

§ 11. Doctrine of Salvation

Lecture 9

Application of Mystical Union to Our Lives

We want to wrap up our discussion of the mystical union. I'd like to say a word, first, about the relation of mystical union to justification. Our mystical union with Christ plays a crucial role in the atonement theory of the great Swiss Reformed theologian François Turretin (1623-1687). For Turretin our sins are imputed to Christ and his righteousness is imputed to us in virtue of our mystical union with Christ. He writes,

the curse and punishment of sin which he received upon himself in our stead secures to us blessing and righteousness with God in virtue of that most strict union between us and him by which, as our sins are imputed to him, so in turn his obedience and righteousness are imputed to us.

So our mystical union with Christ is the basis of the imputation of our sins to Christ and his righteousness to us. According to Turretin, as long as we remain outside of Christ and Christ remains outside of us then we can receive no benefit from his atoning death. But God has united us with Christ in a twofold way, first naturally (namely, by means of the incarnation we and Christ share a common human nature), and second, mystically (namely, our communion with Christ by grace). In virtue of our union with him we share in the benefits of his atoning death. Turretin writes, "Having been made by God a surety for us and given to us for a head, he can communicate to us his righteousness and all of his benefits." Our union with Christ, he says, is the "cause and foundation" of our sharing in all his benefits, including justification (which consists in the remission of sins and our adoption as sons).

So in Turretin's view the imputation of righteousness is explanatorily prior to the remission of our sins. In virtue of our union with Christ, his righteousness is imputed to us. The imputation of his righteousness to us brings two benefits: the remission of sins and the right to life (which is exactly what justification consists of). If we wish to philosophize correctly, Turretin advises, we must not say that God first remits our sins and afterwards imputes Christ's righteousness to us; rather God first imputes Christ's righteousness to us and afterwards on account of that imputed righteousness remits our sins.

Thus, Turretin's atonement theory has a peculiar explanatory structure: first, we through faith are united with Christ as our head; next, in virtue of our union with Christ, his righteousness is imputed to us; finally, in virtue of his imputed righteousness, our sins are remitted and we are given the right to life, adoption as sons.

Although theologians often appeal to our mystical union with Christ to explain the efficacy of his atonement, such an account seems to be viciously circular. The problem is

that only persons who are regenerate and justified share a mystical union with Christ. It is impossible for an unregenerate and unjustified person to be in Christ. So there is a vicious explanatory circle in Turretin's view: in order to be in mystical union with Christ we must first be justified, but in order to be justified we must first be in mystical union with Christ. Even if our mystical union with Christ is simultaneous with our justification, justification needs to be explanatorily prior to our mystical union and not vice versa.

Let me give an analogy in order to make this explanatory priority clear. Think of the state of being in bankruptcy. Being in bankruptcy does not mean just being in over your head financially. Rather bankruptcy is a legal status for which a company must apply. If a company is legally in bankruptcy, then all its debts are absolved and it is freed from all its obligations and can start a new life. In order for a company to be in bankruptcy, there must be a court order which legally gives the company this status. Now obviously, the court order is explanatorily prior to the company's being in bankruptcy even if they are simultaneous. It is in virtue of the legal declaration of the court that you are in bankruptcy; the court does not issue its declaration in virtue of your being in bankruptcy.

Now analogously, our being in Christ is a kind of legal status which we receive in virtue of God's declaring us to be righteous. It is because of our legal justification by God that we are in Christ. So our mystical union with Christ is not the foundation of our justification; rather our justification is the foundation of our mystical union with Christ.

Were I to teach this section over again, I would have discussed mystical union after regeneration and justification rather than before, as we're doing. For regeneration and justification are explanatorily prior to our mystical union with Christ.

Finally, let me say a few words of practical application of the doctrine of mystical union for our lives. I think all of this is very nicely summarized by Paul in Galatians 2:20. Paul says,

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

I want to read that statement one more time and let you reflect on it by asking yourself: can you put your name in there in the place of "I" and "me"?

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

This expresses the union between Christ and the believer so intimately that here Christ is described as living out his life through us as we abide in him and he abides in us.

This doctrine of the mystical union of the believer with Christ, I think, is tremendously encouraging.

1. It is a source of strength as we go through the adversities and trials of life. As we abide in Christ and he abides in us, we are like the branches of that vine which draw their life from the vine. As long as we are abiding in Christ we can be drawing upon that supernatural strength which is given to us through the indwelling Holy Spirit to get through the trials and adversities of life.

2. We've seen that it is a call to holy living. As we are united with Christ we are called to live out the holiness and sanctification that we properly have in Christ. In Christ, we are redeemed, forgiven, cleansed, we are a new creation in him, and we need now to live that out and to live holy lives separated from sin and do nothing that would profane that sacred union that we have with Christ.

3. It is a summons to closer fellowship with Christ. Insofar as we are in Christ, our union with him is not, as I said, something that is dependent upon our emotional experience day to day. Our subjective experience will rise and fall, will wax and wane. And our union with Christ isn't dependent upon that emotional experience. Nevertheless, insofar as Christ lives within us and we abide in him, I think this is a summons to work out in our experience what we really are in Christ and to draw close to him in prayer, in study of his Word, in fellowship, in worship, and so forth as we try to actualize in our experience what we actually are in Christ.

4. It is a source of security for us as believers. Insofar as we abide in Christ and he in us, we are eternally secure. We are redeemed, we are sealed, we are a new creation, justified, sanctified, and all the rest. So this is a call to stay close to Christ because that is where our security lies. For the believer who is abiding in Christ, nothing can snatch him out of the Lord's hand.

I hope that you have been encouraged by this study of the doctrine of salvation. I think it is a tremendous encouragement to us as we reflect on all of these blessings that we have in Christ and then to live our lives accordingly.

Next time we'll take up a study of the doctrine of regeneration, another important subsection of the locus doctrine of salvation.¹

¹ □ Total Running Time: 14:28 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)