

The Method of Grace in the Gospel Redemption by John Flavel

Sermon 2.

In which the Union of the Believer with Christ, as a Principal part of effectual application, is stated and practically improved.

Modernized and annotated by William H. Gross www.onthewing.org March 2013

John 17:23.

I in them, and you in me, that they may be made perfect in one.

The design and end of the application of Christ to sinners is the communication of his benefits to them. All communications of benefits necessarily imply communion; and all communion just as necessarily presupposes union with his person. I shall therefore, in this place, and from this scripture, address the mystical union between Christ and believers; this union is the principal act in which the Spirit's application of Christ consists, and of which I spoke (as to its general nature) in the previous sermon.

In this verse (omitting the context) we find a threefold union: one between the Father and Christ, a second between Christ and believers, and a third between believers themselves.

First, *You in me*: This is a glorious ineffable union, and it is fundamental to the other two. The Father is not only in Christ in respect to dear affections, as one dear friend is in another (who is like his own soul); nor is this only *essentially*, in respect to the identity and sameness of nature and attributes which regard Christ is the express image of [the Father's] person, Heb. 1:8. But the Father is in Christ also as Mediator, by communicating the fulness of the Godhead which dwells in Christ as God-man, in a transcendent and singular manner, as it never dwelt nor can dwell in any other, Col. 2:9.

Secondly, *I in them*. There is the mystical union between Christ and the saints, daily. You and I are one essentially;¹ they and I are one mystically: and you and I are one by communication at the Godhead, and by the singular *fulness* of the Spirit to me as Mediator; and they and I are one by my communication of the Spirit to them *in measure*.

Thirdly, From this results a third union *between believers themselves* so that they may be made perfect in one – the same Spirit dwells in them all, and equally unites them all to Christ, as living members [united] to their Head of influence. There must therefore be a dear and intimate union between themselves, as fellow-members of the same body.

Now my business at this time lies in the second branch, namely, the union between Christ and believers. I will gather up the substance of it into the following doctrinal proposition, to which I will apply this discourse.

¹ Christ is speaking.

Doctrine. *That there is a strict and dear union between Christ and all true believers.*

The scriptures have borrowed from the book of nature four elegant and lively metaphors, to help the nature of this mystical union with Christ into our understandings; namely,

1. pieces of timber, being united by glue;
2. a graft taking hold of its stock, making one tree;
3. a husband and wife, joined by the marriage-covenant, becoming one flesh; and
4. the members and the head, animated by one soul, becoming one natural body.

Every one of these is more lively and full than the other: and what is defective in one is supplied in the other; yet none of these singly, nor all of them jointly, can give us a full and complete account of this mystery.

Not the two pieces united by glue as in 1Cor 5:17, “He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit;” “*kollamenos*”, glued to the Lord. For though this cements and strongly joins them as one, yet this is but a faint and imperfect shadow of our union with Christ; for though this union by glue is intimate, it is not vital, as is the union of the soul with Christ.

Not the graft and stock mentioned in Rom. 6:5. For though it is said there that believers are “*sumfutoi*”, implanted or ingrafted by way of incision, and although this union is vital, because it partakes of the vital sap and juice of the stock, yet here too is a remarkable defect. For the graft is of a more excellent kind and nature than the stock; and on that account, the tree is named for the *graft*, as being from the more noble and excellent part. But Christ, to whom believers are ingrafted, is infinitely more excellent than they are, and they are named for *him*.¹

Nor does the conjugal union established by marriage-covenant between a man and his wife, give sufficient account. For though this is exceedingly dear and intimate, so that a man leaves father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two become one flesh – yet this union is dissolvable. It may and must be broken by death; and then the relict² lives alone without any communion with or relation to, the person that was once so dear. But this union between Christ and the soul can *never* be dissolved by death; it abides to eternity.

Nor, lastly, is the head and members that are united by one vital spirit, making one physical body, mentioned in Eph. 4:15-16. For though one soul moves every member, it does not equally knit every member directly to the head; some are nearer and others are farther away. But here every member alike is united nearly to Christ the Head; the weak are as near to him as the strong.

Two things need to be clarified in the doctrinal part of this point.

1. The *reality* of this union.
2. The *quality* of this union.

¹ That is, a tree that has no branches, but has apple branches grafted in, will produce apples; and so it is called an *apple tree*. But we are grafted into Christ, and will receive our fruit from him: thus we are called *Christians*.

² A woman whose husband is dead, especially one who has not remarried.

First, For the reality of it, I will make it apparent that there is such a union between Christ and believers; it is not *ens rationis*, an empty notion or cunningly devised fable, but a most certain demonstrable truth, which appears,

First, From the communion which is between Christ and believers, in this the apostle is express, 1John 1:3 “Truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ;” “*koinonia*”. It signifies such a fellowship or co-partnership as persons have by a joint interest in one and the same enjoyment which is held in common between them. So in Heb. 3:14 we are μέτοχοι “*metochoi*”, partakers of Christ. And in Psa. 45:7 the saints are called מְחַבְּרֵי־יְהוָה “*mechaverecha*,” companions, consorts or fellows of Christ. That is not only in respect to his assumption of our mortality, and investing us with his immortality, but it has a special reference and respect to the unction¹ of the Holy Ghost, or the graces of the Spirit, which believers partake of *with* him and *through* him. Now this communion of the saints with Christ is entirely and necessarily dependent on their union with him, as much as the branch’s participation in the sap and juice depends on its union and coalition with the stock. Take away the union, and there can be no communion, or communications. This is clear from 1Cor. 3:22-23. “All is yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.” Here you see how all our participation in Christ’s benefits is built on our union with Christ’s person.

Secondly, The reality of the believer’s union with Christ is evident from the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to him for his justification. A believer is justified before God by a righteousness outside himself; this is undeniable from Rom. 3:24. “Being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” Christ’s righteousness becomes ours by imputation; this is just as clear from Rom. 4:23-24. But it can never be imputed to us, unless we are united to him, and have become one with him. This is also plainly asserted in 1Cor. 1:30. “But by him you are *in Christ Jesus*, who by God is made to us wisdom and righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.” He communicates his merits to none but those that are in him. From this, all those vain cavils² of the Papists are solidly answered, who dispute against our justification by the righteousness of Christ, and assert that we are justified by our own *inherent* righteousness.

They demand, “How can we be justified by the righteousness of another? Can I be rich with another man’s money, or preferred by another man’s honours?” Our answer is, yes, if that other is my surety or husband. Indeed Peter cannot be justified by the righteousness of Paul; but both may be justified by the righteousness of Christ imputed to them; they are members, jointly knit to one common Head. Principal and surety are one in their obligations under the constructions of law. Head and members are one body; branch and stock are one tree; and it is no strange thing to see a graft live by the sap of another stock, once it is grafted into it.

Thirdly, The sympathy that exists between Christ and believers, proves a union between them. Christ and the saints smile and sigh together. St. Paul in Col. 1:24 tells us that he “filled up what was lacking, τὰ ὑστερήματα ‘*ta ustermata*’ – the remainders of the sufferings of Christ in his flesh.” It is not as if Christ’s sufferings were imperfect (“for by one offering he has perfected forever those that are sanctified,” Heb. 10:14). But in these two scriptures,

¹ Or anointing.

² An evasion of the point of an argument by raising irrelevant distinctions or objections.

Christ is considered in a twofold capacity; he suffered once *in corpore proprio*, in his own person, as Mediator; these sufferings are complete and full; and in that sense he suffers no more. He also suffers *in corpore mystico*, in his church and members; thus he still suffers in the sufferings of every saint for his sake. These sufferings in his mystical body are not equal to the other, either *pondere et mensuria*, in their weight and measure; nor are they designed *ex officio*,¹ for the same use and purpose, which is to satisfy offended justice by their proper merit. Nevertheless, they are truly reckoned to be the sufferings of Christ, because the head suffers when the members do. Without this supposition, Acts 9:5 will never be understood: when Christ, the Head in heaven, cries out, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” when [our] foot was trod upon the earth. How does Christ sensibly feel our sufferings, or we feel his, if there is no mystical union between him and us?

Fourthly, and lastly, The way and manner in which the saints shall be raised at the last day, proves this mystical union between Christ and them. For they are not to be raised as others, by the naked power of God outside them, but by virtue of Christ’s resurrection as their Head, sending forth vital, enlivening influences into their dead bodies, which are united to him as well as their souls. For so we find it in Rom. 8:11. “But if the Spirit of him that raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he that raised Christ from the dead, shall also make your mortal bodies alive by his Spirit that dwells in you” – even as it is in waking from natural sleep; first the spirits in the head begin to rouse and play there, and then the senses and members are loosed throughout the whole body.

Now, it is impossible for the saints to be raised in the last resurrection by the Spirit of Christ dwelling in them, if that Spirit did not knit and unite them to Christ, as members to their head. So then, by all this it is proved that there is a real union of the saints with Christ.

Next, I will endeavour to clarify the quality and nature of this union, and show you what it is according to the weak apprehensions we have of so sublime a mystery. And I will do this in both a general and a particular account of it.

First, More generally, it is an intimate conjunction of believers to Christ, by imparting his Spirit to them, by which they are enabled to believe and live in him.

All divine and spiritual life originates in the Father, and does not come to us except by and through the Son, John 5:26.² To him the Father given to have an “*autodzoë*”, - a quickening enlivening power in himself; but the Son communicates this life which is in him to no one except by and through the Spirit, Rom. 8:2. “The Spirit of life which is in Christ Jesus, has made me free from the law of sin and death.”...The Spirit must therefore first take hold of us, before we can live in Christ; and when he does so, we are then enabled to exert that vital act of faith by which we receive Christ. All of this is made plain in that one scripture, John 6:57. “As the living Father has sent me, and I live by the Father, so he that eats me (that is, by faith applies me) shall live by me.” So that these two, namely, the Spirit on *Christ’s* part, and faith (his work on *our* part), are the two ligaments by which we are knit to Christ.

¹ *Ex officio* – out of Christ’s Priestly office as our Intercessor or Surety.

² **John 5:26** “For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself...”

The Spirit's work unites or grafts a soul into Christ. It is like cutting the graft from its native stock (which the Spirit does by his illuminations and convictions) and attaching it to the living stock. When the soul is thus prepared and enabled (by the infusion of faith) to suck and draw the vital sap, it becomes one with him. Or as the many members in the natural body are all quickened and animated by the same vital spirit, they become one body with the head, which is the principal member. Eph. 4:4, "There is one body and one spirit."

More particularly, we will consider the properties of this union so that we may better understand the nature of it. *And here I will clarify its nature both negatively and affirmatively.*

First, Negatively, by removing all false notions and misapprehensions of it. We say,

First, The saints' union with Christ is not a mere *mental* union, only in conception or notion; but it really exists *extra mentem*, whether we conceive it or not. I know the atheistic world censures all these things as fancies and idle imaginations; but believers know the reality of them. Johns 14:20. "At that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." This doctrine is not fantastic, but scientific.

Secondly, The saints' union with Christ is not a *physical* union, such as exists between the members of a natural body and the head. Our nature indeed is assumed into union with the person of Christ; but it is the singular honour of that blessed and holy flesh of Christ, to be so united as to make one person with him; *that* union is hypostatic; *this* is only mystical.¹

Thirdly, Nor is it an *essential* union or unions with the divine nature, such that our beings are thereby swallowed up and lost in the Divine being. There are indeed some who talk in that wild way of being "godded into God," and "christed into Christ." Those unwary expressions of Greg. Naz.² "*Theopoiein*", and "*Chrisopoiein*", only countenance such daring spirits; but oh, there is an infinite distance between us and Christ, in respect to nature and excellence, notwithstanding this union.

Fourthly, The union I speak of here is not a *federal* union, or a union by covenant only: there is indeed such a union between Christ and believers, but it is consequential to and wholly dependent upon this one.

Fifthly, and lastly, It is not a mere *moral* union by love and affection; we may say that one soul is in two bodies, or a friend is our other self; the lover is beloved in the person; there is also such a union of hearts and affections between Christ and the saints. But this union is of another nature; *that* union we call a moral union, *this* union is a mystical union; *that* union only knits our affections, but *this* knits our persons to Christ.

¹ *Hypostatic*: the essential nature or underlying reality of something. *Mystical*: Having an import not apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intelligence; beyond ordinary understanding. "In the hypostatic union, Christ shares our nature and secures our redemption, but it remains unapplied apart from the other strata of union. The mystical union, standing between the hypostatic and spiritual unions, [is] the definitive engrafting into Christ by faith through the work of the Holy Spirit; and it is this engrafting which forms the context of the communication of Christ's benefits." William R. Edwards, "John Flavel on the Priority of Union with Christ," *Westminster Theological Journal* 74 (2012): 33-58, p. 36

² Gregory Nazianzen (c. 329–390), a 4th-century Archbishop of Constantinople who helped shape Trinitarian theology.

Secondly, Positively.

First, Though this mystical union does not make us one person or essence with Christ, yet it knits our persons most *intimately* and to the person of Christ. The church is Christ's body, Col. 1:24. It is not his natural, but his mystical body; that is to say, his body is a mystery, because it is like his natural body to him. The saints stand to Christ in the same relation that the natural members of the body stand to the head; and he stands in the same relation to them that the head stands in relation to the natural members; consequently, they stand related to one another as the members of a natural body do to each other.

Christ and the saints are not one, as the oak and the ivy that clasps it are one; but as the graft and stock are one – it is not union by adhesion, but incorporation. Husband and wife are not so near, nor body and soul so near, as Christ and the believing soul are near to each other.

Secondly, The mystical union is wholly *supernatural*, wrought by the power of God alone. So it is said in 1Cor. 1:30, “But by him you are in Christ Jesus.” We can no more unite ourselves to Christ, than a branch can incorporate itself into another stock. It is by him, i.e. by God. It is his proper and unique work.

There are only two ligaments or bands of union between Christ and the soul, viz. the *Spirit* on his part, and *faith* on ours. But when we say faith is the band of union on our part, the meaning is not that it is so much our own act, that it springs naturally from us, or is educed¹ from the power of our own wills – for the apostle expressly contradicts that in Eph. 2:8. “It is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.” But we are the subjects of it; and though the *act* is ours on that account, yet the *power enabling* us to believe is God's (Eph. 1:19-20).²

Thirdly, The mystical union is an *immediate* union. It is immediate, not as excluding means and instruments – for several means and many instruments are employed to effect it – but immediate, as excluding *degrees* of nearness among the members of Christ's mystical body.

Every member in the natural body does not stand as near to the head as another, but all the mystical members of Christ's body stand equally near to him: every member, the smallest as well as the greatest, has an immediate coalition with Christ, 1Cor. 1:2. “To the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.” Among the factions in this church at Corinth, those that said, “I am of Christ,” as arrogating Christ to themselves,³ were as much a faction as those that said “I am of Paul,” 1Cor. 1:30. To cure this, he tells them that he is both theirs and ours. Such enclosures are against law.

Fourthly, The saints' mystical union with Christ is a *fundamental* union; it is fundamental by way of sustenance; all our fruits of obedience depend upon it. John 15:4. “As the branch

¹ *Educed*: evoked or drawn from.

² **Eph 1:19-20** ...the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places.

³ *Arrogate*: to make undue claims to having something – they were trying to distinguish themselves from the other believers as if they had Christ and the others didn't; but Christ belongs equally to all believers, and all belong equally to him.

cannot bear fruit unless it abides in the vine, no more can you, unless you abide in me.” It is fundamental to all our privileges and comfortable claims. 1Cor. 3:23, “All is yours, for you are Christ’s.”¹ And it is fundamental to all our hopes and expectations of glory; for it is “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” Col. 1:27. So then, destroy this union, and with it you will destroy all our fruits, privileges, and eternal hopes, in one stroke.

Fifthly, The mystical union is a most *efficacious* union, for through this union the divine power flows into our souls, both to quicken us with the life of Christ, and to conserve and secure that life in us after it is so infused.

Without the union of the soul to Christ, which is to be conceived as the Spirit’s efficient act, there can be no union formally considered; and, without these things, there can be no communications of life from Christ to us, Eph. 4:16.² As there is that “*energeia*”, or effectual working of the spirit of life in every part, which he speaks of here (as though you said that in the first appearances of a new life, a spiritual vitality was diffused through the soul that was missing while the soul was dead in sin). Yet this union with Christ is still as necessary to maintaining it, as it was before to producing it.

For why is it that this life is not again extinguished, and wholly suffocated in us, by so many deadly wounds that are given to it by temptations and corruptions? Surely no reason can be assigned more satisfying than that which Christ himself gives us in John 14:19, “because I live, you also shall live:” daily, while there is vital sap in me the root, you that are branches in me cannot wither and die.

Sixthly, The mystical union is an *indissoluble* union: there is an everlasting tie between Christ and the believer; and in this it is also beyond all other unions in the world; death dissolves the dear union between the husband and wife, friend and friend, indeed, between soul and body, but *not* between Christ and the soul; the bands of this union do not rot in the grave. “What shall separate us from the love of Christ?” says the apostle, Rom. 8:35, 38, 39. He bids defiance to all his enemies, and triumphs in the firmness of his union over all hazards that seem to threaten it. It is with Christ and us, in respect to the *mystical* union, as it is with Christ himself, in respect to the *hypostatic* union. It was not dissolved by his death when the natural union between his soul and body was dissolved. Nor can this mystical union of our souls and bodies with Christ be dissolved, when the union between us and our dearest relations, indeed, between the soul and body, is dissolved by death. God calls himself the God of Abraham, long after his body was turned into dust.

Seventhly, It is an *honourable* union, indeed, the highest honour that can be done to men. The greatest honour that was ever done to our *common nature*, was done by its assumption into union with the second person hypostatically; and the highest honour that was ever done to our *individual persons*, was their union with Christ hypostatically. To be a servant of Christ is a dignity transcendent to the highest advancement among men; but to be a *member* of

¹ 1Cor 3:23 And you *are* Christ's, and Christ *is* God's. [Flavel has extrapolated the underlying principle.](#)

² Eph 4:16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

Christ, how matchless and singular is the glory of it! And yet, all the saints have such honour. Eph. 5:30, “We are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.”

Eighthly, It is a most *comfortable* union: indeed, it is the ground of all solid comfort, both in life and death. Whatever troubles, wants, or distresses befall us, in this is our abundant relief and support: Christ is mine, and I am his.¹ What may not a good soul make out of that! If I am Christ’s, then let him take care for me, and indeed, in so doing, he does but take care for his own. He is my head, and it belongs to him to consult the safety and welfare of his own members, Eph 1:22-23. He is not only a head to his own by way of influence, but to all other things by way of dominion, for their good. How comfortably we may repose ourselves under that cheering consideration, upon him at all times and in all difficult cases!

Ninthly, It is a *fruitful* union; its immediate end is fruit. Rom. 7:4, “We are married to Christ, that we should bring forth fruit to God.” All the fruit we bear before our ingrafting into Christ is worse than none; till the person is in Christ, the work cannot be evangelically good and acceptable to God: “We are made accepted in the beloved,” Eph. 1:6. Christ is a fruitful root, and he makes all the branches that live in him fruitful too, John 15:8.

Tenthly, and lastly, It is an *enriching* union; for by our union with his person we immediately gain an interest in all his riches, 1Cor. 1:30. How rich and great a person do the little arms of faith clasp and embrace! “All is yours,” 1Cor; 3:22. All that Christ has becomes ours, either by communication to us, or by improvement for us: His Father, John 20:17. His promises, 2Cor. 1:20. His providence, Rom. 8:28. His glory, John 17:24. It is all ours by virtue of our union with him.

Thus you see briefly what the mystical union is. Next we shall improve it.²

Inference 1. If there is such a union between Christ and believers, Oh then what transcendent dignity God has put upon believers!

Well might Constantine prefer the honour of being a member of the church, before that of being head of the empire; for it is not only above all earthly dignities and honours, but in some respect, it is above that honour which God has put upon the angels of glory.

Great is the dignity of the angelical nature: the angels are the highest and most honourable species of creatures; they also have the honour to continually behold the face of God in heaven. And yet, in this one respect the saints are preferred to them: saints have a mystical union with Christ as their head of influence, by whom they are quickened with spiritual life, which the angels do not have.

It is true, there is an “*anakefalaiosis*”, or gathering together of all in heaven and earth under Christ as a common head, Eph. 1:10. He is the Head of angels as well as saints, but in different respects. To angels he is a head of dominion and government; but to saints he is both a head of dominion, and of vital influence too; they are his chief and most honourable subjects, but they

¹ Sol 2.16.

² “Improve” here means to expand upon it, or move from the general into the specifics of the topic.

are not his mystical members: they are like the Barons and Nobles in his kingdom; but the saints are like the dear Spouse and Wife of his bosom. This dignifies the believer above the greatest angel. And as the nobles of the kingdom think it is a preferment and honour to serve the Queen, so the glorious angels think it is no degradation or dishonour for them to serve the saints; for they are appointed to this honourable office, Heb. 1:14, to be ministering or serviceable spirits, for the good of those who shall be heirs of salvation. The best servant does not disdain to honour and serve the heir.

Some imperious grantees would frown if some of these persons were to presume to approach their presence; but God sets them before his face with delight, and angels delight to serve them.

Inference 2. If there is such a strict and inseparable union between Christ and believers, then the grace of believers can never totally fail; Immortality is the privilege of grace, because sanctified persons are inseparably united to Christ the Fountain of life: “Your life is hid with Christ in God,” Col. 3:3. While the sap of life is in the root, the branches live by it. Thus it is between Christ and believers. John 14:19, “Because I live, you shall live also.” See how Christ binds up their life in one bundle with his own, plainly intimating that it is as impossible for them to die, as it is for himself to die; he cannot live without them living.

It is true that the spiritual life of believers is encountered by many strong and fierce oppositions. It is also brought to a low ebb in some. But we are always to remember that there are some things which pertain to the essence of that life, in which the very being of it lies, and some things that pertain only to its well-being. All those things which belong to the well-being of the new creature, such as manifestations, joys, spiritual comforts, etc., may fail for a time; indeed, grace itself may suffer great losses and remissions in its degrees, notwithstanding our union with Christ. But still, the essence of it is immortal, which is no small relief to graced souls. When the means of grace fail, as it is threatened in Amos 8:11; when temporary and merely formal professors drop away from Christ like withered leaves from the trees on a windy day, 2Tim. 2:18; and when the natural union of their souls and bodies is suffering, dissolved from each other by death – when that silver cord is loosed,¹ *this golden chain holds firm*, 1Cor. 3:23.²

Inference 3. Is the union so intimate between Christ and believers? How great and powerful a motive is this then, to make us open-handed and liberal in relieving the necessities and wants of every gracious person! For in relieving them, we relieve Christ himself:

Christ personally is not the object of our pity and charity; he is the fountain-head of all the riches in glory, Eph. 4:10.³ But Christ *mystical* is exposed to necessities and wants; he feels hunger and thirst, cold and pains in his body the church; and he is refreshed, relieved, and comforted in their refreshments and comforts. Christ the Lord of heaven and earth, in this consideration, is sometimes in need of a penny; he tells us his wants and poverty, and how he is relieved, Matt. 25:35, 40. Here is a text believed and understood by very few: “I was hungry, and you gave me food: I was thirsty, and you gave me drink: I was a stranger, and you took me in. Then shall the righteous answer, Lord, when did we see you hungry, etc. And the King shall answer, and say to

¹ Ecc 12.6.

² 1Cor 3:23 And you *are* Christ's, and Christ *is* God's. (also Joh 10.29)

³ Eph 4:10 He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.

them, truly I say to you, in as much as you have done it for one of the least of these my brothers, you have done it for me.”

It was the saying of a great divine, that he thought scarcely any man on earth fully understood and believed this truth, and he conceives that as much is hinted in the text itself, where the righteous themselves reply, “Lord, when did we see you sick,” etc. It intimates in the question that they did not thoroughly understand their nearness, indeed, their oneness with Christ for whom they did these things. And indeed, it is incredible that a Christian can be hard-hearted and close-handed to a Christian in need, when in refreshing and relieving them, he truly believes that he ministers refreshment to Christ himself.

O think again and again upon this scripture; consider what forcible and mighty arguments are laid together here to engage relief for the wants of Christians.

Here you see their near relation to Christ; they are mystically one person – what you did to them, you did to me. Here you see also how kindly Christ takes it from our hands, acknowledging all those kindnesses that were bestowed upon him, even to a bit of bread. He is, you see, content to take it as a courtesy, who might demand it by authority, and deprive you of all immediately upon your refusal.

Indeed, here you see one single branch or act of obedience (our charity to the saints) is singled out from among all the duties of obedience, and made the test and evidence of our sincerity in that great day. Men are blessed or cursed according to the love they manifested to the saints in this way.

O then, let none that understand the relation the saints have to Christ, as members to the head, or the relation they have to each other by that, as fellow-members of the same body, to thereafter allow Christ to hunger if they have bread to relieve him, or Christ to be thirsty if they have means to refresh him. This union between Christ and the saints affords an argument to prevail with us beyond all other arguments in the world. I think a little rhetoric might persuade a Christian to part with anything he has, for Christ who parted with the glory of heaven, indeed, who parted with his own blood for that Christian’s sake.

Inference 4. Do Christ and believers make only one mystical person? How unnatural and absurd then are all those acts of unkindness by which believers wound and grieve Jesus Christ! It is as if the hand wounded its own head from which it receives life, sense, motion, and strength.

When Satan strikes Christ by a wicked man, he wounds him with the hand of an enemy; but when Satan’s temptations prevail upon the saints to sin, he wounds Christ as if it were with Christ’s own hand. It is like the eagle and the tree in the fable¹ complained: the eagle that he was wounded by an arrow winged with his own feathers; the tree that it was split apart by a wedge hewn out of its own limbs.

¹ Aesop’s *Fables*.

Now the evil and disingenuity¹ of such sins are to be measured not only by the near relation Christ sustains to believers as their Head, but more particularly from the several benefits they receive from him as such; for in wounding Christ by their sins,

First, They wound their Head of influence, through whom they live, and without whom they would have still remained in the state of sin and death, Eph. 4:16. Shall Christ send life to us, and we return what is death to him! O how absurd, how disingenuous is this!

Secondly, They wound their Head of government. Christ is a guiding as well as a quickening Head, Col. 1:18. He is your wisdom; he guides you by his counsels to glory. But must he be requited² this way for all his faithful conduct? What do you do when you sin, but rebel against his government, refusing to follow his counsels, obeying a deceiver in the meantime, rather than obeying him.

Thirdly, They wound their consulting Head, who cares, provides, and projects for the welfare and safety of the body. Christians, you know your affairs below have not been steered and managed by your own wisdom, but that orders have been given from heaven for your security and supply from day to day. “I know, O Lord (says the prophet) that the way of man is not in himself, nor is it in him that walks to direct his own steps,” Jer. 10:23.

It is true, Christ is out of your sight, and you do not see him. But he sees you, and he orders everything that concerns you. And is this a due requital of all that care he has taken for you? Is this how you requite the Lord for all his benefits? What recompense: evil for good! O let shame cover you.

Fourthly, and lastly, They wound their Head of honour. Christ your Head is the fountain of honour to you. This is your glory, that you are related to him as your head. You are, on this account (as noted before), exalted above angels.

Now then consider how vile a thing it is to reflect the least dishonour upon him, from whom you derive all your glory. O consider and bewail it.

Inference 5. Is there so strict and intimate a relation and union between Christ and the saints? Then surely they can never lack what is good for their souls or bodies.

Everyone naturally cares and provides for his own, especially for his own body. Yet we can more easily violate the law of nature, and be cruel to our own flesh, than Christ can be to his mystical body. I know it is hard to rest on and rejoice in a promise when necessities pinch, and when we do not see where relief will arise from. But O! What sweet satisfaction and comfort a needy believer might find in these considerations, if he would only keep them on his heart in such a day of straits.

First, Whatever my distresses are for quality, number, or degree, they are all known even to the least circumstance, by Christ my Head: He looks down from heaven upon all my

¹ Here it means a betrayal – presenting a false appearance of sharing a common interest.

² *Requited*: paid back or given something in return for what was received.

afflictions, and he understands them more fully than I that feel them. Psa. 38:9, “Lord all my desire is before you, and my groaning is not hidden from you.”

Secondly, He not only knows them, but he *feels* them as well as *knows* them; “We do not have a High-priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities,” Heb. 4:15. In all your afflictions he is afflicted; tender sympathy cannot help but flow from such intimate union. Therefore in Matt. 25:35 he says, “I was hungry, and I was thirsty, and I was naked.” For indeed, his sympathy and tender compassion gave him as quick a resentment, and as tender a sense of their wants, as if they had been his own. Indeed,

Thirdly, He not only knows and feels my wants, but he has enough in his hand, and much more than enough, to supply them all; for all things are delivered to him by the Father, Luke 10:22. All the storehouses in heaven and earth are his, Phil. 4:19.

Fourthly, He bestows all earthly good things, even to excess and redundance upon his very enemies, “They have more than heart can wish,” Psa. 73:7. He is bountiful to strangers; he loads even enemies with these things. And can it be supposed that in the mean time he will starve his own, and neglect those whom he loves as his own flesh? It cannot be. Moreover,

Fifthly, Up to now he has not allowed me to perish in any former straits. When and where has he forsaken me? This is not the first plunge of trouble I have been in; have I not found him to be a God at hand? How often I have seen him in the mount of difficulties!

Sixthly, and lastly, I have his promise and engagement that he will never leave me or forsake me, Heb. 13:5 and John 14:18. This is a promise which has never failed since the hour it was first made. If then the Lord Jesus knows and feels all my wants, and if he has enough and more than enough to supply them, and if he gives even to excess to his enemies, and has not forsaken me up to now, and has promised he never will, then why is my soul disquieted within me?¹ Surely there is no cause for it to be so.

Inference 6. If the saints are so nearly united to Christ, as the members are united to the head, then O how great a sin, and full of danger, for anyone to wrong and persecute the saints! For in doing so, they must persecute Christ himself.

“Saul, Saul, (says Christ) why do you persecute me?” Acts 9:4. The righteous God holds himself obliged to vindicate oppressed innocence, even though it is for wicked men; how much more will he do so when it is a member of Christ? “He that touches you touches the apple of my eye,” Zech. 2:8. And is it to be imagined that Christ will sit still, and allow his enemies to hurt or injure the very apples of his eyes? No, “He has ordained his arrows against the persecutors,” Psalm 7:13.

O it would be better for your hand to wither, and your arm to fall from your shoulder, than it should ever be lifted up against Christ, in the poorest of his members. Believe it sirs: not only your violent actions, but your hard speeches² are all set down upon your Doom’s Day Book; and

¹ Psa 43:5.

² **Mat 12:36** But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.

you shall be brought to account for them in the great day, Jude 15. Beware what arrows you shoot, and be sure of your mark before you shoot them.

Inference 7. If there is such a union between Christ and the saints as has been described, on what comfortable terms then may believers part with their bodies at death?

Christ your Head is risen, therefore you cannot be lost. No, he is not only risen from the dead himself, but he has also “become the first-fruits of those that slept,” 1Cor. 15:20. Believers are his members, his fullness. He cannot therefore be complete without you. A part of Christ cannot perish in the grave, much less burn in hell. Remember, when you feel the natural union dissolving, that this mystical union can *never* be dissolved: the pangs of death *cannot* break this tie. And as there is a peculiar excellence in the believer’s life, so there is a singular support and a peculiar comfort in his death; “To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain,” Phil 1:21.

Inference 8. If there is such a union between Christ and believers, how it must concern every man to test his state – whether he is really united with Christ or not – by examining the natural and proper effects which always flow from this union? Such as,

First, The real communication of Christ’s holiness to the soul. We cannot be united with this root, and not partake of the vital sap of sanctification from him. All that are planted into him, are planted into the likeness of his death, and of his resurrection, Rom. 6:5-6, viz. by mortification and vivification.¹

Secondly, Those that are so neatly united to him, as members to the head, cannot help but love him and value him above their own lives. As we see in nature, the hand and arm will interpose to save the head. The nearer the union, the stronger the affection will always be.

Thirdly, The members are subject to the head. Dominion in the head must infer subjection in the members, Eph. 5:24. We claim in vain to have union with Christ as our head, while we are governed by our own sins, and our lusts legislate for us.

Fourthly, All that are united to Christ bear fruit to God, Rom. 7:4. Fruitfulness is the next end of our union; there are no barren branches growing upon this fruitful root.

Inference 9. Lastly, how much believers are engaged to walk as the members of Christ, in the visible exercises of all those graces and duties which the consideration of their near-relation to him exacts from them. Such as,

First, How content and well-pleased should we be with our outward lot, however providence has cast it for us in this world? O, do not repine.² God has dealt bountifully with you; upon others he has bestowed the good things of this world; upon you, he has bestowed himself in Christ.

¹ *Mortification*: putting to death the deeds of the body (Rom 8.13). *Vivification*: the quality of being active, spirited, or alive and vigorous – that is, having newness of life (Rom 6.4).

² *Repine*: to express discontent.

Secondly, How humble and lowly in spirit you should be under your great advancement! It is true, God has magnified you greatly by this union, yet do not swell. “You do not bear the root, but the root bears you,” Rom. 11:18. You shine, but it is like the stars, with a borrowed light.

Thirdly, How zealous you should be to honour Christ, who has put up so much to honour you! Be willing to give glory to Christ, though his glory were to rise out of your shame. Never reckon that glory which goes to Christ is lost to you. When you lie at his feet, in the most particular heart-breaking confessions of sin, let this please you: that you have given him glory in this.

Fourthly, How exact and circumspect you should be in all your ways, remembering whose you are, and whom you represent! Will it be said that a member of Christ was convicted of unrighteousness and unholy actions? God forbid. “If we say we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie”, 1John 1:6. “And he that says he abides in him, should walk even as he also walked,” 1John 2:6.

Fifthly, How diligent you should be for peace among yourselves, you who are so nearly united to such a Head, and thereby made fellow-members of the same body! The Heathen world was never acquainted with such an argument as the apostle urges for unity in Eph. 4:3-4.¹

Sixthly, and lastly, How joyful and comfortable you should be, to whom Christ, with all his treasures and benefits, is effectually applied in this blessed union of your souls with him! This brings him into your possession. O how great! How glorious a person these weak little arms of your faith embrace!

Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ

Source: <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/m.sion/flamt-03.htm>

¹ Eph 4:3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling.