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RPTS

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REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL



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From Rutherford Hall

Dr. Jerry O'Neill

President of Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary

Two Bible verses have been on my mind a lot recently. Under divine inspiration, the apostle Paul warns Timothy of those who have the appearance (or form) of godliness (2 Tim. 3:5), but who deny its power. These people, he says, are to be avoided. In 1 Corinthians 4:20, we read that the kingdom of God does not consist in talk, but in power. What a warning for those of us at the Seminary who spend our lives in preaching, teaching, counseling, and in other ways serving as stewards of the mysteries of God! The kingdom of God does not consist in talk, or words, but in power.

One of our students reminded me recently of Talkative in Pilgrim's Progress. Do you remember Talkative? Talkative loved to talk theology. He says to Faithful at one point, Talking about theology is most profitable. A person can learn the necessity of the New Birth, the insufficiency of our own works, the need of Christ's righteousness. He may learn what it means to repent, believe, pray, and suffer. People can learn, for their own comfort, what the great promises and encouragements of the gospel are. He can learn how to refute false opinions, to vindicate the truth, and how to instruct the ignorant.

But then Christian pulls Faithful aside and says to his friend, in essence, Talkative knows how to talk about repentance, belief, and prayer, but he only knows how to talk about them. He goes on to say that Talkative's house is as empty of religion as the white of an egg is empty of flavor—there is neither prayer nor the sign of repentance there.

Why is the church in the West so impotent? Why is the Reformed church so lacking in genuine conversions? Have we lost our saltiness? Why do we appear to be only a dim light in the midst of a decaying culture? When I ask these questions, I hope you understand that I am not talking about the church "out there." Rather, I am talking about the churches of our own tradition. What needs to be done to reverse the trend that seems so obvious in the Western church today?

I certainly do not have the full answer to these questions. Only our sovereign God can bring repentance to our land. But God uses people, men and women and boy and girls, who are filled with His Spirit. In that light, living our lives in union and communion with the resurrected and living Savior is of fundamental importance.

This volume of our journal speaks to the theme, "Experiencing the Fullness of Our Union with Christ." My hope and prayer is that we might all drink deeply from the wisdom contained in these articles. Pray that the Lord Himself would use them to cause us more and more to abide in the Vine as we sense the foundations of our world being shaken! Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain (Psalm 127:1).

Comprehending the Eternal Union of God

Dr. Richard Gamble

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Presbyterian Theological Seminary*

Introduction: Difficulties comprehending the doctrine of God.

The unity and diversity of the Trinity is a true mystery. There are different possible approaches, whether conducting an historical analysis of Augustine's *On the Trinity* or an exegetical analysis of John 17. Perhaps the topic is best expressed through the well-delineated Athanasian Creed. While this article will not be an exposition of the content of the creed, it will provide an analysis of the theological and philosophical assumptions and presuppositions necessary for us to understand the content of the creed. Understanding the presuppositions of God's eternal union will aid in comprehending union with Christ which is the theme of the other articles in this journal.

There are problems with the word "comprehending" in the title. We have to deal with what factors are necessary for people to "comprehend" complex Biblical truth. The first task is to analyze the nature of the language that we use to speak of this Divine phenomenon.

Language

The place to begin discussion is the medium of discussion itself: language. There are at least three types of language used in the Bible as well as in common life. While there are a number of possible words to describe those types, we speak of ordinary language, scientific language, and poetic language.

To make the different types clear, here are some biblical examples, all of which concern wheat. An example of ordinary language comes from Genesis 30:14, "In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field..." A scientific use is from Ezra 7:21-22, "And I, Artaxerxes the king, make a decree to all the treasurers in the province beyond the river: Whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven, requires of you, let it be done with all diligence, up to 100 talents of silver, 100 cors of wheat..." Here the King made an order for a specific amount of wheat that was able to be weighed and measured. The unit of measure was called a cor which was about 6 bushels. This description of wheat has scientific precision.

The final example is poetic. Song of Solomon 7:2, "Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies." In this verse the author was describing a woman's body part. If we read this description with either scientific or even ordinary language, the woman would easily be insulted which would be the opposite of the author's purpose.

Among the three types, ordinary language is foundational to the other two. Scientific and poetic language improves upon or expands ordinary language in different cognitive directions. In general, scientific and poetic are artificial perfections of ordinary language, because they depend

upon human skill for the communicative improvements.¹ For discussion of the doctrine of God, we need to focus on the third type of language, the poetic.

The famous Oxford professor of literature, C. S. Lewis, said that one of the main differences between English poetry and English prose is that poetry contains more adjectives. This observation could easily be dismissed as an immature generalization from a non-expert if stated by me—but not so when articulated by an undoubtedly brilliant scholar. Lewis' point is important. In the biblical example of poetic language, Solomon was embarrassingly fulsome in his vivid and detailed description of his lover's body. There is a good reason why both biblical and English poetry uses so many descriptive words. It is because poetic language wants to bombard the reader with an abundance of factual information, which, from an ordinary language point of view, is either irrelevant or even platitudinous.² Providing that abundance is one of poetry's important functions. On reflection, many would offer that the purpose of poetic language is to arouse emotion rather than provide information. While there is no question that poetic language can arouse emotion, poetry is not merely a stimulant of emotion but is a real and very important medium of information.³

Relative to communication, there is a unique aspect to poetic language. Poetic language is best at describing events experientially. Poetic language can communicate a quality of experience that the author understands—but which the reader has not had. It is good communicating something that is not normally accessible to others. To make that communication, poetic language will use information from within our own experience so that the information becomes a pointer to something that is outside of our experience.⁴ Thus, experience, including religious experience, is often best expressed in poetic language.⁵

Each language type has its strengths and weaknesses. In the biblical example of scientific language, we know why King Artaxerxes made his decree and how the decree was carried out. This is a strength. We have observed poetic language's strength in its ability to communicate experience, making it better suited than scientific language to do such. However, poetic language also has a distinct disadvantage. Information that is given via poetic language has to be met halfway.

To comprehend what Solomon was trying to communicate requires that the reader begin by trusting him. Solomon had something to say, and Christian readers want to understand his message. We believe what he has to say and then we want to understand.⁶

The questions that are answered by the scientific example are inappropriate to ask the King poet Solomon: we do not know how his lover's belly can be a heap of wheat. He wants to communicate information in a different fashion than scientific.

¹ C. S. Lewis, "The Language of Religion," *The Seeing Eye and Other Selected Essays from Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967), 172.

² *Ibid.*, 174.

³ *Ibid.*, 175, 178.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 183: "All our sensuous experience is in this condition."

⁶ *Ibid.*, 179. *Credo ut intelligam* is the only attitude.

Hopefully, we can begin to see how important poetic language is to analysis of the doctrine of God. The Bible communicates ancient information by people personally unknown to us which we as believers must listen to sympathetically and try to translate those experiences in a way that is meaningful to us. We trust and believe the God who speaks and try to comprehend. The old Latin phrase *credo ut intelligam* is part of the very language of the doctrine of God.⁷ As we move closer to the topic, it is perhaps clear by now that language about the nature of God's unity cannot be communicated adequately via scientific language or even ordinary language. However, poetic language can only properly communicate when the reader trusts the speaker and wants to comprehend whatever it is that the poet is saying.⁸ Recognizing the need for unique language when it comes to the doctrine of God, we need to confront the problem of its unique content.

Content Problem

Knowing these three types of language helps us to understand the difficulty of communicating any type of content to another person. The problem of communicating the content of God's unity can be illustrated by two examples.

One example is the simple task to describe something that can be seen, like a mountain. Suppose you are from Pittsburgh and you travel to the Rocky Mountains and want to describe them. Your view from the hotel window would show a certain beauty of the mountains. However, when you travel to the highest public observation sight, the mountains would appear even more majestic.

A geologist would claim to know more about the mountain than you do. He or she would know the geological layers and formations that make up the huge structure.⁹ Different still would be the mountain climber, moving on the very face of the mountain, being up close, who has a different view. He would laugh if I claimed to "see" or "know" the mountains as he does.

Yet the question that we must ask concerning describing the mountains is: "Which one of the various presentations is the true view?" The answer is that whether viewed from a hotel window, from an observation post situated on the mountain, by a geologist or a climber, each perspective, though different, is true. The simple task of communicating about a mountain to another person requires a richness of language. Now, if we move to the task of describing another person, describing a mountain seems easy!

The second example parallels the first in some ways. It is the mystery of the self. A person, like a mountain, is visible. A person can be weighed and measured, his socio-economic background can be studied, and his age can be precisely described. However, if asked to describe ourselves, few of us would say that we are simply the summary of this scientific data. We would argue that the description is inadequate as we give further details about ourselves, like our favorite colors, music, or foods. In fact, there is mystery in trying to describe the self.¹⁰ Each self functions with complex roles such as parent, worker, or student. The self that we present at work is sometimes

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 181.

⁹ Ibid., 228. The problem is not limited to the gigantic. Physicists tell us that there are small particles of tables or trees, clouds or mountains. Underneath is the atom, in the long run you find mathematical formulas. 229: the mathematics may be true about reality but is not the reality itself any more than contour lines are real mountains.

¹⁰ Ibid., 228: What is one's ordinary self? It is "...a mere façade. There's a huge area out of sight behind it." 229: Every further discovery deepens the mystery.

a one-dimensional façade of our full selves. Our work colleagues may think that they know us, but there can be huge areas of our lives that are simply out of their sight.

Furthermore, it takes months or years to get to know another person. Given the high divorce rate, it could be argued that few people actually “know” the other self when they agree to marry. Sadly, pastors know how difficult it is truly to get to “know” a person in the congregation. Like the mountain, there are parts of people that are immediately apparent but there is always more to know on closer inspection.

Now we turn to consider God and creation.¹¹ Moving to “knowing” God in terms of content means knowing that God who created the heavens and the earth. Before that creation, our great God lived entirely outside of space and time. However, human beings live only within space and time, and thus cannot comprehend that which is outside of creation. When we creatures think about God we must remember that for God to teach us about himself, in a way that we can understand, he must enter into space and time.¹² Through the creation, God speaks with covenantal language to his people.¹³

The human word for “unity” relative to comprehending God’s unity is written in a space-time key that is foreign to the music of God’s own universe. To say that his divine “unity” is exactly the same as our concept of “unity” is nothing short of nonsensical.¹⁴

Given that reality, all human thinking about God, or knowledge of God, is properly termed ectypal—in contrast to that which is archetypal.¹⁵ God is self-contained and he is the archetype. He is the original.¹⁶ Humans are created analogues of him and man’s being is analogical of God’s being.¹⁷ Thus our thinking is ectypal. An implication that flows from this biblical distinction is that Christians should think concretely of God, not abstractly. When believers want to comprehend God’s being or unity, they cannot simply use abstract philosophical notions such as the analogy of being. Such an argument would simply posit that “God is that which nothing greater can be conceived”

In conclusion, believers must admit that it is not easy to describe something that we can see and feel, such as a mountain or a man. Thus, we should be overwhelmed by the challenge of how to describe God’s unity. Certainly both the language of the doctrine as well as the content is unique and rich. Admitting the difficulties faced so far, as well as understanding how they can be

¹¹ See Scott Oliphint, *God With Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Crossway, 2011), 181f.

¹² Lewis, *The Seeing Eye*, 229. If you are a person who “has to believe that all things which exist must have unity it will seem to you irritably probable that what lies ultimately behind the one façade also lies ultimately behind the other.”

¹³ Oliphint, *God With Us*.

¹⁴ Lewis, *The Seeing Eye*, 227: “If God created the universe, He created space-time, which is to the universe as the metre is to a poem or the key is to music. To look for Him as one item within the frame which he himself invented in nonsensical.”

¹⁵ Oliphint, *God With Us*, 91-92.

¹⁶ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1974), 215. Hereafter, *Introduction*, 203.

¹⁷ Van Til, *Introduction*, 205: “We must speak of God anthropomorphically. The Scripture speaks of God in that way.”

overcome, takes us to the next task of presenting a biblically faithful doctrine of God's unity- the relationship between God's being and attributes.

***Being and Attributes Identical*¹⁸**

The Bible teaches that God is characterized or comprehended by his attributes; that his being and his attributes are identical. They are not, and cannot be, in some type of an "economic" or functional relationship, because the two are identical with each other.

Thus, when a theologian tries to insert either "economic" (functional) or "ontological" (being) hierarchies into his analysis of God's attributes, his own method produces unnecessary difficulties.¹⁹ Analysis of God's being and attributes requires a methodological balance. For this reason, when describing God, the word 'perfections' is superior to the word 'attributes'. Each divine 'attribute' is perfect, thus one 'completely perfect attribute' cannot be economically superior to another 'completely perfect attribute'.²⁰

Regarding method, since believers love our heavenly Father and want to know more about him, and God's perfections are beyond any human concept, theologians, with a humble and godly attitude, must turn to God himself for aid.²¹ Since God has revealed himself in his word, a proper approach will analyze God's attributes or perfections as he himself has revealed them in the historical unfolding of his special revelation.²² Nevertheless, while choosing a God-honoring path is a good first step, that beginning does not solve the methodological problem.²³

Commencing with God's self-revelation in the Hebrew Bible, the Christian has to determine levels of continuity and discontinuity with the New Testament concerning God's perfections or attributes. Moving then to the New Testament itself, the best approach embraces a well developed biblical-theological method that begins with God's revelation in the gospels and ends with the book of Revelation. It is a demanding task even to try to summarize what the Bible says about God! Yet theologians must attempt to do so. Our method will incorporate the nature of God's being itself in the analysis.

¹⁸ K. Scott Oliphint, "‘Something Much Too Plain to Say’: A Systematic Theological Apologetic," in *Resurrection and Eschatology*, ed. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 364: "The problem is ... an inherent incompatibility or inconsistency either between his attributes, or between his attributes and the properties of creation."

¹⁹ See Rick Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 1:273, 637.

²⁰ Since the church safeguards God's originality, the incommunicable attributes precede the communicable. See Oliphint, *God With Us*, 87-88 who argues that God's essential attributes must be comprehended Christologically.

²¹ While philosophically and intellectually difficult, believers have valid knowledge of God. Gamble, *Whole Counsel of God*, 1:18: "Scripturally speaking, a valid claim of knowledge of God presupposes the integration of that knowledge into the life of the knower, to the extent that the knower is not merely cognizant of facts, but actually changed in thought, volition, and action by those facts."

²² J. Van Genderen and W. H. Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 165: "The only acceptable and reliable approach [to comprehending God's attributes] is that of revelation (*via revelationis*)."

²³ Theologians have chosen different approaches as to how to distinguish among God's attributes. In the nineteenth century, Robert Dabney began with what the human mind can think about God outside of his special revelation. More recently, Robert Reymond used the Westminster Shorter Catechism as a structure, and John Frame the central motif of God as Lord of the Covenant. For more information, see Gamble, *Whole Counsel of God*, 1:650-53, and notes 96-107.

Aseity and Simplicity

Aseity. God said of himself in Exodus 3:14, “I am” or “I will be what I will be.”²⁴ God’s self-existence is denominated as his aseity. Aseity means that God is not dependent upon anything besides his own being. God is the source of his own being.

A good presentation for God’s aseity follows these lines. First, God owns all things on heaven and earth, and all that his creatures possess is given to them by God’s hand.²⁵ Second, God does not owe anything to his creation nor does he have any needs that are based upon the creation.²⁶ All of God’s virtues or perfections (analyzed in the next section) are included in his aseity.

The particular difficulty with God’s aseity is that there are no cognitive or intellectual parallels to it in secular thinking. There have been many attempts to find something similar in competing philosophical or theological systems. Those systems try to find something which is “of itself” or, in Latin, a *se* in the sphere of being, of knowing, or of doing—but they all fail. No non-Christian thought has been able to locate those ultimates in a single principle. While God’s aseity is intellectually difficult, such a great God is also our boast. The aseity of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob gives an ultimate reference in human thinking.²⁷ He is the equal ultimacy of unity and plurality.

*Simplicity.*²⁸ The Bible teaches God’s oneness or numerical unity, also known as his ‘simplicity’.²⁹ God’s simplicity includes his unity. The Old Testament rejected the notion of there being more than one God, and the words of the *Sh’ma* at Deuteronomy 6:4 proclaimed God as absolute numerical identity.³⁰ The Old Testament also taught that God was non-physical, with no parts. In continuity, the New Testament teaches that God is one.³¹

Theologians divide analysis of God’s unity into two categories. First is God’s unity of singularity (that there is only one God), and second is his unity of simplicity (that he is not made of parts). The two notions imply each other and the denial of the one is the denial of the other.³²

²⁴ See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, c2003), 2:151-52.

²⁵ See Gen. 14:19; Ps. 24:1; 50:10-12; and James 1:17.

²⁶ See Isa. 40:19-20; Luke 17:10; Rom. 11:35-36. The summary is dependent upon Frame, *Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, c2013) 407-11.

²⁷ See Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 412.

²⁸ Oliphint, *God With Us*, 67, argues divine simplicity: “Affirms not that God has a nature but that God is his nature.”

²⁹ See Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1981), 111.

³⁰ Van Til, *Introduction*, 215-16. It is not correct to separate universals from the Godhead. If we begin with human ultimacy, then there is no predication. If we fail to comprehend aseity, then there is no notion of God’s self-existence.

³¹ See also John 10:30, 38; 14:10-11; and 1 John 5:7.

³² Frame, *Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995), 55.

This divine simplicity is related to God's spiritual nature and is connected to his invisibility. Even though he is simple, or possesses 'qualitative oneness', we can still distinguish between God's various perfections or attributes because that is how he has revealed himself.³³

In conformity to his oneness or simplicity, and wondrous to contemplate, the Old Testament also demonstrated that God is also a plurality of persons. Specifically, the Lord, the Spirit, and the Wisdom of God were personified and differentiated.³⁴

It is intellectually difficult to hold on to God's simplicity combined with his multiplicity.³⁵ Nevertheless, this is Scripture's teaching. God's simplicity reminds believers that God's relationship with his people is fully personal.³⁶

Comprehending the Trinity

Relations between the Persons of the Trinity

Equality in Being and Works. The three persons are in an intimate communion with each other.³⁷ The three persons permeate each other and none exists without the other two persons. There is a mutual indwelling of the three persons of the Trinity. Theologians use the Greek term *perichoresis* or the Latin *circumincessio* to describe that mutual relationship.

Besides being in unity, the triune God also works in equality among the three persons.³⁸ That statement does not mean that each person performs the same works. It is the Son, for example, and no other person, who died on the cross. Paul's doctrine of salvation clearly demonstrated the full and equal working of the three persons of the Trinity relative to salvation.³⁹

³³ Gamble, *Whole Counsel of God*, 1:653-54.

³⁴ Gamble, *Whole Counsel of God*, 1:633-36. For the Word of God, see Psalm 33:6, 9. For the Spirit of God, see Gen. 1:2; Ps. 51:11, 104:30; 139:7; and Isa. 48:16, 63:10. The Holy Spirit sets apart for ministry at Isa. 61:1 and is grieved at Isa. 63:9f. For the Wisdom of God, see Proverbs 3:12-31.

³⁵ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 428-31 argues that Thomas Aquinas wrongly held to a total absence of multiplicity in God.

³⁶ Thus, it may be wise to emphasize God's necessary existence rather than to focus on his divine simplicity in the abstract. See Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 433.

³⁷ Augustine advanced the church's understanding of the relationship. Later, the Greek term "perichoresis" was used (since the 8th century) to describe this communion. The expression was affirmed (in the fifteenth century) at the Council of Florence. Calvin taught the same in *Institutes* 1.13.19, 143: "The Father is wholly in the Son, the Son wholly in the Father, even as he himself declares: 'I am in the Father, and the Father in me.'" Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 1:461 cited the Greek term and its meaning with approval.

³⁸ See Bavinck, *CRD*, 158-59; Frame, *Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2011), 631-43; and Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 479.

³⁹ Paul formulated his understanding of redemption in terms of adoptive Sonship, which connected back to God's earlier work, as unity in Trinity, to Israel's adopted Sonship. Paul's teaching was probably most clearly presented at Ephesians 3:1-13. For more information, see Chapter 15 on Christ's work of redemption and Christ's eternal Sonship as the archetype for his salvific work in time. See also David B. Garner, "The First and the Last Son: Christology and Sonship in Pauline Soteriology," in *Resurrection and Eschatology*, ed. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 272-78.

Theologians can rightly differentiate between what they term the “ontological” Trinity in contrast to the “economic” Trinity.⁴⁰ These distinctions are simply tools that are made by creatures to try to help us to understand our Creator.⁴¹

The ontological Trinity is a way to describe God as he exists apart from his relationship to creation.⁴² It is a way to describe God as self-complete, involving the equal ultimacy of unity and plurality, of the one and many.⁴³ The economic Trinity, on the other hand, is a way to describe God as he relates to people and his creation.⁴⁴

The history of theology demonstrates that there is one basic Trinitarian heresy- when someone mixes the temporal with the eternal in ultimate union. Addressing contemporary theological debate, it is not correct to equate the legitimate term “perichoresis” with the intra-trinitarian covenant.⁴⁵

Finally, while this truth has been attacked by many through the centuries, the doctrine of the Trinity is not unnecessarily speculative.⁴⁶ It is not too much for the Church to demand belief in this doctrine. God, viewed as Trinity, is a rich presentation of the beauty of God in relationship with himself.⁴⁷ The concepts of God’s oneness, as well as his threeness, while intellectually difficult, are not truly contradictory.⁴⁸ Also, knowledge of the doctrine of the Trinity is worthwhile because the sinner’s own redemption must be comprehended as an act of the unified God as Trinity. Those saving thoughts and actions of God spring from before creation, to Christ’s incarnation and resurrection, to the creation of Christ’s church, the very body of Christ inhabited by the Holy Spirit.⁴⁹

Knowing God

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament did not try philosophically to prove God’s existence—it was taken for granted.⁵⁰ The New Testament presented two basic options, either to accept

⁴⁰ For more information on the Ontological and Economic Trinity and related topics, see Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 706-19.

⁴¹ Van Til, *Introduction*, 225. The Nicene creed emphasized that the internal relationship of the Persons of the Trinity is prior to and independent of the relation of the Godhead to creation.

⁴² See Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, 205-06.

⁴³ See Van Til, *Introduction*, 223 and Gamble, *Whole Counsel of God*, 1:88.

⁴⁴ See Gamble, *Whole Counsel of God*, 1:273: “...the Trinity has an economy of functions while maintaining an ontological equality, there can be an economy of functions within human beings.”

⁴⁵ Some have said that “representation and mutual indwelling are the quintessential issues of the covenant. See Ralph Allan Smith, “A Response to the OPC Committee on the Doctrine of Justification,” 2.

⁴⁶ Bavinck, *CRD*, 161; Van Til, *Introduction*, 223.

⁴⁷ Bavinck, *CRD*, 160.

⁴⁸ Yet, the doctrine of the Trinity is also more than intellectually difficult. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:445: “To say that this doctrine is incomprehensible, is to say nothing more than must be admitted of any other great truth....”

⁴⁹ Bavinck, *CRD*, 161, 163.

⁵⁰ See Gamble, *Whole Counsel of God*, 1:277.

the assumption of God's existence or to reject both God and his divine self-revelation.⁵¹ There were no formal scriptural proofs for God's existence, since his existence was simply a given.

However, knowledge of God's existence was not some type of blind faith. Rather, it was and is based on seen facts.⁵² While he physically revealed himself in the Old Testament, another way that God was known was through his creating men and women in his image. He has revealed himself in humanity because men and women reflect God's image. Thus, as creatures created in his image, God is known 'innately'. This knowledge is sometimes called 'natural revelation'.⁵³ However, phrases like 'natural revelation' or 'universal intuitive truths', if used at all, must be defined and used carefully. Something may be 'universally believed' but still not be true!⁵⁴

God has also revealed himself in his creation. Although there is this revelation of God in 'nature' that is not the 'special' revelation found exclusively in Scripture, we must be careful when we use the expression 'natural theology' based on general revelation.⁵⁵ Knowledge about God that comes from general revelation requires special revelation to interpret it properly.⁵⁶

Also, from the time of humanity's fall into sin, we have faced a problem relative to knowing God and his spirituality. God is a spirit and we are flesh. We want to be able to see him. Such a desire is not necessarily sinful, as manifested in Moses' desire to see God—which God granted. The answer to this significant problem was that God revealed himself in 'flesh'.⁵⁷ It is Christ who has made God known.

Finally, the New Testament underlined what was already clear in the Old, that knowledge of God is a unique type of knowledge. Human knowledge of God is not something purely intellectual, but is also relational.⁵⁸ Knowledge of God is something personal—to know him is to be in a relationship with him. Truly to know him requires faith.⁵⁹

⁵¹ Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 74, 76.

⁵² Gamble, *Whole Counsel of God*, 1:278.

⁵³ See Gamble, *Whole Counsel of God*, 1:194. The full knowledge of God, for example as defined by the WCF, is not innate. Hodge defined that limited innate knowledge of God as, "...this sense of dependence and accountability to a being higher than themselves [that] exists in the minds of all men." Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, (New York, 1877), 1:191-92, 195. For more information, see John Owen, *Biblical Theology*, 176; Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, 27-28; Bavinck, *Doctrine of God*, 41-43; and Van Til, *Introduction*, 194-95.

⁵⁴ Hodge wisely said that a truly intuitive, universal truth applies to those truths "...which have their foundation or evidence in the constitution of our nature." *Systematic Theology*, 1:194.

⁵⁵ See Gamble, *Whole Counsel of God*, 1:279-82, 281: "The revelation of God that is found in humanity (as created in his image) and in creation (also called general revelation) is not the same thing as 'natural theology'." It is not certain that we can speak of a 'natural theology' at all. For example, Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:195, says that the sublime definition of the WCF can only be attained from special revelation. Hodge made careful limits.

⁵⁶ Gamble, *Whole Counsel of God*, 1:282. More information on the historical development of what some call "natural theology" will be found in volume 3.

⁵⁷ Gamble, *Whole Counsel of God*, 1:279-80.

⁵⁸ Bavinck, *CRD*, 118: "God's incomprehensibility does not render knowledge of God impossible. This is then knowledge of a unique nature." see Ps. 34:8 and Jer. 22:15-16. This peculiar usage of the word is different from the "normal" understanding, which usually is intellectual.

⁵⁹ Bavinck, *CRD*, 117, 121.

Another way that the relational aspect is manifested is to say that for a human to know God meant that he also feared God. They always went hand in hand.⁶⁰ The prophet Jeremiah was in a deeply personal relationship with God, and Hosea and Isaiah also taught that it was more important for God's people to know God than to present burnt offerings to him.⁶¹ To know God was to give him his due honor.⁶² For men and women to know God truly requires knowledge that is based upon the solid rock of God's self revelation combined with the person's trust in that revelation.⁶³ Believers know God through the grace offered to us in Christ.

In conclusion, comprehending the eternal union of God requires facing the language and content problems, realizing that God's being and attributes are identical and underlining the importance of God's aseity and simplicity. After proper analysis, to know Him is to love and fear Him.

⁶⁰ Gamble, *Whole Counsel of God*, 1:600: "The knowledge of God is also connected to public righteousness." "It would necessarily follow that when God's people seek to know him, their way of life will make them more like the Lord himself. Such knowing changes one's fundamental character."

⁶¹ While Jeremiah felt that he was ill equipped for the task, God understood that need and gave him amazing promises, see Jer. 1:6. God expressed his love for the prophet at 31:3. See Gamble, *Whole Counsel of God*, 1:584. See Hos. 6:6; 13:4-5, and Gamble, *Whole Counsel of God*, 1:599.

⁶² Bavinck, *CRD*, 122.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 119: "To be able to live truly, we must know God." "Essential knowledge of God is knowledge that is based on revelation and faith."

Enjoying the Communion of Saints

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Q. 63. What are the special privileges of the visible church?

A. The visible church hath the privilege of being under God's special care and government; of being protected and preserved in all ages, notwithstanding the opposition of all enemies; and of enjoying the communion of saints, the ordinary means of salvation, and offers of grace by Christ to all the members of it in the ministry of the gospel, testifying, that whosoever believes in him shall be saved, and excluding none that will come unto him. (Westminster Larger Catechism)

INTRODUCTION

It is a glorious and special privilege of the visible church to enjoy the communion of saints. This article aims to address that joyful communion. Of course, to frame it around joy is to make our communion more than a matter of bare theological assertion. It is to bring it into the realm of the affections¹ or Christian experience. Implied is that our union with Christ, expressed in our communion with one another, should move from 'doctrina' to 'pietas', from confessional theological statement to a practical lively orthodoxy. If, as our catechetical heritage teaches, man's chief end is the eternal enjoyment of our triune God, and the communion of saints is the outworking of the most central² and basic aspect of God's saving work—union and communion with Christ – then the communion of saints is something to be eminently enjoyed. More than merely a good thing, the communion of saints is a joyful thing.

We will consider the connection between our joy and its object, in this case, the communion of saints. Specifically, we will examine the spiritual fruit of joy, a framework for enjoying our communion, and how we practically respond.

ROOTS OF OUR UNION AND COMMUNION JOY

Law Command

There is little question that joy has a foundational place in Christian experience. Repeatedly, the Old Testament enjoins believers to joy. “[L]et Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad” (Psalm 53:6);

¹ For Jonathan Edwards, true affections were induced by the Spirit operating on the *mind* leading to the intensification of the *will*.

² “Nothing is more central and basic than union and communion with Christ.... Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.... It embraces the wide span of salvation from its ultimate source in the eternal election of God to its final fruition in the glorification of the elect.” John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 161, 165.

“Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name!” (Ps 97:12); “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 118:24). Similarly, the New Testament puts forward Christian joy as characteristic of a genuine Christian faith and life. Jesus calls believers to “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven” (Mt. 5:12). The apostle Paul enjoins the Philippian believers to “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice” (Phil. 4:4).

Tracing these and additional biblical lines of joy will lead one to see that joy is very often a matter of law command. Over and over, the scripture presents joy as the subject of divine directive and imperative. The summons “O be joyful in the Lord!” (Psalm 100:1) is not an optional suggestion. It is a word commanded by our Divine Lawgiver that makes a direct claim on the will of the hearer. In framing it this way, it is implied that joy, as a Christian affection, bears on the believer’s volition.

Liturgical Context

Consider further that the command to rejoice is not an unmediated declaration from heaven directly to Christians. We do not hear an audible voice speaking from heaven exhorting us to be joyful. All the instances of commands to joy that we have are mediated via the biblical canon and occur within a liturgical context. The covenant community of saints at worship is the theater in which Christian joy is rehearsed and enacted. While it does not take a village, it does take a covenant community, for it is in the church where we learn and are liturgically trained, as it were, in righteous joy. God commands our rejoicing and, over time as we are part of the body at worship, we are habituated and formed in being a collectively joyful people. One underlying assumption here is that believers bring their joy(s)³ and all manner of gracious affections into the congregation. And as the church worships, those joys and affections are then directed toward their proper ends and object as we are caught up in praise of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within that congregation. Our hearts, desires, and joys, being what they are, can be bent Godward by means of corporate worship.⁴

Lively Communication

Neither divine law command nor the liturgical context explain the root of Christian joy. While command and context are not incidental to it, they are not what is most integral about it. For

³ “The most obvious fact about praise—whether of God or anything—strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honour. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless ...shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favourite game – praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious, minds, praised most, while the cranks, misfits, and malcontents praised least...Except where intolerably adverse circumstances interfere, praise almost seems to be inner health made audible...I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: ‘Isn’t she lovely? Wasn’t it glorious? Don’t you think that magnificent?’ The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about. My whole, more general, difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what we indeed can’t help doing, about everything else we value.” C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: A Harvest Book/Harcourt Inc., 1958), 93-95.

⁴ Psalm 72:17 is a wonderful example of how our hearts may be recalibrated within and by participation in corporate worship. Our affections, like joy, are such that they are affected by liturgical contexts which assist in shaping us, body and soul, for God’s glory in the world.

that we must look to our union with Christ, for it is that central application of salvation which enacts a lively communication of the grace of joy, in addition to all other gracious affections. “Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory” (1 Pet 1:8). “By the operation of the Spirit on us whereby we are ‘quicken together with Christ’ (Eph. 2:5),” and “the actings of faith”⁵ through and by us whereby we come to grasp Christ, the believer is united to Christ and thus receives the grace and fruit of holy love and joy, “you love him...and rejoice with joy.” “By faith [we] have fellowship with him in his graces” (WCF 26.1). Every believer united to Christ, bound to Him by the Spirit, will evidence the Spirit’s fruit of joy. Our union with Christ is the root of the joy we are to exhibit in our manner of life.

RECOGNIZING AND REJOICING IN OUR UNION AND COMMUNION

What does it mean to glorify God and enjoy the communion of saints forever? We will pursue one broad, confessionally-based line of thought. I suggest that the confession, particularly chapter 26, in its characteristically rich and dense formulations, sets forth a framework for enjoying the communion of saints.

Rejoicing in our unity

The Confession states that saints are united to Jesus Christ by his Spirit and to one another in a common bond of love (WCF 26.1). Our connection with one another derives from our union with Christ, our common Head, and the Spirit’s powerful binding of us all together under our head. Our commonness, A.A. Hodge states, “involves us in ties of sympathy and identity of interest. One cannot prosper without all prospering with him—one cannot suffer without all suffering with him.”⁶ Put artfully, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny”⁷ is how Martin Luther King described our unity.

Moreover, the confession rightly states that this common union extends beyond descriptive spiritual reality and into the realm of practicality. The nature of our unity is such that our “gifts and graces,” “outward things,” and personal “abilities” do not simply belong to us separately or individually, but are to be shared corporately with the wider church community. No member of the body is to see himself in terms of himself alone, but as inextricably united to both Christ and every other member of the communion of saints. The African saying “I am because we are” expresses well the confessional idea of our connectedness to one another.

In fact, so strong is the notion of our common unity that the framers of the confession explicitly head off any thought of an equality of being between Christ and the believer—we are not so united as to be subsumed into the Godhead. Additionally, it explicitly affirms the believer’s right to private property and personal ownership within the church lest one think that unity means ipso facto communalism. Thus, our togetherness, or connectedness, is not monism of any sort. But this deep unity is an ongoing answer to the high priestly prayer of our Lord that touches on the unified inner life of the Godhead, “That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us” (John 17:). The visible communion of saints is the earthly embodiment of that prayer.

⁵ A. A. Hodge, *Commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 2013), 322-323.

⁶ *Ibid*, 325.

⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1991) 290.

A. A. Hodge expresses the foundational unity we share this way: “Communion is a mutual interchange of offices between parties, which flows from a common principle in which they are united.”⁸ More poignantly and experientially, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote his first dissertation on the communion of saints (*Communio Sanctorum*) says of our vital one-ness, “The more genuine and deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us.”⁹

What is universal, common, and shared among the communion of saints is grounds for “an effusion of holy joy” to borrow from Spurgeon. The communion of saints means the deep unity of saints because God, in Christ, and by the Spirit, has made us one.

Rejoicing in our Diversity

While we rejoice in what is common to us, we likewise enjoy our communion by virtue of what is different between us. There exists a glorious diversity among us. Again, as the confession lays out, we recognize a diversity of “each other’s gifts and graces” (WCF 26.1), knowing that no one, single person possesses within himself all that is needed to maintain “an holy fellowship” (WCF 26.2). Additionally, saints minister to one another “according to their several [diverse] abilities” (WCF 26.1), which suggests that healthy life together as a unity depends upon an implicit and lively diversity. While our fellowship is one of a common communion (unity), our “goods and possessions” are not thereby made communal but remain diversely owned by the various members as has been noted already. Regarding private ownership, the confession follows the logic of Peter’s ancient question to Ananias and Sapphira, “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?” (Acts 5:4). Along with our unity, this too—the outer and inner diversity of believers—is something in which we are to find delight. Diversity is a constitutive part of the enjoyment of our communion.

Enjoying the communion of saints calls us to careful attention of both what is common and distinct to us, to those things we have similarly and uniquely, the oneness never canceling out or being subordinated to the many-ness. But both, in their many, many iterations, are equally foundational to us as a people. Our differences never dissolve into silos of individualism. Our shared common-ness never gives way to bland sameness on any level.

When we confess that we believe in the communion of saints, we are confessing that we are a body that in a multitude of concrete ways is “both separate and connected, distinct and related”¹⁰ in our corporate life. We manifest union in distinction.

Of course, this unity and diversity operates within the general sphere of creation, not just the particular realm of the visible church. Think of the words “dog” and “collie”. We know that a collie is a particular kind of dog. Collies have a general dog-ness just as Dobermans, German shepherds, poodles, etc. There is a diversity of dogs. Yet, collies and all various canines share a common dog-ness. There is unity and diversity of dogs.

For another example, think of the wonderful world of created sound. A single song can be played in many different ways and yet the unique tune/melody remain recognizable in spite of differences in rendering (i.e. theme and variations). That everyone has a favorite version of this

⁸ Hodge, *Commentary on the Westminster Confession*, 21.

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper, 1954), 26.

¹⁰ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 66.

or that piece of music testifies to this. We can perceive this about music because of our innate ability to discern unity and diversity writ large in creation.

In noting this, we are drawn to acknowledge the very nature of God Himself who is consummate unity and diversity, with His oneness and three-ness being equally ultimate and foundational to his nature as God. With him being the creator of all things, we should expect a universe fully stamped with the marks and imprint of the God who created it. Universality and particularity are everywhere. The heavens declare the glory of God's unity and diversity.¹¹ This is something for us to re-declare, in which we should rejoice in creation generally and the communion of saints particularly.

Unity vs. Diversity: A Contemporary tension

Now exploring unity and diversity as a framework for engaging and enjoying our communion with saints is not merely an interesting bit of speculative theology, a way to satisfy an itch for theological abstractions. It has concrete, real world consequence for how we are to be the church in the world.

I raise a contemporary church issue which brings into bold relief how we often fail to enjoy communion. In fact, we kill our corporate joy by failing to engage one another robustly through the lens of unity and diversity. The issue is race in the American church.

Few would deny that the twenty-first century American church experiences persistent and recalcitrant problems around race seen, not least, in its startling degree of segregation¹² by race. In the face of this, Christian sociologists who have studied churches and other religious organizations have noted a recurring pattern. In order to deal with the modern problem of race, majority-culture (i.e. white/European heritage in the US) churches tend to call for and extol transcendent values. They stress what is common to all members, the foundational unity which exists between all believers regardless of the various particularities of the parishioners. Stated differently, dominant-culture led churches often attempt to move beyond race as the principal manner of dealing with race.¹³ In this way, terms like 'post-racial' and 'colorblindness' and correlative sentiments like "I don't see race" are seen as positive and admirable for life within

¹¹ Cornelius Plantinga sees in the very process of creation a unity and diversity shaped pattern of "distinction-within-union." *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 29.

¹² (1) nearly nine in ten churches are 80 percent or more one race; (2) the average public school is six-times more diverse than the average church, the average neighborhood ten-times more; (3) the small number of ethnically diverse churches is largely unstable and located in transitioning communities where white congregants are moving out while ethnic minorities are moving in." Mark Robinson, review of *United: Captured by God's Vision for Diversity*, by Trillia Newbell (Chicago: Moody, 2014), *The Gospel Coalition*, April 28, 2014, accessed November 21, 2015, <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/united#>. For these statistics, see Michael O. Emerson and Rodney Woo, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) 37, 42.

¹³ "Findings suggest that most [majority culture led] multiracial congregations require an avoidance of discussions of racism, racial inequality, and politics and that members downplay their racial identity in favor of their religious identity in order to incorporate multiple racial groups into a single congregation. Similar forms of racial inequality that exist in society often arise in multiracial congregations as white leaders and members have an outsized influence on how the congregations are structured and organized. Thus, it appears that, on the whole, multiracial congregations are not increasing consciousness of racism and racial inequality. If anything, multiracial congregations are legitimating and reproducing racial inequality rather than challenging it." Korie L. Edwards, Brad Christerson, and Michael O. Emerson, "Race, Religious Organizations, and Integration," *Annual Review of Sociology* 39 (July 2013): 224.

the household of faith. In other words, highlighting our similarity is the key for resolving racial fractures.

Quite opposite of this, Christians in minority-led churches and organizations tend to highlight and emphasize the diverse cultural and experiential dynamics at work within the body as the way to address racial difficulties. Taking specific note of particularities of life by bringing to light unacknowledged and oftentimes hidden patterns of distinct ethnic group realities is seen as the way forward through racial strife. What from one view might be seen as “playing the race card,” far from being a manipulative ploy, is from the other view most likely an honest attempt to make plain the complexity and difficult dynamics required to navigate a racialized church and society. Of course, the place that race plays in any particular instance needs to be adjudicated but it should not be dismissed at the outset. Minority Christians will challenge¹⁴ the racial status quo in order to deal with it. From this vantage point, highlighting, not ignoring, differences and distinctions is key for resolving issues that arise.

One group of Christians emphasizes unity, the other diversity, yet both strive toward the same goal: a beloved communion of saints. As you might suspect and have likely experienced, this disparity becomes a recipe for the disunion of saints, and the racially divided nature of the church at present bears this out.¹⁵

Following on from the framework previously articulated, I suggest that in order to enjoy our communion in the way to which our Lord call us, we must embrace and come to enjoy equally both our sameness and difference. We must resist the tendency to play down, in the interest of a general spiritual unity, the myriad of particularities which mark out believers in the visible church. God loves the diversity of creation and creatures, including us. He made so much of it. Annie Dillard, observing the wonderful complexity of nature wrote, “The Creator loves pizzazz” in *The Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.¹⁶ She is right. He does. We do not do well to flatten and assimilate it into sameness. In doing so, we assume a kind of neo-Docetism that devalues the significance of material creation in favor of immaterial categories. Likewise with our common unity: our deepest mark of identity as Christians is our union with Christ and we are only united to each other insofar as we are first in union with Him. Our union is not grounded in psychological or social affinity, common interests, shared ethnic heritage or the like. Regarding the communion of saints, Bonhoeffer forcefully notes, “We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.”¹⁷ What is most spiritually true of us is also what is most common to us. Where we are fundamentally defined and named is in precisely that point where we share our deepest unity: our in Christ-ness.

Saints must not put these twin truths into tension with one another, nor subordinate one to the other, but live into both as a framework for our earthly enjoyment. To see and savor our union and distinction—ethnic, racially, and otherwise—is to think God’s thoughts after him, the one who created a world charged with the beauty of unity with diversity in all things.

¹⁴ “Monoracial congregations of color seem to have more potential for challenging racial inequality, evidenced in the well-documented role of African American congregations in political mobilization for greater equality (e.g., Morris 1984, Pattillo-McCoy 1998) and in the role of immigrant congregations to provide resources and social capital that facilitate upward mobility.” Edwards, et al., “Race, Religious Organizations, and Integration,” 224.

¹⁵ #Blacklivesmatter vs. #Alllivesmatter is an example of this racial tension in the wider culture at the moment.

¹⁶ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 139.

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life together*, 21.

RESPONDING TO OUR UNION AND COMMUNION

As the Church Gathered

When it comes to godly growth in our individual and corporate life “insight is not change.” It is never enough to know the good and not do it. Where God gives the gift of saving, uniting faith, he likewise ordains to good works. The call is to live out what we profess, to respond to what we recognize scripturally. The Confession gives the perfect context for living out a joyful communion of saints: the church in and out of worship. It is as we are bonded together in “an holy fellowship” (WCF 26.2) that we come to enjoy one another as we perform “spiritual services” done in accordance with our diverse or “several abilities.” This is done to the end that we might experience collective “mutual edification.” Paul’s image of the body joined together (unity) with every joint supplying its part (diversity) comes to mind (1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4).

We need not think about this too philosophically, but commit to participation in the church practically. For it is in the practical coming together as the church, enacting our covenant responsibilities to each other, that we come to enjoy the covenant community. “For the kingdom of God is...righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

As the Church Scattered

There are many ways we can move toward a joyful experience of the communion of saints, ways which arise from scriptural considerations. Here are four exhortations:

Presence

Commit to be present to one another, not solely on the Lord’s Day. Just show up. Echoes of “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves” should always ring in our ears. Faithful, persistent presence is fundamental to covenant keeping. As we promise to be present, we “create a small sanctuary of trust within the jungle of unpredictability.”¹⁸ That sanctuary gives us space to enjoy one another without fear. As westerners have largely lost, but of which our eastern brothers and sisters seem to be so aware, we will come to discover that “feelings” of joy follow faithfulness. Our love and enjoyment of the saints often follows our long-suffering engagement with the saints. Joy might not come in the morning but it will come. In being faithfully present, we will learn to love and enjoy the strangers with whom we find ourselves in covenant community.

Pursuit

More than being present, pursue other believers, especially those who are wildly different from you. If we are to widen our circle of communion to be ever extending “unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus” (WCF 26.2), we must take initiative and pursue others who are not presently in our sphere of fellowship. We must resist having close relationships with only those who are already a mere reflection of ourselves. There is a rare beauty in having joyful, deep, holy fellowship with people for whom the only explanation is that God has united you in Christ by the Spirit. Christ’s own incarnational mission—“For the joy that was set before Him” (Heb. 12:2)—is the greatest example of bridging a chasm of eternal difference ever known. We are sent to pursue an analogically similar kind of joy with others. As Christ said, “As the Father has sent me, so send I you” (John 20:21).

¹⁸ Lewis B. Smedes, “Controlling the Unpredictable – The Power of Promising,” *Christianity Today*, December 1, 2002, accessed November 21, 2015, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/decemberweb-only/12-16-56.0.html?sms_ss=facebook&at_xt=4ded2d7c2d2a2b14%2Co.

Practice

In some ways, enjoying one another is an acquired skill that grows as we faithfully practice serving as need and opportunity arise. It is a kind of “training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16) that Paul commends. Like the pianist whose craft is perfected through repetitive, patient attendance to practice, our capacity to enjoy the communion of saints improves as we are formed in habits of faithful service of one another. The church on earth anticipates and is a dress rehearsal for the eternal church of the new heavens and (re)new(ed) earth. Dress rehearsals are needed practice, a “labor [that] is not in vain” in light of upcoming events.

Ponder

We love because he first loved us. Similarly, we enjoy others because God in Christ has first enjoyed us. To know and feel the Father’s pleasure as his beloved will free and enable us to know and love our fellow saints. Those who know the Father’s joy over them, show divine joy to their brothers and sisters. If we forgive as Christ has forgiven us, we enjoy as Christ has enjoyed us. Regularly think on these things. Ponder the position you have and let it fuel your joy of others.

CONCLUSION

Enjoying the communion of saints is an inestimable gift and privilege. It is ours by way of present participation and prefiguration of our coming eternal state where we will belong to that “great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Rev. 7:9-10). May our communion now on earth be as joyful as it is (and will continue to be) in heaven.

What Happened to Me in 1952

Rev. Ken Smith

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BEFORE

I was a graduate of RPTS, installed as pastor of what was then Central-Pittsburgh Reformed Presbyterian Church located in the lower north-side of Pittsburgh. I had been preaching for two years during seminary—at Westmayfield chapel in Beaver Falls, PA and at Parnassus Reformed Presbyterian Church in New Kensington, PA. As far as I knew, no one had come to Christ. During those days, my good friend Roy Blackwood and I wondered: our respective calls were with pain, yet plain. Why were we called into this dying branch of His church? We prayed for His answer.

The work at Central-Pittsburgh was challenging and I was feeling the pressure of preparations. I was not sure that I could fulfill what I longed for: a fruitful ministry. I felt quite unprepared and had told my professors of my frustration. That produced one good conversation with the president over dinner when I learned his philosophy of teaching. He taught differently on the golf course! But the elders of the church were supportive and faithful. I was grateful for them.

It was 1952. A Billy Graham Crusade was scheduled for September in Pittsburgh, and our Session agreed to participate with prayer, contribution, and participation. (By the way, thirty-six persons from our congregation made “decisions” of one sort or another during that Crusade.) One thing new in this evangelistic effort was what was being called “Follow Up” classes. Graham had sleepless nights concerned for those who had made decisions, so he contacted Dawson Trotman of the Navigators to give him help. Consequently, when the Crusade came to Pittsburgh, they held follow-up sessions for those who wanted to learn what to do with persons who had made decisions for Christ—especially those who made first-time decisions for Christ.

DURING

Robert McConaughy, clerk of our session, who worked in the Gulf building downtown, asked if I would like to attend one of these follow-up meetings. I, of course, said yes, and on Thursday morning at 6:45 a.m. we joined a packed house in 1st Presbyterian Church. Down front a man was talking. He was holding in his hand a mock-up kind of “wheel” and was describing how to care for a new believer. I had never heard anything like this before, and I was intrigued how he freely quoted the Scriptures and described how to help a new Christian learn to live his life in Christ. There was something different about his presentation. There was no challenge at this point. It was more like an explanation of what the Bible says that a new believer needs and how to help him learn to feed on the Word of God, as 1 Peter 2:2 says: “As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word that you may grow thereby if so be you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.”

But then I heard him tell something of how the Navigators began with just a sailor, named Lester, whom Dawson helped to grow. In time, Lester brought another sailor to Dawson to

“follow up.” Trotman told him, “No, Lester, you do it, because if you can’t do it, I’ve failed.” So Lester took him on and taught him. Dawson took on another. It was then that Dawson introduced the word “multiply.” At creation God had made man, male and female, to multiply. Again I was intrigued, even fascinated. As a Reformed Presbyterian I was more acquainted with subtraction. But multiplication? “Is what he’s saying real?” I asked myself. I could hardly believe it. But he kept on quoting the Word and telling of men growing in Jesus. When World War II broke out, they knew of men walking with Jesus on a thousand ships and army bases, all traceable back to Lester! I am thinking: this vision of multiplying is what the Reformed Presbyterian Church is missing! Amazing!

That first session excited me, and I began to follow Trotman every time he spoke to learn more. I drove to the Seminary and told the guys they needed to get to these follow-up meetings—and some of them did! Then one day I heard Trotman speak three times in one morning. As I was listening, it all suddenly made sense. I had been approaching my ministry exactly opposite to what Trotman was describing. When the meeting was over, I was glued to my seat. My neighbor said, “Ken, are you all right?” He looked perplexed when I said, “You know, for the first time in my life I feel all right!” I understood! I understood!

So I went to Dawson, and said that I understood what he was saying. He barked, “How old are you?” I said, “Twenty-five.” Then he said, “We’ve been asking God to raise up men who mean business.” I said, “Well I mean business, but I have a congregation of one-hundred and thirty people across the river, and I need help.” He said, “Would you like to have some time with one of our men?” I leaped at the opportunity, and thus I began meeting regularly with Don Rosenberger, a Navy veteran converted at Pearl Harbor in 1941 who took me by the warm hand, so to speak, and began to show me how to help a new believer. Whether he knew it or not, he was really helping me for the first time in my life learn what it means experientially to walk with Christ and look to Him for growth and ministry on a daily basis.

AFTER

I began to memorize Scripture as I had never done it before! The promises came alive, the warnings significant, the joy unmistakable. I now knew why I was reading the Word: it was to fellowship with the Lord Jesus! Sometimes I say it became communication, not just information. As a consequence my preaching took on a vitality that was obviously evidencing the power of the Risen Christ by His Spirit, and people responded. I began to inquire at the door into their response. “What was particularly helpful? Did it make sense? Can we get together to talk about it?” I found that I no longer feared inquiring into a person’s relationship to Christ, and I also found that many were eager to discuss their inner life. It was not long until people were asking for spiritual help, and now I knew how to help them. I began a weekly Bible study with a couple up in the Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh. Ministry began to blossom! Through Don I learned how to spend personal time with another man one-on-one, with the purpose of his eventually doing the same with other men.

Sometime later I began to ask, “What happened to me?” Trotman had said, “A chain is as strong as its weakest link.” I knew I had found the link that completed my seminary education. But what was it? I could not explain this to others by telling my experience. It was then my colleague Joe Hill put me on to John Murray’s *Principles of Conduct*, particularly the chapter “The Dynamic of the Biblical Ethic.” I had come to experience my union with Christ in His death and resurrection. Out of Jesus flowed my life and ministry—and they still do.

Living in an Abiding Relationship with Christ

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When we ask what it means to live in an abiding relationship with Christ, we should begin by asking a simple question: what does it mean to abide? Well, it quite simply means to “accept or bear,” to “remain or stay,” and to “wait or stand.” The idea then is an uncomplicated one. To abide in a relationship is to continue in that relationship. The continuance may be easily accepted or born with much difficulty. Nevertheless, to think about living in an abiding relationship with Christ is to think about remaining in Christ.

Now, *remaining* or *waiting* is perhaps the single most difficult idea to put into practice. No one wants to wait. I remember watching television and movies growing up wherein the hero would instruct someone to wait or *remain* behind while he went on ahead to secure the bad guys, but inevitably the person whose job it was to remain could not follow that simple instruction. He had to follow the hero! As Christians, however, this is our calling. We are to remain, or abide, in Christ. It is little wonder that the Scriptures put such a premium on *standing*.

So, the question is how to live in an abiding relationship with Christ? How do we stand in Christ? In answering that question we should begin by consulting the Scripture. There are a variety of Biblical passages to which we could turn as we focus in on our topic. Although John 15 is not least among them, but, rather, is the *locus classicus*, it is our purpose here to turn elsewhere. We will look at 1 Peter in order to think through what it means to live in an abiding relationship with Christ and the reasons for doing so will become evident with progress.

The plan is as follows: First, we will set the stage theologically. In other words, we will go through some basic theological training that will prepare us to engage in exegetical cartography of 1 Peter. Second, having our theological bearings as well as a familiarity with the structure of 1 Peter, we will explore the *sitz im leben* or setting of the recipients of this letter and consider why it matters in light of our topic. Finally, we will explore some practical counsel that will help us to abide in Christ.

THEOLOGICAL BASICS: CHRISTOLOGY

We all know the basics of Christology. Christ, the second person of the Trinity, is one person with two natures dwelling in two estates. Now, it is the latter part of the formula that is of concern to us. What are the estates of Christ? It might be better to ask a more basic question first. What does the word estate mean? Estate is a dying word unless we are using it to talk about the remains of the dead. It usually conjures up thoughts of something old and musty. The word “auction” often accompanies “estate” in common parlance. In fact, type the word into your search engine and sentences about real estate will abound. In short, property has become the primary meaning of the word.

However, theologically, the word has enjoyed more precision than is currently the case. In theological discourse today, estate is interchangeable with the word condition. Now, this is not

entirely wrong. Nevertheless, by making these words synonyms theologians lose a vital distinction, which is obviously the bread and butter of theological discourse. Let us take a minute to understand the difference between state and condition.

According to Geerhardus Vos, “A state is the relationship to the judicial power within which one stands.”¹ In other words, state is the result of a judicial relationship. To put it tersely: no judge, no state. However, condition can and does exist in the absence of a state. Vos writes, “A sinful condition can always be conceived of as an inherent quality, even if there were no God in the world...”² Or to put it in another way, there would be a condition even if there were no judge to determine the state.

Let us flesh this out a bit. A sinful condition could be conceived of apart from God’s existence but such is not the case with regard to the state of guilt. In other words, one could be sinful in condition but, apart from God’s judgment, not guilty in state. Guilt is, according to Vos, a judicially imputed, accredited, or reckoned state.³ Therefore, we might say that God as judge ascribes to each one a state which is based on our condition. The state is the objectification of the condition.⁴

This distinction also allows for the transfer of one’s state to another without the individuals sharing the same condition. Consequently, when we speak of Christ’s estate of humiliation we mean that God imputed to Him the state of being guilty in order to become man’s surety.⁵ Therefore, with regard to Christ’s condition He was without sin, but as to His state during His humiliation He was guilty and cursed.⁶

Now, why is this important for us as we think about living in an abiding relationship with Christ? It is important because Peter wants us to understand that the abiding life is lived in union with Christ and that union life is objectified in the Christological paradigm of humiliation and exaltation. In other words, Peter contextualizes the Christian life in terms of Christ’s two estates. Before we think about some of the implications, let us consider now 1 Peter’s exegetical cartography. In other words, let us explore Peter’s Christological contextualization of the Christian life, and there too we will find the humiliation and exaltation of Christ.

EXEGETICAL CARTOGRAPHY

When we open to 1 Peter we are struck by a singular theme: the letter is about suffering and is addressed to those who suffer. In fact, the letter seems to be bookended by that very idea. Peter begins, “In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary you have been distressed by various trials” (1 Peter 1:6), and he matches that statement at the end: “After you have suffered a little while...” (1 Peter 5:10). The letter has rightly been dubbed the Job of the New Testament.

¹ Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics: Vol. 3, Christology*, Translated and ed. by Richard B. Gaffin, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), 183.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 184.

⁶ Ibid.

But Peter goes beyond merely identifying the experience of his recipients. He frames their suffering. How does one frame something like that? Suffering has a tendency to overwhelm, cloud, and confuse the individual perspective. Fear usually has a way of playing its part as well. How does he help them to frame or, perhaps better, to reframe their experience of suffering?

An artist named W.E. Hill popularized what is sometimes called the young lady/old woman illusion. At first, Hill's drawing appears to be a young woman, but after closer inspection it appears to be an elderly woman. Often people find it quite natural to make out the younger woman in the picture, but to see the older woman takes a little more effort. Usually someone has to point out that the side of the young woman's face is the nose of the old woman and that is when the eyes light up in recognition.

That is what Peter does in the structure of his letter. In the midst of his readers' suffering, he points out Jesus. Now, the question remains: how does he do this? How does he fix their eyes in the right place so that they can see Jesus rather than their misery? The first thing that he does is point them to the gospel.

In 1 Peter 1:11, Peter describes the gospel as the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. Now, that ought to perk up your ears. Why? Because he is describing the gospel in terms of Christ's humiliation and exaltation. In fact, that description is used to bookend or to enclose almost the entire letter as well. In 1 Peter 5:1 he writes, "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." Suffering and glory. Clearly, Peter has built his letter around the twofold state of Christ's humiliation and exaltation.

The first thing that Peter does emerges from a pastoral heart. He acknowledged the suffering of his recipients. Here is a valuable lesson for the man given charge over the people of God. In fact, he even closes out the letter with their suffering. However, he has framed the letter's teaching and, better yet, the suffering of the people in the paradigm of Christ's suffering or humiliation and His exaltation. In other words, he contextualizes suffering that will last for a little while in the One whose sufferings have eternal value.

But he does more than that. Secondly, he speaks of their existential participation in the humiliation and exaltation of Christ. He shows his readers their involvement in the same pattern: "But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God" (1 Peter 2:20). In other words, when you experience humiliation for doing what is good and right—presumably for Christ's sake—you also experience a foretaste of the exaltation that is to come. Clearly, Peter is bringing the twofold state of Christ to bear upon their situation.

We find a similar statement in 1 Peter 3:14: "But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed." Here again we find the categories of humiliation and exaltation applied to the recipients. However, notice that Peter makes the connection between Christ's humiliation and exaltation and their suffering explicit. He writes, "But to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation" (1 Peter 4:13). The suffering and glory of Christ will lead us from humiliation to exaltation—something we can taste in this life.

Before moving on, think about what Peter is saying in this verse. Peter describes the recipients of his letter as having a "share in the sufferings of Christ." The word "share" is from the well known *κοινωνέω*, which is the verb form of the more popular *κοινωνία*. So, the idea expressed here is not 'fire hall fellowship'. The word has investment and partnership as its backbone.

In other words, if Matthew and Mark each put up half the money to begin a printing business, they are approximating the Biblical idea of *κοινωνέω*. Together they are investing in the work.

They are sharing the risks. They are enjoying the rewards. This is what Paul had in mind when he thanked God for the Philippians and their participation in the gospel (Philippians 1:5).⁷ In fact, when Paul speaks to the Corinthian church about the Macedonians' giving he says, "For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation (κοινωνίαν) in the support of the saints..." (2 Cor. 8:3-4). These believers begged for the opportunity to have real fellowship or partnership in the Gospel. And, as if to emphasize the point, Peter adds a third and final "if then" type statement in verse 14, "If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed."

PUTTING THEOLOGY AND EXPERIENCE TOGETHER

All of this raises an important question: how can Peter use the estate of Christ's humiliation and exaltation as a paradigm for the believer's suffering, not to mention their impending exaltation? Focusing on Christ's suffering and humiliation, the question may be framed with even more precision. If Christ's humiliation arose from an imputed state of guilt and my humiliation emerges from a sinful condition how can Peter use the former as an archetype for the latter?

There is a twofold answer. First, we must remember that Peter is not identifying Christ's state with our condition. Instead, Peter is helping to see the two analogically. In other words, the believer who shares the state of Christ's justification and yet continues to struggle with the condition of the present age finds his condition analogous to Christ's imputed state. It is in the midst of this struggle that we look to Christ as our example, which is precisely what Peter exhorts us to do saying, "For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps."⁸

The word "example" is used only here in the New Testament. A literal rendering might read "from the writing"—having the idea of being copied from writing. The word functioned well in describing how young children would trace letters in order to learn to write.⁹ This is the sense of it; Christ is to be copied. As though we were children sitting down at a table ready to copy the characters of the alphabet in order to learn how to write, so we are to copy the life of Christ.

This leads to the second point. The focus of Peter's doctrine of union with Christ highlights the *imitatio Christi* rather than the mystical or predestinarian aspect of union. In light of the first point, the reason should be obvious: although Peter is not drawing an identity between Christ's state and our condition, he is nevertheless drawing an analogy between our present condition—suffering for doing good—with Christ's suffering in His imputed state.

Now, two things must be noted here. First, there is absolutely nothing atoning in our suffering—even when we suffer for doing good. Rather, the suffering we experience for doing the good is part and parcel of abiding in Christ. It is a mark of our abiding in Christ. Second, as Peter says, there is no analogy between our sinful suffering and Christ's righteous suffering. Only suffering for doing good can be considered an imitation of Christ's suffering.

Now, all of this raises a very simple and practical question. What qualifies as suffering for doing good? To put it plainly, what type of suffering imitates Christ? What kind of suffering indicates our abiding in Christ? This leads to our next point.

⁷ The word translated participation in the NASB is κοινωνία.

⁸ 1 Peter 2:21. The value of Christ's death was not merely or primarily that of exemplar but penal. However, in this letter Peter's emphasis falls to this particular aspect of our union.

⁹ Paul J. Achtemeier, *I Peter: Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 199.

THE *SITZ IM LEBEN* OF THE LETTER'S RECIPIENTS

It is hard not to wince when opening the pages of this letter. Why? We have already noticed that the letter opens and closes striking the same note; these exiles are suffering. Now it might be helpful to explain why. One of the means of growth and expansion adopted by the Roman Empire was colonization. In fact, colonization was viewed as an important part of maintaining the peace and prosperity of the Empire. Rome would take a group of people and settle them in a distant land and yet they would remain under the legal jurisdiction of Rome.

But who do you send to these colonies? Who would want to go? The answer to that question varied a bit in Roman practice. But there is at least one answer that might be interesting to us. If the emperor or the senate viewed a group of people as troublemakers, those people would be deported to a newly acquired colony or some remote area of the empire. Often in Rome, troublemakers and religious groups were synonymous. Why? Because in Rome, even if a new religious group was tolerated, the tolerance was not total. New religions were considered a menace the moment they took advantage of tolerance in order to disturb the peace, offend accepted Roman morality, or engage in converting native Romans. That was in fact what happened under Emperor Claudius (41-54 AD).¹⁰

The Roman historian Suetonius tells us, "Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome."¹¹ In the latter part of the fifth decade (ca. 49 AD), Claudius had decided that the Jews (at that time not distinguishing between Jew and Christian) had tried his patience long enough and he had them expelled. A reference to this expulsion is made in Acts 18. One of our favorite couples in the New Testament, Aquila and Priscilla, found themselves ejected from Rome as a result.

The reason this explanation is important is that Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, all five regions mentioned in 1 Peter, were colonized by Emperor Claudius.¹² The point is this. It is possible and likely that Peter is writing to a group of people who had become Christians somewhere other than those five regions and Peter had some association with them prior to his writing this first letter. Now these people found themselves, likely as a result of the expulsion of Claudius, resident aliens scattered throughout Asia Minor. Peter writes them a word of encouragement. This is the setting of this letter.

However, Peter did not choose to record this historical background in order to make it an example of what it means to follow Christ in His humiliation. That is not to say that it would not qualify as such, but, at least textually, Peter is unconcerned with how they arrived in these five geographical areas.¹³ Nevertheless, Peter does provide us with examples of what it means to share in Christ's suffering, but these examples, as we will discover, reach into our experience as readers. What are they? The answer may shock you. We share in Christ's suffering when in our ordinary day-to-day lives we do what is right no matter the consequence. Notice Peter's list.

First, he says we are to submit ourselves to every human institution, whether king or governor. Often times, perhaps as a result of our perplexity when dealing with a text like this one, we allow our imagination to run with interpretations. Thus, let me tell you what would be a mistake for

¹⁰ Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 29.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 32. Though debated by scholars, I am accepting that *Chrestus* is a corruption of Christ.

¹² *Ibid.*, 29.

¹³ It should be noted that there are varying interpretations about the exiles and whether the title alien in the opening verse is spiritual or geographical or both.

us. It would be a mistake for us to begin wondering about Peter's philosophy of government. Why? Because, Peter simply does not tell us what type of government has God's approval and what type does not. That is plainly not the focus of these verses. So, if that is not Peter's focus, then what is?

Peter is not concerned with the type of government so much as he is concerned with our behavior living under any government, and, again, government of any type. To put it according to our theme, Peter is concerned with our abiding in Christ while living under a government that does not allow us to do so easily or comfortably. This certainly strikes a chord especially in today's climate of political change.

Second, Peter is concerned with the behavior of a slave. Why? Because, according to Peter, a slave was not only to show respect to the master who showed kindness but also to the unreasonable and perverse master. Peter's intention is to encourage right behavior even on the part of believing slaves.

Third, Peter is concerned with the behavior of wives who find it difficult to live the Christian life in their present marriage arrangement. Peter says in 3:1, "In the same manner, the wife is to submit to her husband." Perhaps a better way, a more textually consistent way, of putting it would be that the wife's reverence for God is her motivation for submitting to her husband—even a harsh husband.

Part of the difficulty is understood in light of cultural expectations for women. For example, a wife was expected to have the same friends as her husband and that has some serious implications. Listen for example, to Plutarch's instruction in his *Advice to the Bride and Groom*:

A wife ought not to have friends of her own, but use her husband's as their common stock. And the first and most important of our friends are the gods. A married woman should therefore worship and recognize the gods whom her husband holds dear, and these alone. The door must be closed to strange cults and foreign superstitions. No god takes pleasure in cult performed furtively and in secret by a woman.¹⁴

Clearly, we see the difficulty of what it means to abide in Christ. But more, we see how it is that the women may have to endure the abuse and rejection of her husband in a way reminiscent Christ's own suffering in 1 Peter 2:21-25.

Fourth, Peter speaks to a husband who seems to have a difficult wife. It appears that the situation is opposite to the previous one; here we likely have a believing husband living with an unbelieving wife. Quite familiar is Solomon's saying about living with a wife who is less than agreeable: It's better to live on the corner of a roof or even a desert than it is to live with her. Elsewhere Solomon equates a contentious woman to a constant dripping on a day of steady rain.

Notice what Peter is doing. He is acknowledging the difficulty of the husband's position and then leading him to Christ. It should be obvious by now why 1 Peter 2:21-25 is set down in the midst of these scenarios. Peter is helping us to look at the example of Christ in the midst of our own sufferings—ordinary though they may be. Peter encourages this husband to follow the example of Christ, the one who humbled Himself and when reviled did not revile in return, who, while suffering, uttered no threats but instead kept entrusting himself to the Lord. Peter says that this is the One we are to follow.

¹⁴ Plutarch, *Advice to the Bride and Groom and A Consolation to His Wife*, ed. Sarah Pomeroy (NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 7.

Finally, Peter sums it all up by telling these exiles to be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kind, and humble. What is more, he takes them back to the example of Jesus; they are “not to return evil for evil or insult for insult, but give a blessing instead; for you were called to this very purpose that you might inherit a blessing” (1 Peter 3:9). Peter again returns to the two estates of Christ: humiliation and exaltation. They were called to suffering in the ordinary relationships of life that they might inherit glory.

Now, this ought to minister to each one of us. We may not be exiles from Rome, but we are certainly living under a government which is becoming increasingly unfriendly to our faith, or we are in some form of servitude, or we are married. Peter’s point is absolutely clear. Life, even ordinary life, follows the contour of Christ’s twofold estate, which raises our next point.

PRACTICAL COUNSEL FOR AN ABIDING LIFE

Earlier we saw that 1 Peter is built upon the two estates of Christ. What is more, we saw that abiding in Christ is, at least in part, following the example of Christ and seeing our suffering in light of His suffering. However, this is not an abstract theological concept. In fact, good Biblical theology and systematic theology are rooted in the text of Scripture and such is the case here. What are the pastoral implications?

First, we need to remember that our humiliation and exaltation in Christ are in God’s timing. Notice how wonderfully Peter sets this out. In 1 Peter 1:10-12, he states that the prophets made careful searches and inquiries “seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow.” The prophets were not only seeking to know the Christ’s identity but the time of his appearing.

However, in the same chapter, Peter says that the Christ was foreknown before the foundation of the world and has appeared in these last times for the sake of His people. The idea is that the Christ who was known before the foundation of the world appeared at the exact time He was supposed to arrive. Now, why is this important? Because at the end of the epistle Peter says, “Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time.”

That is simply brilliant! Do you see what Peter is doing? He is saying, look at what God did in Christ. Christ was revealed to you at the proper time in all of his suffering with the anticipation of glory to follow! And now, Peter is saying, follow him. Humble yourselves before God that he might exalt you at the proper time! Your day is coming. It is appointed. You feel only humiliation now but glory is coming. It is coming in God’s time. You can trust God for the details of your life—even when you are suffering.

Second, Peter wants us to see and understand that the connection between the suffering and glory of Christ and our own is made by apostolic witness. In other words, Peter is connecting what the prophets inquired into and the angels longed to see with his own apostolic office. He does this in two ways. In the first place he shifts the meaning of the suffering and glory of Christ. In the opening chapter it is a description of the gospel. However, in 1 Peter 5 the glory extends into the future. Second, he sets himself apart from that of a seeker or an inquirer. He is not one like the angels, longing to look. No, he is a witness of the sufferings and a partaker of future glory.

But notice something else. Peter is not setting himself up or apart from everyone else. Notice that he describes himself as a fellow elder and witness. The clear grammatical implication is that the elders are fellow witnesses. The gravity of this point cannot be understated. Peter traces the suffering and glory from the angels’ desire to see, to the prophet’s inquiries, to his witness and that of the elders in Christ’s church. In other words, when you sit under a pastor faithful to God’s word, you have an immediate connection to the suffering and glorified Christ.

Third, and very pastorally, Peter encourages us to cast the cares of our humiliation upon the humiliated One. This is an important lesson because many people stress over suffering. We have already noticed the types of things that create anxiety, but now the important thing to notice is how to overcome our anxiety about suffering. How do we cast our cares on the Lord?

There are four vital principles that come from 1 Peter 5 that will enable you to be more Christ-like in your living out the humiliation of Christ, and to cast your cares upon God. First, we must learn what it is to cast. Notice something about 1 Peter 5:6-7. Despite the fact that we often read it like two sentences, it is really one sentence, and as a result there is a logic to how these two verses fit together. In order to grasp the logic, it is necessary to understand the translation.. When translating an aorist participle like “casting,” introductory Greek grammars teach that is helpful to insert the word “after” in our translation in order to get the sense of time. Now, if we did that our translation would read something like this, “Therefore, humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, after casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.” Now, that basic principle of translation really opens things up.

We first of all see the need to cast our cares upon God and only then can we talk about what it means to humble ourselves. Until we are ready to cast those cares on Him we remain prideful, thinking that we are able to manage on our own.

Maybe you are wondering what it looks like to cast our cares on the Lord. I used to have relatives that lived on the North side of the New River Valley in West Virginia, and when I was young we would visit. I only have a few memories of that time, but one that stands out vividly is my grandfather carrying a saddle to one of the horses and throwing it—or casting it on the horse’s back. That is the sense of this word. In fact, it is used in that exact way in Luke 19:35. The disciples were casting their coats on the back of the donkey that Jesus would ride into Jerusalem. The saddle that my grandfather carried from the barn to the field was his burden to carry. It was a large and awkward old saddle, not easily managed. But when he cast it upon the horse it was no longer his burden to carry. It was on the back of the horse. That is what Peter is wanting us to see here. *What burdens are you carrying that ought to be cast upon the Lord?* That cuts to the heart of things, does it not?

Now, perhaps you are thinking, “Well, that would be me, but you still haven’t told me how to cast. You’ve just told me what it looks like when I do it.” Fair enough, and this leads to the second thing you must notice. Casting our burdens is accomplished by prayer. It is accomplished when we talk to God. This is in fact what Jesus did. Think once again about Gethsemane. There Jesus prayed. He spoke to His heavenly Father. He spoke to Him in the darkness of Gethsemane about His desire to see the cup pass from Him. When He arose from prayer, at least that burden was gone.

At this point, you may be thinking, “Been there, done that, and it doesn’t work. Maybe it worked for Jesus but not for me.” If that is your response, consider another question. Did you ever stop to think that prayer is not just another fix-it tool for your spiritual toolbox but, instead, language, words, and conversation are an opportunity to develop a relationship between you and the covenant God? Have you ever noticed that when a relationship deepens between a husband and wife they do a lot of talking? In talking, they are learning. They are learning facts, birth dates, geography, and experiences, but they are learning more than facts. They are also learning how one another thinks, and how the other person moves logically from A to B. Moreover, they are not just learning methods of thought; through their talk they are harnessing one another’s affections.

What happens when the communication stops? The facts remain and the knowledge of how the other thinks is still there, but the affections begin to wander and sometimes that kind of thing

can lead a man or woman into an affair. Now, that man or woman may well know that what they are doing is wrong but they simply cannot disengage themselves from what they are doing. Why is that? It is because they have stopped communicating with their spouse and started communicating with another person. More to the point, if you have treated prayer more like a tool than the opportunity, that may explain why it does not seem to be effective in relieving the stress of humiliation.

Now, if you do pray and pray regularly, then a third thing happens. You begin not simply to know that you are loved, but you begin *to feel* loved. God has your affections because nothing else has your heart. When we cast our cares upon the one who presently and continuously cares for us, we get a sense of that present and continuous care. There are times when we are just overcome by a sense of His love and keeping power in our lives.

All of this leads to the fourth thing to notice: we are humbled. We humble ourselves after casting our anxiety upon Him. These two things go together. With that comes an interesting point. The text says, “Therefore humble yourselves...” as though humbling is something that we do. But that is not exactly correct. The verb for “humble” is in the passive voice meaning that we receive the action. In other words, it might be better translated “accept humbling.” Why? Because humbling happens when we admit that we cannot deal with our cares alone! Now, the only way that we are going to accept humiliation under the mighty hand of God is if we know that He cares for us because we have been able to cast our cares upon Him. Do you want to learn how to abide in the humiliation of Jesus Christ that you might be exalted at the proper time? Then you must learn to cast your cares upon the Lord.

Experiencing the Fullness of Our Union with Christ at the Lord's Table

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Although there are many doctrinal and historical controversies that swirl about the sacrament of the Lord's Table, and which we might be expected to address when dealing with our experience of fullness of our union with Christ in the sacrament, I wish here to leave those topics to the systematic and historical theologians. Instead, let us turn to focus on a single, biblical theme that has its beginnings in the Old Testament, and comes to fruition in the Lord's Table. That theme, highlighted in 2 Samuel 9, will indeed help us to experience the fullness of our union with Christ in the sacrament. It is the theme of being graciously invited to sit at a king's table, under his mercy and protection.

There are three terms that the New Testament uses to describe the sacrament: Communion, the Lord's Supper, and the Lord's Table. These are not just mere synonyms; each term is well considered by the apostolic writers, and each term is meant to emphasize some aspect of the meaning of the sacrament. Today we will consider the sacrament as it is called the Lord's Table.

This is a unique term because it does not focus on the elements of the sacrament, or even the fact that it is a meal. Instead, our attention is drawn to the table itself and the Lord's ownership of the table. The focal point of the table is built upon longstanding imagery of what a table has always symbolized, in the Old Testament, and throughout history.

First and foremost, a table is a place where a family gathers, where the closeness and intimate fellowship of a family is realized and enjoyed. Psalm 128 paints this memorable picture for us. Describing the blessings of a covenant family, it says, "Your wife will be a fruitful vine in the heart of your house, your children like olive plants around your table." If the table is a symbol of family, then the Lord's Table is certainly a symbol of our adoption as sons and daughters of the Lord. It is not too much to say that, if the table is an integral part of the sacrament, one of the things that is signified and sealed by the sacrament is our adoption into the household of God.

A table is also a place where family structure is acknowledged. Specifically, every table has a "master" in biblical terms. In our terms we talk about the "head" of the table, who is the head of the home. The head of the house is always the head and owner of the table, specifically, and this headship is usually acknowledged in some way at the table. The head of the table almost always sits in a specific seat, or is the one to say the prayer before a meal.

It is no coincidence that, as the family structure has declined in our times, families do not gather as frequently around a table. The symbolism of headship at a table is also beginning to vanish, along with the very idea of headship itself. But, this connection between headship and a table is closely united in biblical imagery, and it is, no doubt, why Paul referred to the sacrament as the "Lord's Table"—in order to emphasize the headship of Christ over His people. When we sit at the Lord's Table, we remember and proclaim not only His death, but also that He is the only king and head of the church.

Another important part of this dynamic of headship over a table is that those who sit at a man's table are under his guardianship and protection. To eat at a man's table is to be cared for by him, as if you were his own family. This is beautifully illustrated in 2 Samuel 9. The chapter begins with David asking the question, "Is there still anyone who is left of the house of Saul that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?" The word translated "kindness" is the Hebrew word *chesed*, which means "covenant faithfulness" or "grace," and is the word most often used to describe God's love for His people. David invited Mephibosheth, the lame grandson of Saul, to eat at his table for the rest of his life. This was to be David's expression of covenant faithfulness for Jonathan's sake. Then, throughout the chapter, the text repeats itself, again and again, using the imagery of a table as the symbol of David's *chesed*. In verse 7 David says, "You will eat bread at my table continually." In verse 10 David says to Ziba, "Mephibosheth will eat bread at my table always." In verse 11 David says, "As for Mephibosheth, he shall eat at my table like one of the king's sons." The text concludes by saying, in verse 13, that Mephibosheth "ate continually at the king's table." The text does not merely mean that David fed Mephibosheth. David could have done that in any number of ways. Instead, the text emphasizes David's table, and how Mephibosheth was given a seat there, which symbolized David's care, provision, and protection—his *chesed*.

All of this imagery comes to bear in a sacrament that is called the Lord's Table. We are reminded not only of His headship, but of His covenant faithfulness toward us. We are under His care and utterly dependent on what He provides—much like lame men sitting at a king's table.

In contrast, the imagery of being beneath a man's table is to be humbled before him. The Canaanite king Adoni-Bezek commented upon his defeat, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off used to gather scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has repaid me" (Judges 1:7). Another Canaanite – one more faithful – will always be remembered for saying, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master's table" (Matt. 15:27). The woman who said these words was commended for her great faith, and her daughter was healed, but she knew that even to be under the Lord's Table would be blessing enough. In the sacrament, we are graciously invited to sit at the table, not gathering scraps, but enjoying His full provision.

Another thing a table symbolizes is the solidarity of faith, whether that faith is true or false. For example, the prophets of Baal and Asherah were said to "eat at Jezebel's table," which was Elijah's way of saying that she gave her full support and allegiance to those false prophets and their false gods (1 Ki. 18:19).¹ The apostle also assumes that a table is a symbol of religious solidarity and a singular allegiance when he writes, "...you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons" (1 Cor. 10:21). We cannot have a divided mind or an equivocal faith, and we cannot serve two masters. The Lord's Table is a symbol of the unique and singular allegiance we have with Christ and His people. As Charles Spurgeon put it, table companions pledge a "mutual fidelity."²

Finally, in terms of symbolism, a table is a biblical metaphor for peace, and being able to enjoy the provision of peace. This point comes out negatively in the imprecatory prayer of Psalm 69:22—"Let their table become a snare for them, and their well-being a trap." The term translated "well-being" in the NKJV is the word *shalom*, which is well known as the Hebrew word meaning "well-being," or "peace." Notice here that "their well-being" or "their shalom" is a parallel term for "their table." Their table becoming a snare means that the wicked may only have an

¹ Interestingly, Elijah said this while talking to King Ahab, Jezebel's husband. By referencing "Jezebel's table," perhaps Elijah meant to say that Ahab had lost his headship, and therefore his table.

² Charles H. Spurgeon, *Till He Come: A Collection of Communion Addresses* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 191.

appearance of peace for a time, but their apparent peace will only turn to judgment. On the positive side, Psalm 23 beautifully pictures a furnished table as the provision of peace from the Lord. That table is said to be prepared “in the presence of my enemies” (Psalm 23:5). This helps us understand what that table symbolizes. In the presence of enemies, those who would persecute and disturb our peace, we are nonetheless provided a table, which is a symbol of the peace we have in Christ. Who reclines at a table and enjoys a meal while enemies look on? It is the same as asking: who really has peace in this tumultuous and dangerous world? Only one who believes in the Prince of Peace and rests in Him. A table is a picture of this peace, and the Lord’s Table is a regular reminder of our peace in Christ – a peace which surpasses all understanding, even in a tumultuous and dangerous world.

To summarize so far, a table is a vastly important biblical symbol. We may sometimes think of a table as just a piece of furniture with a functional purpose, but in biblical imagery, it embodies precious meaning. It is a sign of the closeness of a family and its authority structure; it is a symbol of provision, protection, and peace, under the tutelage of one head; it is also a representation of solidarity and agreement. All of this imagery comes to bear in a sacrament called “The Lord’s Table.”

There is one last element to this Old Testament imagery that we need to consider, which comes from Malachi 1:12. In that passage, the altar in the temple is referred to as “the table of the Lord,” or “the Lord’s table.” This is unique phraseology in the Old Testament, being found only in this one verse, and not a few commentators are tempted to see it as a prophetic reference to the New Testament sacrament. That is perhaps a bit much to conclude; nevertheless, it is a striking term in Malachi, and it may be the source of the term “the Lord’s table” in I Corinthians. At the very least, it reminds us that what took place on the altar of the temple would be fulfilled once and for all by Christ. Our proclamation of this fulfillment is in a sacrament called the “Lord’s Table,” so in one sense, Malachi’s term is anticipatory, if not outright prophetic. However, there must be no confusing the shadow with the substance. In the Scriptures, the altar may have been called the Lord’s Table, but the Lord’s Table is never called an altar. In the Roman Catholic Church, the piece of furniture upon which the sacramental elements sit is referred to as an altar, because the sacrament is actually seen as a re-sacrificing of Christ’s body. It is called an altar because an altar, by definition, is a place of sacrifice. This terminology, and the theology behind it, is positively wrong, even blasphemous. Hebrews 7:27 says that Christ offered up Himself once and for all, as a perfectly sufficient sacrifice, never to be repeated again. To set the bread and the cup on something called an altar is to deny the completion and perfection of Christ’s death.

The Lord’s Supper sits on a table, not an altar. An altar is a place of sacrifice, but a table is a symbol of living headship. The elements we eat symbolize His broken body and shed blood, but we sit at the table of a living Lord, who has a living and gracious headship over us. When we come to His table, what should be on our minds and hearts is His headship—the reality of it, the blessings of it, and the implications of it for our lives. We are not re-sacrificing the body of Christ at an altar; we are submitting to His headship at His table.

Following this imagery, we come now to a most important point. Every table has a head, and that head has the full prerogative to determine who will sit at his table and enjoy the blessings of his provision. Even in our experience, we know that a man has the full right to invite or not invite whomever he wants to sit at his own table. You can not invite yourself. Only the head of the table can do that. Would it not be unnerving, to say the least, if someone walked into your house and sat at your table uninvited? A table guest must be invited, if he is to be welcome.

Even a common man has the sole authority to invite whom he wants to his own table, but now imagine walking into a king’s palace and sitting at his table without an invitation. In 2 Samuel 9, it would have never entered into Mephibosheth’s mind to just appear one night at David’s table

without being invited. Even when he was invited, he could hardly believe it. Now, add the fact that we are not talking about the table of any mere human king. We are talking about the table of the King of Kings, the eternal Son of God and ruler of all nations. If we think of it that way, as we should, it is amazing how many people come to the Lord's Table without ever first asking: am I invited?

Our Savior is clear in His word about who is invited. It is those for whom He died—who, by a living and growing faith, discern the Lord's body as being broken for them, and have examined themselves for such faith, and repented of their sins, and who truly desire a growing measure of God's grace. Those are invited who are truly covered by the righteousness of Christ by faith, and who, with a humble but clear conscience before God, can say, "I trust in Christ alone." This is why Scripture issues a stern warning to examine yourself, lest you come to the Lord's Table uninvited. It is of interest to note that, when Christ instituted the Lord's Supper, He spoke of Judas this way: "The hand of my betrayer is with me on the table" (Luke 22:21). Christ could have referred to His betrayer in any number of ways, but the betrayal of Judas seemed to be so highlighted by the table, where solidarity and loyalty are supposed to be symbolized. For this reason a man is supposed to examine himself before coming to the Lord's Table—faithlessness will only be highlighted by the table, because the table is where loyalty comes to be confirmed.

It would be wrong to think that the invitation to the Lord's Table is solely discerned by the individual. The Lord's Table is a corporate sacrament. After all, a table is for a family, not an individual. The body of Christ, primarily through its elders, must exercise discernment when it comes to the Lord's Table, in order to lovingly prevent those who are yet uninvited from eating and drinking judgment upon themselves. Yet even if the elders of the church have a practical duty to fulfill by guarding the purity of the sacrament, it is important that we jealously guard the sole headship and authority of Christ that is symbolized by His table. Behind His headship at the table stands an even greater reality, which is the fact that salvation is entirely His work, and the saved are entirely of His choosing. If the Lord is sovereign over who He invites to His table, and only those who are saved by His grace are invited, then we are brought back to the fundamental point of the gospel itself—that we are saved solely by the good pleasure of a sovereign God.

While much can be gleaned by looking back at the symbolism of a table in the Old Testament, our Lord also intended for His table to be a pledge of the future state of glory. Upon instituting the sacrament, our Lord quelled a prideful dispute among the disciples with the assurance that those who continued with Him in His trials would "eat and drink at My table in My kingdom" (Luke 22:24-30). This assurance, given to His apostles while still seated at the table, would have been very striking. Christ obviously meant the Lord's Table to be an abiding assurance that we will yet sit with Him at an even greater table when His kingdom comes in its fullest. In this regard, the Lord's Table is a guarantee that His promises are true and His salvation is sure. Not only will we come into His kingdom, but we will come to His table—a place of intimate and joyous fellowship.

Given the fact that the sacrament is invested with this rich, Biblical imagery of a table, Reformed churches have historically been careful to use tables when observing communion.³ John Knox's Anglo-Genevan Psalter specifies the use of a table where every communicant may have a seat. Commenting on Knox's communion practice, Hughes Oliphant Old identifies the importance of the table's symbolism:

³ For a full treatment of this historical practice see Walter Taylor, "As They Sat at Table: Presbyterian Communion Practices," D.Min. diss. (Due West: Erskine Theological Seminary, 2012).

The table is obviously part of the sign. Every man and woman likewise takes his or her place as occasion best affords. Apparently this gathering around the table, and even sitting at the table, was regarded as a most symbolic act. It was seen as a sacramental act. It was one of those visual acts that was of the essence of the sacrament.⁴

Likewise, the *Westminster Directory for the Publick Worship of God* specifies that the communion table be “conveniently placed, that the communicants may orderly sit about it, or at it.”⁵ Consequently, Scottish “communion seasons” were known for being careful to give each person a seat at the table. Larger congregations would often have six or seven seatings at the communion table, and the services could go on for hours before everyone was served.⁶ Even with the logistical problems that inevitably arose, sitting at the Lord’s Table was seen to be as much a privilege as actually partaking of the elements. Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847) was the first in Scotland to openly promote “pew communion” for practical reasons, but the use of tables was always a historic and cherished practice in the Covenanter tradition.

Reformed churches exhibit a mixed practice today, with some still accommodating all the communicants at tables. Others are content that the symbolism of the table is preserved by placing the elements on a smaller table where the pastor officiates, while the communicants partake of the sacrament in pews. I do not intend to make a firm case for either practice. While it would be ideal to have all the communicants sitting around the Lord’s Table, the most important thing, I believe, is to purposefully incorporate a table of some kind into our communion practice, and always find comfort and joy in what that table symbolizes.

When David invited Mephibosheth to eat at his table, we do not necessarily see a prophetic precursor to the Lord’s Supper. What we do see is David, the human forefather of our Savior, an established type of Christ and the king of God’s people, extending his undeserved covenant mercy to a crippled outcast of the house of Saul, which had been rejected by God. King David could have easily ignored him, or even killed him, but he chose to love him. He could have shown his kindness to Mephibosheth in a thousand different, impersonal ways, but nothing could have demonstrated his heartfelt mercy more than to give Mephibosheth a seat at his table. David’s table represented his loving guardianship, his true fellowship, and his abundant provision. He did not just feed Mephibosheth; by inviting him to his table, he adopted him as a son.

Surely we can see a reflection here of David’s greater Son. David could only invite a lame man to his table, whereas Christ could command the lame to stand up and walk. As the greater King of God’s people, Christ extends His covenant mercy to outcast sinners who have no claim to His grace, and who suffer from the death of sin, which is a far greater malady than crippled legs. Our King and Savior also chose to impress His great mercy upon us by inviting us to His table—the Lord’s Table—which embodies His loving guardianship, His true fellowship, and His abundant provision. By inviting us to His table, Christ shows us that He is no distant benefactor; He is a loving Savior who adopts us as His own, who exercises an affectionate headship, and pledges to care for us according to our needs. This is what it means to be invited to the King’s Table.

⁴ Hughes Oliphant Old, *Holy Communion in the Piety of the Reformed Church* (Powder Springs: Tolle Lege Press, 2013), 249.

⁵ *The Westminster Directory: Being a Directory for the Publick Worship of God in the Three Kingdomes*, Ian Breward, intro. (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1980), 385.

⁶ Old, 783.

In conclusion, consider the response of Mephibosheth when he was invited to David's table: "What is your servant, that you should look upon such a dead dog as I?" (2 Sam. 9:8). Every communicant who comes to the Lord's Table should have the same dead-dog humility as Mephibosheth. To sit at the table of the King of Kings, under His loving protection and headship, is a privilege that no sinner deserves. We cannot have enough thankfulness and humility when coming to the Lord's Table. Thomas Watson said it well:

If we would come rightly prepared to the sacrament we must come with humbled hearts...Was Christ humble, who is all purity? And are we proud, who are all leprosy? Oh, let us come with a sense of our own vileness. How humble should he be who is to receive alms of free grace!⁷

⁷ Thomas Watson, *The Lord's Supper* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 50.

Preparing for Our Heavenly Union with God

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Q. 82. What is the communion in glory which the members of the invisible church have with Christ?

A. The communion in glory which the members of the invisible church have with Christ, is in this life, immediately after death, and at last perfected at the resurrection and Day of Judgment. (Westminster Larger Catechism)

At the time of my study and writing of this article, I have been emotionally walking with a lifetime friend and mentor as he fights a battle against a serious form of cancer. Observing someone close to you preparing to meet God moves a discussion such as this one out of the realm of the merely academic and speculative to that of pastoral and personal. So this article is dedicated to Pastor David Long, who first taught me and now is showing me many of the truths which it contains.

CLARIFYING THE DEFINITION OF WHAT IS MEANT BY OUR ‘HEAVENLY UNION WITH GOD’ OR ‘COMMUNION IN GLORY’

As we speak of our heavenly union with God, the modern, rather simplistic thought of “just going to heaven” might cloud our thinking. For this popular Gnostic-like ‘justification by death’ anti-gospel and antichrist message is so popular in our day. In contrast, the teaching of Scripture on this subject is more complex, yet more beautiful, and far more profound than contemporary thought portrays it. As Q. 82 of the Westminster Larger Catechism cited above states, referring to this topic as our “communion in glory,” there are three stages of our heavenly union with God that we must consider.

First, our heavenly union with God involves, in part, our regenerated state. As the catechism states, the communion in glory that the members of the invisible church have with Christ is “in this life.” In the gospel, Christ is our Immanuel or “God with us.” Heaven comes to us in the gospel as God dwells with His people who are His holy temple through the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. This earthly experience of our heavenly union has been the primary focus of the three preceding articles.

The next stage of our heavenly union with God encompasses what is known as the intermediate state. As the Larger Catechism explains, “The communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death is, in that their souls are then made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies...” (WLC 86). This intermediate state is more glorious than our regenerated state as believers experience the direct,

immediate presence of God upon death. However, as the name implies and this catechism answer alludes, the intermediate state is not the completeness of our heavenly union. For, if I may quote this rightly provocative statement from N. T. Wright, “Heaven is important, but it’s not the end of the world.” The catechism states that the third stage of our heavenly communion is where it will be at “last perfected.”

The third stage of our communion in glory is known as our resurrected state. Upon Christ’s glorious return to the earth, the righteous who were with him and those still on earth shall be united to their bodies raised in immortality. Then, as the Larger Catechism explains, “They shall be received into heaven, where they shall be fully and forever freed from all sin and misery; filled with inconceivable joys, made perfectly holy and happy both in body and soul, in the company of innumerable saints and holy angels...” These truths are glorious enough, yet the answer goes on to describe this in relationship to the Trinity, as it states this happiness will “especially” come by being “in the immediate vision and fruition of God the Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, to all eternity” (WLC 90). Sadly, too many treatments on our heavenly union almost equate the second and third stage, not giving full emphasis to the resurrection state.

So as the terms ‘heavenly glory’ and ‘communion in glory’ are used, there is a movement with which this article is primarily concerned, emphasizing where the earlier stages are limited experiences of, and even preparation for, the final one. If a military unit stages a war exercise, there is a glory in that event. Yet the glory of that preparatory event is minuscule in comparison to that army’s full conquest of the enemy and victory celebration. So too the church militant is moving toward becoming the church triumphant, but the fullness of that final state will not occur until the glorious day of Christ’s return and the invisible church’s resurrection when the consummation of the new heavens and new earth takes place. Thus, this sense of movement from one stage to the next is what is meant when we speak of preparing for our heavenly union with God.

Now let us think upon a particular facet regarding the basis for this heavenly union that further highlights this sense of movement.

LAYING FORTH THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR OUR HEAVENLY UNION WITH GOD

In his work on the Trinity, Robert Letham reminds us that there are three unions which “are the very heartbeat of what God is and all that he has done for us.”¹ Letham explains that first and foremost God himself is a being of union. God as one being exists as three persons in a union that is eternal and indivisible, in such a manner that preserves the distinctiveness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit yet also gives them perichoretic knowledge of one another.

The second union regards the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became man in response to the eternal counsel of the Godhead. As such, even now in his resurrected and exalted state Christ has a human body and soul existing in perfect union with his divine personage.

The third is the union we have with Christ in our salvation and is the heavenly union of which we speak. When we are granted faith in Christ and repentance over our sins, Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit comes and “dwells with you and will be in you.” (John 14:17)

These truths are agreed upon and summarized by Thomas Boston:

¹ Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology and Worship* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 466.

There are three mysterious unions in our religion. (1.) The substantial union of the three persons in one Godhead. (2.) The personal union of the divine and human natures in Jesus Christ. (3.) The mystical union betwixt Christ and believers, which is that wherein Christ and believers, are so joined, that they are one Spirit, and one mystical body, 1 Cor. 6:17 and 12:13.²

The implications of these unions are indicated by John Murray when he says:

There is another phase of the subject of union with Christ that must not be omitted. If it were overlooked there would be a serious defect in our understanding and appreciation of the implications of this union. These are the implications which arise from the relations of Christ to the other persons of the trinity and from our relations to the other persons of the trinity by reason of our union with Christ.³

Thus, each of these unions are related, for as Letham states, “The coming of the Holy Spirit is, in effect, the coming of the entire Trinity. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit take up residence with the one who loves Jesus.”⁴ Indeed, in the highly Trinitarian passage of Ephesians 1:3-14, which is just one long sentence in the original Greek, twelve different times Paul refers to our union with Christ by saying “in Him” or “in Christ” as he recounts the blessings of salvation Christ has given to us. Yet Paul does so in such a way that he explains how our union with Christ gives us the experience of the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the sealing power of the Spirit. Proper Christology always brings us to a robust Trinitarianism. To give a corollary to Gregory’s famous statement on the Trinity—on how the one takes our minds to the three and then back again—one cannot meditate on Christ for long without having his mind taken to the Father and the Spirit as well.⁵

What this ultimately should inject into the knowledge of our salvation is that we are being inexorably drawn by each experience of it further into union with God and further toward this union’s consummation as described above. In John 14, Jesus says that the Spirit “will be with you forever” (John 14:16) and that through the Spirit the Father and Son will come to the believer and “make our home with him” (John 14:23). The Triune God makes his home in us ultimately to prepare us to bring us home to him (John 14:1-3). Twenty years after his famous *Discourse on Communion with God*, John Owen added a chapter to his premier work to address this point.

² Thomas Boston, “Of Union with Christ,” in *The Whole Works of the Late Reverend and Learned Mr. Thomas Brooks, Minister of the Gospel at Etterick*, Vol. 1 (Charleston, SC: Forgotten Books, 2012), 546.

³ John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 171.

⁴ Letham, 469.

⁵ John Calvin. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, 1559 edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1.13.17.

Thus, therefore, we see how the Father is in the Son, and the Son in the Father; how they both are in all things, and all things in them: what communion Christ hath with his church; how his church, and every member thereof, is in him by original derivation, and he personally in them, by way of mystical association, wrought through the gift of the Holy Ghost; which they that are his receive from him, and, together with the same, what benefit soever the vital force of his body and blood may yield; — yea, by steps and degrees they receive the complete measure of all such divine grace as doth sanctify and save throughout, till the day of their final exaltation to a state of fellowship in glory with him, *whose partakers they are now in those things that tend to glory*.⁶

This glory we are now tending toward is indescribable in many ways, as John Calvin states in the *Institutes*.

But since the prophecy that death shall be swallowed up in victory (Hosea 13:14), will then only be completed, let us always remember that the end of the resurrection is eternal happiness, of whose excellence scarcely the minutest part can be described by all that human tongues can say. For though we are truly told that the kingdom of God will be full of light, and gladness, and felicity, and glory, yet the things meant by these words remain most remote from sense, and as it were involved in enigma, until the day arrive on which he will manifest his glory to us face to face (1 Cor. 15:54).⁷

So in essence this article is attempting to explain how to prepare for an event that is inexplicable, what angels themselves long to understand. Yet this heavenly union, planted by the Spirit into our hearts at our conversion, grows and sends us onward toward our inevitable destiny. Paul expresses the indescribable nature of our heavenly union when he shares his prayer for the church at Ephesus.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 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. (Ephesians 3:14-19)

Thus, even as we go on seeking to understand this heavenly union, we must pray that we may do so. The people of God are to be filled with all the fullness of God, which will ultimately occur when the perfect comes at the resurrection. With this biblical and theological knowledge, how do we prepare for the consummation of our heavenly union?

INSTRUCTING FURTHER OUR SOULS AND THOSE WHOM WE LOVE IN OUR HEAVENLY UNION WITH GOD

Though many instructions could be given for this preparation, three primary ones will be encouraged here.

⁶ John Owen. “A Vindication of some Passages in a Discourse concerning Communion with God,” *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2010), 285 (emphasis added).

⁷ Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.25.10.

1. Grow in holiness to prepare for this union.

The eternal, holy God is calling each believer through his Holy Spirit to an eternal, holy enjoyment of him. Each battle he wins in mortification and each step he takes in sanctification are movements toward glorification. Yet the believer must live in awareness of this goal. As the Apostle John tells us, “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. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (I John 3:2-3).

In his famous sermon *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*, Thomas Chalmers explains how growth in holiness is aided by seeing it as preparation for heaven. Chalmer’s thesis is that we will only give up an object we love if we have a greater object to love. Thus, he states, “The love of the world cannot be expunged by a mere demonstration of the world’s worthlessness. But may it not be supplanted by the love of that which is more worthy than itself?”⁸ After illustrating this thesis in a variety of ways, he concludes his message by imagining a man “standing on the margin of this green world” and looking beyond into a vast, dark unknown void. He would not be compelled to leave the world he knows for that which is unknown. But then Chalmers holds up another scenario:

But if, during the time of his contemplation, some happy island of the blest had floated by; and there had burst upon his senses the light of its surpassing glories, and its sounds of sweeter melody; - and he clearly saw, that there, a purer beauty rested upon every field, and a more heartfelt joy spread itself among all the families; and he could discern there, a peace, and a piety, and a benevolence, which put a moral gladness into every bosom, and united the whole society in one rejoicing sympathy with each other, and with the beneficent Father of them all. - Could he further see, that pain and mortality were there unknown; and above all, that signals of welcome were hung out, and an avenue of communication was made for him - perceive you not, that what was before the wilderness, would become the land of invitation; and that now the world would be the wilderness?⁹

Only those growing in holiness can be suited for the happiness of heaven. As J.C. Ryle explains:

When an eagle is happy in an iron cage, when a sheep is happy in the water, when an owl is happy in the blaze of noonday sun, when a fish is happy on the dry land, then, and not until then, will I admit that the unsanctified man could be happy in heaven.¹⁰

2. Develop your talents to prepare for this union.

Often teachings on heaven and communion with God are devoid of any sense of the resurrection, and are couched in terms that seem to describe a perpetual intermediate state. Yet the intermediate state is not the resurrected or perfected state. Consider that though there is great glory in heaven as it now exists, it has not yet reached its perfected state.

- The creation of God groans for full redemption.

⁸ Thomas Chalmers, “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection,” *The Works of Thomas Chalmers, D.D.* (Philadelphia: A. Towar, Hogan & Thompson, 1833), 381.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 388.

¹⁰ J.C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Wilmington, DE: Associated Publishers and Authors and London: J. Clarke, 1956), 24.

- Christ, the firstfruits of the resurrection, has not seen the full harvest gathered.
- Christ and his people have not yet been vindicated before the world.
- Believers who have died in Christ have not received their resurrected bodies.
- The wicked have not been judged.
- Satan still roams on this earth has not yet been cast into the lake of fire.
- Heaven's last enemy, death, has not yet been swallowed.

Indeed, the Scriptures indicate that believers who have died in the Lord are aware that heaven has not been brought to its perfected state. In Revelation, John sees the martyrs of the early church crying out with loud voices, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:10). Only at Christ's final return will all things be completed. As Murray states succinctly, "Glorification is resurrection."¹¹

Therefore, the people of God need to live with the resurrected state as the ultimate reality before them. The Bible is clear that our eternal rewards in the age to come depend upon, and are connected to, what we have done in this age in service to Christ (Matthew 25:14-46; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15). Thus, the performance of this work should show an awareness of eternity. There is great need for this teaching to be recaptured lest, without it, we become Gnostic, not seeing that what we do as believers in this life has eternal bearing on our lives in the world to come. Reflecting on what our eternal responsibilities will be is as mysterious as trying to understand what living in an immortal, resurrected body will be like. Yet anyone who desires to prepare themselves for an eternal union with the Triune God of the new heavens and new earth through the mediation of God incarnate should view and use their gifts and opportunities for service in the regenerated state as preparation.

3. Receive suffering as soul-humblings to prepare for this union.

To wean us from this world and humble us in preparation for eternity, God often brings suffering into the life of the believer. We hear the apostle connecting these concepts when he says to the Romans, "If we are 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" (Romans 8:17). Apparently the leaders of the church should be leading in the suffering for Christ's sake but recognize that results in glory. "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed" (1 Peter 5:1). Indeed, all of God's people should take heart in their sufferings and humiliations because of their preparatory nature. "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Corinthians 4:16-17).

Again, Ryle observes the Christian humbling himself for heaven.

¹¹ Murray, 181.

The riper he is for glory, the more, like the ripe corn, he hangs down his head. The brighter and clearer is his light, the more he sees of his shortcomings and infirmities of his own heart. When first converted, he would tell you he saw but little of them compared to what he sees now. Would anyone know whether he is growing in grace? Be sure that you look within for increased humility.¹²

Yet even with these applications before us, thinking merely of an individual preparing himself and others around him to go to heaven upon his death is an insufficient consideration of this subject. “Each saint of God who dies has his own appointed season and therefore his own time to depart and be with Christ. We can see that this event is highly individualized.”¹³ By noting the “highly individualized” nature of our passing from the regenerated state to the intermediate one, Murray is pointing toward the greater and more glorious reality yet to come.

Yet however glorious is the transformation of the people of God at death and however much they may be disposed to say with the apostle that to depart and to be with Christ is far better (cf. Phil. 1:23), this is not their glorification. It is not the goal of the believer’s hope and expectation.¹⁴

LOOKING MORE CLOSELY AT PASTORAL THEOLOGIANS’ EMPHASIS ON OUR HEAVENLY UNION WITH GOD

Murray leads us to one further delineation that must be made regarding this subject. In the contemporary evangelical church, heaven is almost exclusively considered in an individualistic manner. Modern society focuses on an individual’s entrance and experience in heaven almost to the exclusion of corporate considerations.

However, one of the emphases in the Westminster documents is the expression they give to our union with God in more corporate terms. Thus, the Catechism’s statement, expressed in terms of the “communion in glory which the members of the invisible church have with Christ,” gives a driving, Biblical principle for us in contemplating the communal nature of heaven. When Christ prayed his high priestly prayer recorded in John 17, he repeatedly spoke of his followers in such corporate terms reflected in verses such as John 17:24: “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”

Again, Murray says, “This truth that glorification must wait for the resurrection of the body advises us that glorification is something upon which all the people of God will enter together at the same identical point in time.”¹⁵ The church through the ages has never had a joint experience, yet that will occur on the day of the resurrection.

In pastoral theology, this goal of the people of God journeying toward their consummate glory together impacts instruction on caring for the church. One common theme in works on pastoral theology is the idea of pastoral ministry preparing the congregation to be heaven-ready. For instance, in the fourth century, one of the Great Cappadocians Gregory Nazianzen stated this aim of pastoral ministry in full Trinitarian language:

¹² Kenneth Prior, *The Way of Holiness: A Study in Christian Growth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 88.

¹³ Murray, 175

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

The scope of our art is to provide the soul with wings, to rescue it from the world and give it to God, and to watch over that which is in His image, if it abides; to take it by the hand, if it is in danger; or to restore it, if ruined; to make Christ dwell in the heart by the Spirit: and in short, to deify, and bestow heavenly bliss upon, one who belongs to the heavenly host.¹⁶

Gregory then says that the shepherds of God's people must:

feed His flock with knowledge...(so that Christ may) give strength and power unto His people, and Himself present to Himself His flock resplendent and spotless and worthy of the fold on high, in the habitation of them that rejoice, in the splendour of the saints, so that in His temple everyone, both flock and shepherds together may say, Glory, in Christ Jesus our Lord, to Whom be all glory for ever and ever. Amen.¹⁷

Likewise, a millennium later, Martin Bucer framed his guidance for pastoral ministry by explaining what the nature and characteristics of the church are:

Namely, that it is the most united gathering and communion; that its extent is seen in that believers and all the elect are led to Christ the Lord and are built up and provided for, so that they neither lose nor lack any good thing, whether corporal or spiritual, but are constantly led on and encouraged to perfect salvation of body and soul.¹⁸

Though examples could be multiplied, suffice it to say that if the whole of God's people will one day participate together in the consummation of our union with Christ, ministers would do well to prepare them for such a day.

VIEWING MINISTRY TO THE CHURCH AS NECESSARY PREPARATION FOR OUR HEAVENLY UNION WITH GOD

With these truths in mind, ministers should be preparing their sheep for a heavenly glory with God. Three further corporate preparations can be given.

Use each Lord's Day as a stepping stone toward heavenly glory.

As George Swinnock said about the Lord's Day, "Prepare to meet thy God, O Christian!"¹⁹ If the church is on a spiritual pilgrimage to eternity with God, then week-by-week as she gathers for worship each Lord's Day the congregation has taken a step closer to this great event. The minister should emphasize the holiness of the Lord's Day—the holy day, the holy sacraments, the holy Word of God, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the holiness of the saints—to remind the church of its journey toward eternal union with God. Each Lord's Day is bringing the church closer to the Day of the Lord.

¹⁶ Philip Schaff, *Nicene & Post-Nicene Series 2 Vol 7: Cyril Of Jerusalem: Catechetical Lectures, Gregory Of Naziansum: Orations, Sermons, Letters, Prolegomena* (London: A&C Black, 1980), 209.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 227.

¹⁸ Martin Bucer, *Concerning The True Care of Souls*, trans. by Peter Beale (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 6-7.

¹⁹ J.I. Packer, *The Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision for the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 257.

Preach the Word of God corporately to the people.

Often the minister's aim is to make personal applications of the Scriptures. Yet so much of the Bible is written to the congregation of God's people and was to be read and applied corporately. Thus, the minister should not only address each person but also see the whole body of Christ and preach to it corporately. He should urge each member of the church to supply what is lacking in others. If we comprehend in preaching that we are preparing the bride for Christ (Ephesians 5:25-27), for an eternity of dwelling with the Triune God in what Edwards refers to as "the world of love," then we will be deliberately helping them see the Trinity at work in their lives for the sake of the body of Christ.

Structure the service deliberately to be Trinitarian in its essence.

The minister must be intentional in planning the worship service to guide the congregation in this direction the implanted Spirit is taking them. One simple yet effective means of encouraging more heavenly mindedness in the congregation is insuring that names of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are used in the worship service. The Father should be prayed to in the name of the Son as the presence and power of the Holy Spirit is sought. The preaching of Christ should regularly acknowledge the Father's plan and the congregation's reliance on the Spirit's work. Singing should draw attention to the Triune God at work.

Perhaps in the Reformed Presbyterian Church, our eyes have been somewhat blind to this truth when the Psalms are sung. We properly encourage seeing the Christology of the Psalms (Luke 24:27, 44). Yet, does the noting of Christ also include the other persons of the Godhead? Consider the most well know psalm, Psalm 23. We readily recognize the shepherd is Jesus Christ. Yet do we also see the Shepherd is leading us on paths of righteousness that takes us through the valley of the shadow of death to the destination of dwelling forever in the Father's house, just as Jesus promised in John 14:1-3? Do we see that the Shepherd provides through the Spirit the peaceful food of green pastures, the refreshing drink of quiet waters, the anointing of oil upon our heads, and the provision of a table in the midst of enemies? The minister must show the congregation regularly that through Christ we enjoy now this heavenly union even as he leads us toward its final consummation.

Sinclair Ferguson reminds us of this truth when he says,

I've often reflected on the rather obvious thought that when his disciples were about to have the world collapse in on them, our Lord spent so much time in the Upper Room speaking to them about the mystery of the Trinity. If anything could underline the necessity of Trinitarianism for practical Christianity, that must surely be it!²⁰

Being brought to where Christ's death and resurrection ultimately were designed to take us is "the perfect and full communion" (WLC 90).

²⁰ Letham, 375 (see also 423).