

§ 11. Doctrine of Salvation
Lecture 8
Metaphors for Mystical Union

We are going to continue our discussion of the mystical union of Christ and his church and examine a couple of New Testament metaphors that are used to express the union that we have with Christ.

The first of these is the relationship between a bride and a groom, or a husband and a wife. As they are united in marriage, they are a symbol of the union of Christ and his church. Paul explains this in Ephesians 5:21-35. Paul writes,

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church; however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Now, this verse in the original context in Genesis referred to the union of the man and his wife in sexual intercourse as they become one flesh in the conjugal act of marriage. But Paul says, in a deeper sense, this verse refers to the union between Christ and his church. The man and the wife become one flesh, and this is a symbol or representation of the intimate, personal union of Christ with his church. So the marriage relationship is a living parable, as it were, of the mystical union that is the subject of this lesson. That is why, I think, the marriage relationship is so sacred to God and must not be violated. This is why adultery or homosexual activity is so abhorrent to God. Because it is a profaning of this symbol of the union of Christ and his church.

A good example of the sacredness of our union with Christ is found in 1 Corinthians 6:15-20. Here Paul talks about the importance of chastity in the marriage relationship as well as for those who are single. In verse 15 of 1 Corinthians 6, Paul says,

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? [Notice the union that we have with Christ. Your bodies are members of Christ.] Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two shall become one flesh.” But he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun immorality. Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body; but the immoral man sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

We see here in Paul’s commands for observing chastity, both within marriage as well as for single people, the importance of our union with Christ and not allowing that to be profaned in any way by making the members of Christ illicitly members of some physical union other than the union between a man and his wife. So the marriage relationship is a living picture of the mystical union. It is no wonder that our Catholic friends see marriage as a sacrament. You can see why it would be regarded in that way in the sense that it pictures the union between Christ and his church.

The second metaphor that we find in the New Testament that also expresses the intimate union of the believer with Christ – one which we’ve already alluded to – is the body with its many members or parts. The way in which the many parts of the body are not independent of one another but rather go to make up one living, functioning organism illustrates our union with Christ.

Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. He writes,

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are

indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unrepresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

So, as Christians, we are members of Christ's body. Just as the body has all of these interdependent parts that function for the whole and each of which is important for the proper functioning of the body, so we, too, make up this one body in Christ and need to care for one another in order that the body of Christ may not be impaired.

Paul also speaks to this analogy in his epistle to the Ephesians 3:4-6. He writes,

When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that is, how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

This is what we saw in Romans 9, you'll remember, that God has sovereignly elected to save all those who place their faith in Christ Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile. Now the Gentiles are also members of the same body with Jewish believers and therefore partakers of the promises in Christ Jesus because they, too, are united with him in Christ.

Then in chapter 4 verses 4-16 Paul goes on to extend this analogy. He says,

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said,

“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.”

(In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may

no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.

Here, now, Christ is said to be the head of this body of which we are the members. As we are in him, submitted to him, and exercising our spiritual gifts in the context of the local church, then the body of Christ locally will be healthy and will build itself up and will grow into maturity. Notice that maturity in Christ is characterized by a stability that is not buffeted and carried about by every wind of doctrine. That emphasizes the importance of a class like Defenders – learning Christian doctrine as part of maturity in Christ.

In the analogy of the body with its many members, we have another symbol of our union with Christ and the importance of exercising our spiritual gift in the context of the body to build up the body of Christ.

So in both the marriage union between a man and his wife and in the body of Christ, headed by Christ himself, we have important New Testament metaphors of our mystical union with Christ.

Next time we'll look at some relationship between the mystical union and salvation and draw some application of this union to our personal lives. Until then may God bless you until we meet again.¹

¹ □ Total Running Time: 16:09 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)