote, without our willing response to him, we could not speak of union here or even of relationship, but only of a strange, anti-relational,

legal and external divine act of abstract sovereignty. But the human race voted indeed. We responded. We, Jew and Gentile together, damned and cursed and crucified the incarnate Creator and Son of God—*deicide*, the rejection and killing of God. What could possibly be more vile? Yet it is precisely this most vile act that is taken up and experienced by Jesus. In utter oneness with his Father and the Holy Spirit, and as the Creator and Sustainer of all things, the Son of God became one of us, and we betrayed him with disdain and tortured him in our scoffing rage. It was not the wrath of the Father that was poured out on Jesus at Calvary, but the wrath of the human race. Scripture is crystal clear: with venomous contempt *we* condemned our Creator, banishing him from our presence on Golgotha's hill. And the One crucified by humanity is the Father's eternal Son, the One anointed in the Holy Spirit, and the One in and through and by and for whom all things were and are created and are constantly sustained. Thus as Jesus bowed as an innocent lamb to be slaughtered by the human race, he brought his oneness with his Father and the Holy Spirit—and his divine, but jeopardized union with the human race—into our twisted blindness and horrifying iniquity. As such Jesus Christ is the Creator meeting us at our most violent and wicked worst, using our bitter rejection of him to bind us in union with him forever, thereby rendering separation from him an eternal impossibility and destroying every threat to our ceasing to be.

Here is unimaginable sin and unimaginable love meeting in one Person. The crucified Son *is the mercy seat*, the place where the blessed Trinity in the person of the Son experienced and endured and accepted and embraced the human race in its alienation and enmity against the Triune God in astonishing and everlasting mercy. Here is the New Covenant, the new relationship between the Creator and anointed Son and his broken creatures, born in the shed blood of breathtaking divine mercy and human treachery. And here in Jesus on the cross at our hands is the meaning of union. The crucified Son is himself the union between the Father and the Holy Spirit, indivisibly one in him, with those whom he created yet who responded to him in unbelief and unspeakable derision. In our rejection of the Son of God, and in his willful surrender to our bizarre blindness, we stand before a union with Jesus made real not by our faith and repentance, but by our unbelief and treason. Such a union is so astonishing that it is almost unbelievable, but it is the gospel itself. It is both too beautiful and too horrible for words, but so it is.

It is the Holy Spirit's determined delight to *reveal* this reality, this union, in us, inside our own blindness. The Spirit's mission is not to *create* a relationship between us and Jesus, as if that union were not already made real in our rejection of our Lord. The Holy Spirit does not come to us from the outside, as if the Spirit were absent in the incarnation as a mere spectator watching the Son as he bowed before our hatred. The Holy Spirit was indivisibly one with Jesus as he experienced our wrath. And thus the Spirit moves not from absence to presence, but from union with us in our darkness in Jesus to the work of revealing this union in us in our fallen minds. In oneness with Jesus in his oneness with us, the Holy Spirit comes to us to reveal the truth of all truths—to lead us to acknowledge and embrace Jesus as our Creator and Lord, salvation and life, the true and only source and meaning of our humanity. As the Spirit leads us to discover Jesus himself within us and inside the great illusion, we behold the one whom we have pierced and encounter the real gospel—the limitless mercy of the Triune God—which both shocks and relieves us in our self-incarcerating pride and overwhelming anxiety. In so doing, the Spirit reveals a reality for us to believe, a reality that we can rest in and allow to silence our guilt and shame, our fear and forlorn sense of worthlessness. As we discover that we rejected and damned Jesus, and that this Son is indivisibly one with his Father, we see that in the very event of our shameful crucifying of Jesus, the Father was not abandoning Jesus or us, but accepting and embracing us as his beloved children in our unspeakable waywardness. And as we discover that the Holy Spirit was indivisibly one with Jesus as he submitted himself to us in our dastardly unbelief, we begin to see that the Holy Spirit has made our traumatized, fear-stricken souls, our self-righteous, blind and obstinate hearts the very Temple where the Holy Spirit chooses to dwell in infinite, creative joy, and power, and endless gifts. Indeed, here we see that as we rose against and snuffed out the Father's Son, we unwittingly offered—from the pit of our insane and faithless apostasy—the one true and faithful Son as our response to the Father. The discovery of this Father and this Son and this Holy Spirit in us has the actual authority and weight with our souls to free us from our

self-loathing and allow ourselves precisely as guilt-ridden, shame-riddled covenant-breaking sons and daughters to *be loved* by the Father himself, prodigals stunned by the abounding goodness of our Father's heart and inspired by the staggering love and humility of our brother Jesus.

Now is the age of revelation and judgment, the age in which the Holy Spirit is at work revealing Christ in us and patiently giving us eyes to see that Jesus—through our rejection of him—is now united with us *in our alienation*. His "I AM" now dwells in our "I Am Not," and our Father is most pleased to reveal his Son *in us* in the joy of the Holy Spirit. Christ in you, the hope of glory, is the deepest truth about us and is to be proclaimed as the gospel to every human being. As truth Christ in you is also the light which shines in the darkness, summoning us to take sides with Jesus against the way we think and see and feel and project, even while warning us that if we don't we doom ourselves to the misery of living in the great illusion and its fear. Now the human race stands under the command of Jesus: Abide in me and in my love and you will bear much fruit. Now comes the loaded promise of Jesus: If you will walk with me I will lead you to experience my Father with me and a life in the Holy Spirit that is utterly inconceivable to you at this moment, a life not of loneliness and dread, stuck in sadness and self-righteousness and religion, but a life of hope, of freedom to know and to be known and delighted in. I meet you in your illusion of separation, in the lie of the evil one. My presence in love calls you to abide in my love, accept my acceptance of you as you are, let my Father be your Father, and I promise that my own "I AM" will flow as a river of living water from your innermost being into your shattered life of pretense. Abide in me and you will bear much fruit means: if you take sides with me against the way you see my Father as the harsh judge eagerly watching every move you make from the infinite distance of a disapproving heart, and against the way you see yourself as a loser, an apostate worthy only of disgust, or as the all-knowing competent one who cannot be told a thing, and against your conclusion that your enemies are outside of me and my love, I will lead you into the shalom of the Triune God from the inside out, and the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the seas.

The gospel is not the news that we can receive Jesus Christ into our lives; the gospel is the news that Jesus Christ has received us into his life. And the *us* he has received into his life is not the Sunday version of us, but the blind and obstinate, the faithless and fearful and terrified us. The revelation of *Christ in us* thus awakens almost unbelievable hope even as it exposes and challenges our alien way of seeing, our way of believing which seems to be the most obvious thing in the world to us. The light of union confronts the assumptions of our fallen minds, the assumption that we are separated from God and that he has abandoned us in justice, the assumption that we are unworthy of his care and have forfeited any right to his love, the assumption that the Holy Spirit is to be feared and avoided at all costs, and the assumption that we must cross an unknown divide to make things right with God before we are safe.

It is here in the revelation of Jesus' union with us that we learn the nature of true faith and the nature of sin. Faith is not an independent act conjured up from our own resources that moves us into right relationship with God. Faith is believing in Jesus who is revealing himself in the Spirit inside our own hearts and alien inner worlds of fear and self-righteousness and pretense. Faith does not create union with Christ; faith is believing the union is true, which leads into ever increasing freedom to experience Jesus himself and his Father in the Holy Spirit. Faith is seeing with Jesus' eyes and learning to agree with him in trust, and thus share in his peace and hope and joy. Sin is resisting the Holy Spirit's revelation of Jesus in us, refusing to see with his eyes and insisting that Jesus Christ change his ways and join ours. Sin is the insistence that Jesus repent and believe in us, that he take sides with us and with the way we see and perceive and feel and project, that he change the way he sees himself and his Father and the Holy Spirit, and us, and our enemies, and learn from us about the real world.

Nothing in heaven or on earth can destroy the union that Jesus established with us when he became the Lamb surrendering himself to our will to slaughter and destroy. But we can insist on imposing our darkness upon Jesus Christ and his world. We can fight him and disagree with his enlightening presence

and love. He will never break ties with us or divorce or abandon us in our folly, yet we are free to sin, to mock him, to resist our own identity in union with him, to invent gods and goddesses, grand religions and religious ways back to our deities, even while we breathe Christological air and have our very being in union with Jesus Christ. We are free to continue to see with the foreign eyes of unbelief toward Jesus and to experience the tumultuous chaos of our own theories if we so choose. We are free to carry on living in our own worlds, the worlds of false religion and pretense, of self-generated and grandiose illusions of meaning and purpose, of self-centered pride and manipulation, of jealousy, anger, and wrath, of dread, meaninglessness, and despair. But we are not free to separate ourselves from the love of God in Christ Jesus, or from the Father's eternal embrace of us in our wickedness, or from the Spirit's choice to dwell with us in our great confusion. And we are not free to escape the reality or the revelation of *Christ in us*.

Jesus will never force us to take sides with him, but by our own doing we have invited him into the deepest abyss of confusion in our own souls. In rejecting him we opened the door to our wound. In crucifying the Creator Son we opened our alienation to his presence and the Father's embrace. There he speaks as the living Word of God, the humble brother of the human race, the light of life shining in the great darkness. There the Holy Spirit, who indivisibly accompanied the Son into the far country of our murder and rage, cries "Abba! Father!" bearing witness with our spirits that we are sons and daughters of the Father, joint heirs with Jesus himself, heirs of God and the triune life. The Son of God in his union with us summons us in the Spirit to believe, to trust, to weep in the hope of his presence in us, to let go of our assumptions and illusions and share life with him in the Spirit's delight and in the unearthly assurance of our Father's steadfast love. This is the fight of faith, a fight between the believing of Jesus Christ himself and our own believing, between the revelation of Jesus in us and our own but broken way of seeing where our default setting is the assumption of separation from Jesus. It is a fight which begins with our rejection of Jesus and is quickened by the mind-blowing revelation of Christ in us in the Holy Spirit, and thus carries the promise of nothing less than the life and glory of the Triune God. And it is a fight that we must engage personally—not to become united with Jesus—but in order to live in and out of his union with us, in order to participate with him in dismantling our alien way of seeing so that his heart and soul and mind, and his own relationship with his Father and his own anointing in the Holy Spirit are free to have the run of the house in our souls, even as we hear that Jesus Christ is the author and finisher of faith. It is an infinitely unlikely impossible possibility that we would finally resist Jesus encountering us in his love, and his witness addressing us from the depths of our own souls in so beautiful and quickening a hope. But even if we do, and choose to continue to live in the illusion of separation and its cascading misery of great darkness, we can never cease to be. For it is impossible that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit will ever go back on the union they dreamed in eternity and now made real for us in Jesus' submission to us in our alienation. And it is impossible that Jesus will ever stop loving us in our darkness, or that the Holy Spirit will ever give up on giving us eyes to see the truth, or that the Father will abandon us, relinquishing his love and withdrawing his passionate opposition to our unbelief and its hell.

A proper essay to follow,

Baxter