

Healthy Churches Have Gospel-Grounded Identity: Colossians 1:28

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INTRODUCTION

Healthy Churches have a Gospel-grounded identity. What we are hoping to show today is that in order for a church to be healthy, it must be grounded in the gospel, and in particular to see its identity grounded in the gospel. To try and get at this topic I would like us to read Colossians 1:28-29 together, 'Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. 29 For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.'

We are living in an age where the truth of the gospel as it was rediscovered at the time of the Reformation is experiencing a resurgence. We are seeing a return of the 5 Solas. We are seeing a true appreciation for the doctrine of justification, that we are forensically declared righteous by the imputation of an alien righteousness, and this received by the monergistically enabled instrumental non-meritorious antecedent condition of faith. And so today we talk about being cross-centred or gospel-centred. But for all this gospel talk I have found in many blogs, books, sermons and ministries that the benefit of justification has stood in the stead of the person of Christ as the gospel. In other words, if you really want to be gospel centred you have to be grounded in more than justification, you need to be grounded in the Christ who justifies. Justification is the hinge upon which all religion turns, we are not diminishing its importance, or detracting from any of the welcome emphasis that it has received. Because we are sinners who stand condemned before a holy God, we have a legal problem and justification is the legal solution to our problem, it is no wonder that it will take centre stage. However, it is my contention that in Paul's mind the architecture of Paul's theology was not centred on justification but on union with Christ. And it is only by tapping into union with Christ that we get a full perspective on the gospel. Sinclair Ferguson in his book *The Whole Christ*, tells us, 'it is reckoned that in the Pauline corpus, *en Christo* occurs eighty three times and *en Kurio* another forty seven times—and this does not include the frequent occurrence of 'in Him'.¹ Writing about another controversy, the Marrow Controversy which was debating the place of repentance in salvation he makes these important points about not separating the benefits of the gospel from the Christ of the gospel. 'The benefits of the gospel (justification, reconciliation, redemption, adoption) were being separated from Christ, who is Himself the gospel. The benefits of the gospel are in Christ. They do not exist apart from Him. They are ours only in Him. They cannot be abstracted from Him as if we ourselves could possess them independently of Him.'

1 Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ, Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters*, p44. Footnote 16.

This separation rarely takes place deliberately as a conscious decision in either doctrinal exposition or gospel preaching; nevertheless it does frequently take place.² Justification has come to take Christ's place at the centre in many people's thinking. I think Michael Kruger's criticism is correct, he says that to focus on Christ's cross work and resurrection which results in justification as the whole Gospel is to have Christ as priest only but not also as prophet and King. The whole gospel is the whole Christ which makes for a whole church. We want to see God's saving work from election to incarnation to death, resurrection, ascension and the heavenly session as well, not only in Christ's cross work. This was Paul's method for making churches healthy. So to understand how we are to be gospel-grounded we need to explore the biblical notion of union with Christ.

Col. 1:28 gets at this point. This is a particularly pertinent verse. Firstly notice that Paul is outlining his own ministry strategy along with the other apostles, we see this in the word 'we.' Him 'we' proclaim. Secondly notice that this method is used in order to present Christians as 'mature' there is the part that speaks to our goal of seeing saints and churches healthy. Paul is seeking mature believers not merely converts. Thirdly, notice the emphasis of Christ-centredness in the statement 'Him we proclaim.' Fourthly, notice the emphasis on this maturity taking place in union with Christ as he speaks about 'that we may present everyone mature in Christ.' Some other important observations that inform this goal are: that Paul uses proclamation, the preached word as the instrument to accomplish his goal. We see that Paul is not a millennial because he does not only preach positively but with warnings, what some might call gospel-threatenings. We see that Paul was a heavily doctrinal preacher who taught with all wisdom. We see that Paul focused on everyone, he overlooked no saint, this point is repeated three times in this verse. Paul as a minister lived a life centred on this goal and work hard for it, 'for this I toil.' We see that he was a minister who was willing to suffer in laying down his life for the elect. We see that he did it depending upon the grace of God, 'struggling with all His energy that He powerfully works within me.' And so Paul's confidence was in 'all His energy' which 'powerfully works' in Paul's life. He saw his feeble words and efforts as working by His power to cause transformation. For those who are ministers or have opportunity to preach, here is your paradigm for ministry.

I won't be able to outline every aspect of Paul's theology but I would like to do two things. I would like to show how looking at the gospel through the lens of union with Christ enriches our gospel grounded identity. And how this identity gives richness and motivation to all our doing as a church.

Let me invite you to look at some familiar doctrines but now through the same lens Paul uses. Let's begin by thinking about election, and how Paul saw this teaching in light of union with Christ. Eph. 1:4-5, 'even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.' Our salvation did not begin with the cross but way back in eternity. Christ as our saviour did not begin to act when He was thirty but in eternity past. We are told that our election was in Christ, 'He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world.' This informs our view of election and puts it in a new light. For example when we view the words 'in love He predestined us' in verse 5 one could think of God's love for the elect abstractly or because we are loved in Christ, as in our representative even then. This gives a different flavour to our notion of love. The nature of the love of our election is the same as the love with which the Father loves His own Son. The our conception of the love of God's predestination is not only

2 Ibid., p42.

informed by God's unchangeable nature, but it is brought home more forcefully when we realise that we are in our election simply participating in the love that the Father is pouring out on His own Son. This is the root of our gospel-grounded identity, we are embedded in the Son as the 12 jewels were embedded in the breastplate of the highpriest and when God pours out His perfect Sonward love in the context of the Trinity, we get drenched in that love. The love of our election is not an alien love that had never existed in God before that sprang into being, but it was the eternal, never changing delight of the Father in the Son. Election which we ordinarily ground in God's unchangeable nature can now also be enhanced and grounded in the love relations of the Trinity. That love which was distant and abstract is now measurable though we see we cannot measure it, His electing love is as strong and unchanging as His love for the Son.

Let's apply this lens of union to justification. If we are thinking about this doctrine correctly we understand justification to be a legal declaration where on account of Christ's alien righteousness imputed to us when we believe, we receive a new legal standing as righteous when once we were criminals. The Roman Catholics objected to this at the time of the Reformation, they said that it was a legal fiction and made a liar of God. They claimed that for God to call something righteous that is not righteous is a lie, so they insisted that righteousness must be imparted and infused not imputed and credited. Here is where the union with Christ lens, as it intersects with the covenantal lens comes to clarify the issue. Paul in Romans 5:12-21 uses the two Adams structure to show how sin and righteousness, life and death come through Federal heads. Being represented by our covenantal heads we receive a real guilt or righteousness not a legal fiction. We are really righteous by virtue of representative union. This lens has apologetic value.

Traditionally as we have explained this great exchange we have tended to abstract it from Christ. Here is a traditional explanation. We think of our sin on the one hand, and Christ's righteousness on the other. And we see a double imputation. All my sin is transferred to Christ and He is *simil iustus et peccator*, both righteous and sinful, righteous by nature, but sinful by imputation. And all His righteousness is transferred to me, and I too am *simil iustus et peccator*, but sinful by nature yet righteous by imputation. To use Luther's illustration I am a dung heap covered in snow where Christ was pure snow covered in dung. Amen!

But the doctrine is sweeter still when we see it as Paul did as justified in Christ. Paul states it in several places, e.g. 2 Cor. 5:21, 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' Romans 8:1, 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.' Notice that the language is not so much something leaving Christ and landing upon us but rather us being grafted into Christ and bound up with Him. In some ways we fall into the differences between the Luther versus Calvin views on the Lord's presence in the supper, we can need to see the traffic as not coming down but going up. The truth of the matter is that Christ does not lose any righteousness, nor even donate it, we are grafted into Christ united to Him, so that all that He is represents us before the Father. We do not merely receive Christ's righteousness like a piece of paper that can be lost but rather we are united to Christ into His mystical body so that Christ is our very righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30). When God wants to look at your righteousness He does not look at you, He looks at His Son. John Bunyan puts it like this, '...the righteousness is still 'in Him'; not 'in us,' even then when we are made partakers of the benefit of it, even as the wing and feathers still abide in the hen when the chickens are covered, kept and warmed thereby.... Indeed this is one of the greatest mysteries in the

world—namely, that a righteousness that resides with a person in heaven should justify me, a sinner, on earth.³

It was this very thought that John Bunyan marks as what his faith clung to when he was converted. Writing about his conversion he says, "One day as I was passing into the field . . . this sentence fell upon my soul. Thy righteousness is in heaven. And methought, withal, I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God's right hand; there, I say, was my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, he wants [=lacks] my righteousness, for that was just before him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, "The same yesterday, today, and forever." Heb. 13:8. Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons; my temptations also fled away; so that from that time those dreadful scriptures of God [about the unforgivable sin] left off to trouble me; now went I also home rejoicing for the grace and love of God."

This grounds our justification. It is not merely a transaction but a person, it is not a piece of paper that can perish or be lost it is the person of Christ who is our righteousness. It is not a new set of clothing that we wear and can muddy but it is the never changing righteousness of Christ. Now ponder this further. Can Christ's righteousness survive judgement day? Wrong question, Christ has already survived judgement day when He died on the cross and the resurrection proves that His righteousness has already passed God's judgement. The righteousness that is ours is already tested, we don't need to worry about the outcome, it is already proven. But there is more, Christ has already faced judgement and been vindicated and cannot be judged again, and we are in Him. There is no double jeopardy with God, Christ cannot stand trial again, therefore our justification is not merely an abstract verdict of righteous passed over us, but Christ's own verdict. It can never be changed, never challenged, and never retried. That is why there is no more condemnation for you because it is impossible to accuse Him, or put Him on trial.

Perhaps now we can appreciate why Paul preaches Christ and tells us to remember that our lives are hidden in Christ, Col. 3:1-4, 'If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.' Do you view your life as embedded in Christ's, bound up with His? You are righteous not merely by His righteousness but in His righteousness, you live not by His life but in His life, you inherit in His inheritance, etc. etc. As the bridegroom becomes one body, one community of property and one family with his wife, Christ is the same to us. For this reason to preach the gospel is to preach the whole person of Christ and not merely the benefit of justification. Col. 2:1-3, 'For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, 2 that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.'

Let's consider adoption. When we become believers we become children of God. Adoption is called by John Murray the highest blessing of our salvation. To have God as our Father is indeed the greatest thing we could ask for as creatures. Yet even this astounding teaching is grounded in our union with Christ and informed by it. If we had to ask the question how

3 Quoted by Robert D. Brinsmead in *Present Truth, The Righteousness of Christ*, p21.

much does God the Father love me, our adoption informs this question. Look at John 17:23, 'I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.' We are loved by God just as Christ was loved. This is a remarkable statement. We would have to apply the distinctions of the hypostatic union to this statement. For we would not want to assume that we are loved as the eternal Son is loved, for we would not want to assume to take that privilege to ourselves. But by virtue of our Spirit union with His humanity which is in turn united to His deity, there will be an overflow. By the Spirit we are united to Christ; Christ the man is united to the Eternal Son; the Eternal Son is united to the Father. Perhaps now by this immersion in Christ and God we know what Peter means when he talks about us partaking of the divine nature.

John 20:17, 'Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Here we see Jesus first message to the disciples after His resurrection and it is the message that God is God to them as He was to the Son, and He is Father to them as He is to the Son. We can use the picture of an orphan being adopted into a family. We would expect in any ordinary situation that the natural son would be loved more, yet this is the striking feature of our adoption. Since we are embedded in the Son, it is as if all the love that God pours out upon His Son is poured out over us. We do not emphasize that we receive this love apart from Christ and have it equal to Christ, but rather because we are in Him we are co-beneficiaries of all He receives.

Perhaps this gives some concrete conception to what Paul prays for when he asks that we would know the dimensions of God's love, Eph. 3:14-19, 'For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith---that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.'

Part Two

Union with Christ is a neglected yet central doctrine and we have been looking at our identities as we are united to Christ as the heart of the gospel. I was asked to continue looking into this issue to bring more light out of it, so it is my pleasure to continue where we left off last week. We are making a biblical response to the justification onlyism that is part of the Reformed resurgence in the church today. We have said that justification is central and important, but making the important thing the only thing leaves us bankrupt in the end. Biblically salvation is pictured more in terms of union with Christ and this lens does not detract from the centrality of justification by faith but enriches it, plus it brings many other wonderful truths into the foreground. So far we have looked at election, justification and adoption in light of our union with Christ, today we are going to change gear and look at other aspects of our union with Christ.

Traditionally there are four ways to think of our union with Christ. In our election we talk of our predestinarian union with Christ. When Christ was incarnate as our representative and He obeyed God's law and died and rose again for us, we look back at what He accomplished for us in terms of what we call representative union. Thirdly, when the Holy Spirit calls us in salvation, the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ in regeneration, and we experience the application of all Christ has done for us, and we will call this, existential union/soteriological union. Finally, when Jesus comes again we will be with Christ forever in eternal fellowship,

and we refer to this as eschatological union. The first two, predestinarian and representative union are legal not experiential. We were not there but Christ was there in a legal and representative capacity. He was standing in our stead in our absence. However, the last two, existential and eschatological union are experienced by us personally. In our last message we covered those benefits that accrue to us on account of Christ's legal union with us, today we focus on the transforming aspect where we participate in that union.

Next we need to look at how the gift of faith and regeneration relates to union with Christ by the Spirit. The testimony of Scripture is that we are dead and cannot come to the Father unless we are drawn by the Spirit. 'Rowland Stedman wrote that the way in which Christ and His people are united is that 'The Lord Christ, by His Spirit, taketh possession of them, and dwelleth in them; and believers through faith of the operation of the Spirit, take hold of Christ, and get into Him; and so they are knit together and become one.' The Lord Jesus 'cometh and taketh up residence in them; and they are enabled to go forth unto Christ, and receive Him as He is offered in the Gospel; whereby they are in Him: and thus this Union is established.' According to Stedman, there are 'two great bonds or ligaments' of this union. On Christ's part, He dwells in the believer by His Spirit. On their part, they apprehend Christ by faith and 'take Him home, as it were, unto themselves.' The first is what Stedman calls a natural bond, while the second he terms a legal bond. The natural bond is the same as the positive element of regeneration.'

Here is one way to view salvation. On the one hand Christ united Himself to me in effectual calling and regeneration. It is when He does this that I experience union with Christ, the life I receive I receive by virtue of being grafted into His resurrection life, 'even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ---by grace you have been saved---;' (Eph. 2:5). It was not merely the imparting of life but a grafting into Christ's. It was this point that I experienced the effects of that life in a new heart. Then and only then did I unite myself to Christ in faith. This faith results from His life in me. In this way we see union with Christ having two aspects. Christ uniting Himself to me and giving me new life by grafting me into His life, and this results in me uniting myself to Christ by faith. All we have done is shown that our regeneration is a resurrection with Christ as we are united to Him.

This perspective gives us great assurance when we think of the nature of the life we live by but it often makes those who are only familiar with justification nervous and think that having regeneration and faith which flow from union precede justification, a bad thing. Since justification is only by faith, faith is prior to justification. The faith we exercise is the receiving of Christ's righteousness not a work of righteousness in and of itself. Prior to faith is the New Birth that enables the faith. So the order is regeneration—faith—justification. The priority of the transformative to the forensic (legal) has led to some questions as to the relationship between justification and union with Christ. If regeneration precedes justification does justification contemplate the inward work of the Holy Spirit as its root? In other words, doesn't union with Christ encourage a view of justification by impartation; that is a view of justification that sees the basis of our righteousness upon a work of the Spirit in us, not a forensic view as seeing our righteousness on the basis of Christ's work *for* us not *in* us? This was the view of the Roman Catholic Church who took a purely logical view of the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation) and they saw justification resulting from the works of love produced by a work of grace in the soul by the Holy Spirit. Robert Letham makes these important remarks: 'Certainly, God imparts His grace to us by the Holy Spirit's transforming us into the image of Christ. But this has nothing to do with our attaining a right *status* with

God. Our justification comes exclusively as a result of the work of Christ, through His obedient life and atoning sufferings and death, sealed and vindicated in His resurrection and ascension. Only faith, looking entirely outside ourselves, is *appropriate* for receiving the gratuitous gift of justification.⁴ In other words, I think what Letham is saying that the object of our faith, faith being the instrument of our justification, is not Christ *in* us but Christ *for* us. An inward work of grace, whether it is regeneration or the union that creates that renovation is not the object of our faith. Faith puts its confidence not in Christ's work in us but for us.

Any introspective viewing of Christ's work in union in us would breed a view of salvation that must first see Christ regenerate us/or united to us, as the thing we put our confidence on for justification instead of viewing Christ's representative life and death as pleasing to God and sufficient to appease His wrath and provide a righteousness that will meet God's requirements. Hyper-Calvinism puts the confidence of our faith not in Christ's representative but transforming work in regeneration or a sense of assurance. Arminianism puts its confidence not in Christ for us but sees the ability to (enabled or not) believe as a work of faith that satisfied a lower legal standard or righteousness. And Roman Catholicism sees justifying faith as faith completed by love that is enabled by the inward working of the Spirit. All three are introspective rather than looking extraspectively to the work of Christ as the grounds of our justification.

Let's look at sanctification. Sanctification has perhaps suffered more than any other doctrine due to the loss of the emphasis on union with Christ. The impression you can get from a justification onlyism is the picture of a Christian as a still totally depraved sinner who is no better than someone who is unregenerate but for the fact that they have Christ's imputed righteousness, and a heart of gratitude to help them do all they need for God. Sanctification is reduced to the role of evidence, it is abstracted from Christ and merely becomes a benefit hanging off another benefit instead of the vital outworking of our union with Christ. Calvin solved this problem by speaking of the duplex gratia, the double grace of justification and sanctification that result from union with Christ. Sanctification is not a secondary effect but a primary effect of union with Christ. Sanctification is not merely the fruit of our gratitude that we show when we consider and become comfortable with our justification, it is much more.

When we are born again Paul tells us in Eph. 2:5 that we resurrected with Christ. That the power at work to bring about new life is a participation in the new age power of Christ's resurrection. This resurrection ensures that we are no longer totally dead sinners in the same way we once were but alive in ways we were once dead. Sin still touches every part but we are not enslaved in every way as we once were. The vitality of this life of Christ, like being hooked up to a dialysis machine gives health and life. The acts of faith and repentance are gifts of this new life giving us new abilities that we could not have while dead in sin. Romans 6 tells us that our baptism is showing that in this new life we have resurrected with Christ and thereby died to sin. This does not mean we are glorified, nor is perfection possible this side of eternity, but Paul brings forward this argument to show why the justified believer cannot continue in sin. There is a new life inside of him, a new ability to obey, a new ability to mortify sin and nurture the fruit of the Spirit. A good illustration is Pinocchio.

4 Robert Letham, *Union with Christ in Scripture, History, and Theology*: 2011, P74.

A big question is what enables and motivates a believer to be holy? We all agree that viewing the wonder of God's grace in our justification produces the joy of the Lord which is our strength in obedience. We could add Chalmers and Pipers emphasis here on the power of a greater affection, whether it is viewing the glory of God or the beauty of Christ as true motivators which capture the heart and enable real obedience from love which pleases God. But in both these cases emotion is the fuel. True it is Spirit taught emotion, but we need to add another truth to these correct motivations. The fact that in Christ we have died to sin, that His vitality is flowing in us to help us to put sin to death and His power is present to bring about the fruits of the Spirit in the barrenness of our fallenness. The truth that Christ's resurrection is the inbreaking of the new age which results in new life overcoming the death that held us and new power helping us to being a transformation into the image of Christ, even now from one degree of glory into another. Paul uses the language of creation to speak about our newness, Eph. 2:10, 'For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.' Notice the emphasis on being created, this is our participation in the new creation in Christ's resurrection, and how this is done in Christ. Notice that we are made new for the purpose of good works. Our good works do not merely say, 'Hey my faith for justification is real,' they say, 'Hey, Christ is alive and I am alive in Him.' As Christ seeks our good deeds for His Father's glory we must see these good works as a crucial part to that end.

We have been looking at Luther's statement, *simil iustus et peccator*, and it is true statement when considering we have a real legal righteousness while still an imperfect sinner. But we can also say alongside this as we view this new reality wrought by our union with Christ in sanctification that we are *partum iustus; partem peccator*. I am borrowing this phrase from Luther as well (Luther's works Vol. 25: 322-323). Because we are newly alive and not totally dead, and now able to yield good works we must do justice to the reality that our union with Christ brings about. We have to acknowledge that the life in us is real, that the fruits of the Spirit are real, and that the good deeds we do in Christ are really righteous in some way though not perfect. To say anything less would be to deny what God says about us in Christ.

The reality of union with Christ must also inform our view of Church. There are several ways in which union with Christ affects our view. Firstly, because every individual Christian is united to Christ by the Spirit, this means that we are as much a part of each other as we are of Christ. There are various types of union. There is the union between Father and Son, we cannot experience this on account that we are not God. There is the union of Christ's divine nature with His human nature, this too is alien to our experience as our union with Christ is not to become one person with Him. There is the union between a husband and wife, this is merely a one flesh union. Then there is the union by the Spirit with Christ in salvation. It is through this union that we are also brought into a true union with one another. For we are all joined to Christ as the head and we are the body. Just as your union with Christ encourages a deeper communion with Him, so this perspective on your union in one body should encourage that we nurture the union that we already have. We must not settle for shallow forms of unity that are merely concerned with external uniformity. We must be one in love, one in mission, one in worship, one in belief and one in mind. The reality of this bond in Christ should be manifest in the new way in which love one another, agree with one another and work with one another like one else but those most closely bound do. Recognise that the people next to you are more permanently brothers and sister in Christ than they are mothers, fathers, husbands, wives and children. Our union as brethren in Christ is eternal the marriage and family bonds are temporary. Pondering what we are as a single family in Christ should spill over into our words, our giving, our

patience, our sacrifice, willingness to be with one another on the Lord's Day and at other times. This is your gospel grounded identity. You are now more permanently joined to the church than your blood.

Let me apply this is just one area. If one part of the body suffers, every part suffers with it, it is the suffering of the one body not the isolated part. If one family member suffers it is the families suffering and felt and owned by all. When someone is sick in the congregation you are personally invested by virtue of your union. When someone has financial problems those are your problems too. We must necessarily apply the truth about ourselves. We are more profoundly unified than any race, political party or affiliation can make us. Be what you are.

Secondly, we must mention how union with Christ should change how we see the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. We understand that these are signs that indicate something that is present by the Spirit not something that is absent. For example, Paul tells us that to participate in the Lord's Table is a spiritual activity not merely a mental one; we have real interaction with Christ's resurrected humanity by the power of the Spirit. There is a real blessing to be had that flows by the Spirit from Christ to us. We do not think that Jesus is bodily present in the elements but that the Spirit unites us to the Christ who is signed in the elements. Baptism and the Lord's Supper promise a blessing in keeping with the reality signified. Because of our union with Christ, these simple things become a means of grace to us. The blessing obtained through these commands had been lost as the doctrine of our union with Christ is lost. Those who have properly emphasized this teaching have also had a high view of the blessings received in them.

Thirdly, on account of our union with Christ the ministry of the word is transformed into more than a mere speech or lecture. Because Christ by His Spirit is active through the preaching of the word, the union we have with Christ is nurtured, nourished and strength pours into us through His Spirit blessed word. Paul puts it this way in 2 Cor. 5:20, 'Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.'

Prayer is also often mentioned as a means of grace along with the sacraments and the Word. And let me only say a very little on this most important topic. We must know the difference between union and communion. Union is what Christ does to us by His Spirit, He brings us into the family and puts His Spirit in our hearts giving us all the position and apparatus we need to now pursue relationship. Communion is taking advantage of our adoption and access and pressing into the God we have been to have a relationship with. The benefits of our union are poured out through the bonds of communion. In other words, pray a lot, worship a lot, spend much time with God and the benefits that are ours in Christ will come to us. Jesus used the picture of the vine. John 15:4-5, 'Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.'

Eschatology is our last look at union. One day Jesus will come again and because we are already united to Him by His Spirit, all that He is in His resurrected humanity, we will become, 1 John 3:2, 'Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.' We will receive all the benefits of holiness, resurrection and inheritance that have only been ours in part. But more importantly we will see Him and have a real fellowship with Him. Faith will give way to sight.

Let's quickly consider how this influences how we see activity as a church.

Firstly, let us think about our good works. Because we are filled with the Spirit of Christ who works within us to will to glorify Christ, and because He strengthens us to act for Christ, those deeds done by Christ's Spirit, for Christ's glory in obedience to Christ's command are acceptable to God in Christ. They are not offered as merit to buy heaven, but on account of our standing as children we are indeed able to do a good deed, though not perfect and it can please the Father though not buy heaven. Our deeds come as it were through Christ Himself to the Father and are qualified by Him to be pleasing. It is for this reason that there are indeed rewards on the last day, for we are not merely offering filthy rags to God, now that we are in Christ our good deeds are not filthy rags.

Secondly, we must see our prayers in the same way. Being in Christ, being motivated and moved by the Spirit of Christ, praying in the name of Christ which every Christian does every time they pray by virtue of their relation to Christ, our prayers come to the Father not from without the Trinity but from within. Remember we are embedded in Christ, we are hidden with Christ in God, our prayers are not from outside of this Trinitarian intimacy come from the Son Himself as we are united to Him, so that all our prayers are passed through His lips or hands as if they were His.

Next we look at suffering. William Hughes, otherwise known as Bill Hughes, came to my bible college as a guest lecturer. If I remember correctly he was speaking on the pastoral ministry. The key thing that stands out for me as I think upon his messages was a story he told. He had recently gone through a very painful time in his church where he has been removed from being the Pastor. It had been a very difficult time and he was extremely depressed. His wife, like Spurgeon's good wife was a support to him and took some paper and put some words on them and put them on the wall facing his bed. So that every day when he put his feet on the floor getting out of bed he would read these words, 'For Him, for them.' These were the words that helped get him through one of the hardest times a man can go through in the ministry.

2 Tim. 2:10, 'Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.' Paul we know endured much, we all the lists very well, but here we see something of his motivation in signing up for more suffering every time he sets foot in a new town, and why he does not throw in the towel when he suffers. Let me unpick a few lines of Paul's thought about suffering so that we can more readily line ourselves up with his willingness to serve the church as ministers.

Romans 8:17, 'and if children, then heirs---heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.'

Please notice that as children we must suffer, that being a child of God does not preclude but include suffering.

Notice further the necessity of suffering with regards to glorification. We will not be glorified unless we suffer. We know that this is not justification by pain, for we are justified by faith, but Paul insists that there is a non-meritorious necessity to suffering. It is the appointed path along which all Christians must walk. Just as good works and sanctification are the necessary way to heaven, suffering is bound up with our Christian obedience. It is the appointed means by which God wants Christians to move from justification to glorification. The necessity for this becomes obvious when we realise that we live at war. We are striving against sin, in a world that will hate us, against the principalities and powers, and any form of faithfulness is antagonistic to the present status quo.

But more profound than the necessity of suffering is the nature of suffering. Paul talks about suffering with Him, not for Him, but with Him. What does he mean? The mystery of

'with Him' lies in Paul's own conversion experience. Remember when Paul was confronted on the Damascus road in Acts 9, Christ said to him, 'And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"' Christ identified the suffering of the church with Himself, he told Paul that the persecutions against the church were done against Jesus Himself as the head of the body as well. Jesus teaches this truth in the parable of the sheep and the goats and reveals that the good or bad deeds done to even the least of the church was done to Him, Matt. 25:40, 'And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

This is not just a figure of speech or hyperbolic speech, we are mystically united to Christ so that He is the head and we are the body, Eph. 2:22-23, 'And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.' It is this union that ensures that all that has happened to our head has happened to us. He has died and has resurrected, and so have we. And likewise when we suffer it is His body that suffers. I am not implying some weird view that makes Christ cringe every time we stub our toes, but rather a unity that makes our sufferings His. So then as we go out into this world and preach the Gospel we are an extension of Jesus doing it.

In fact Paul talks about his own ministerial sufferings as further sufferings of Christ for the church, Col. 1:24, 'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.' There is nothing lacking in Christ's sufferings when it comes to the issue of paying for our sins, but there is still much suffering on the part of Christ's body as we take the message of the Gospel into hostile territory and are persecuted and killed as we go. Paul sees his own suffering for the preaching of the Gospel to bring in the church as Christ's sufferings. In 2 Timothy 2:10 he puts it this way, 'Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.' Paul views his ongoing gospel ministry, as painful as it often was, as the necessary means by which God was calling His elect to Himself. There is no suffering that is too great done in service to the church because it is Christ serving His church through us, and He would not count any task too much.

Paul counts this to be one of the greatest things in the Christian life, listen to the things that he treasures above all else in Phil. 3:8-11, 'Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith--- 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.' In amongst the list of 'the righteousness from God,' 'that I may know Him,' and 'the power of His resurrection,' we find this precious phrase, 'and may share His sufferings.' We can easily understand the desire to have God's gift of imputed righteousness, and to know Jesus face to face, and to know freedom from this life in resurrection, but can you put this on your bucket list, on your list of the things you value more highly than anything else in life? Do you count those things suffered in the cause of the gospel as of highest value? Do you see your suffering for the church and its health as the highest privilege and form of service you can render here on earth? When Paul said, 'to live is Christ,' he meant, 'to live is to serve the church like Christ. We are confronted with the call to enter into a life for others like Christ lived, being willing to suffer, and counting it the highest honour to serve where

Jesus has served, knowing we can never do enough in service for the church which He was willing to die for.

It is this life that God blesses to bring about blessing for others, for unless the seed first dies it cannot bear fruit, listen to how Paul puts it in 2 Cor 4:8-12, 'We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 11 For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 12 So death is at work in us, but life in you.' We partake in His sufferings but we also get the joy of seeing life for others flow as well.

We are not without comfort in our sufferings with Christ. The scriptures tell us that we experience God's blessing in a peculiar way when we suffer with Christ, 1 Peter 4:12-14, 'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.' Paul tells us that we share in God's comforts if we are afflicted, 1 Cor. 1:5, 'For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.' We can be assured that we have Christ with us in our participation in His sufferings.

So if I were to put a sign on my wall to encourage me to continue in faithfulness through suffering, the sign Bill's wife put up was excellent, but we could also put up another one in light of Paul's perspective on ministerial suffering, 'With Him for them.'

In conclusion. In order for the church to be healthy it needs to understand its identity as being grounded in the whole Christ. For the whole gospel is the whole Christ for a whole church.