

Pastor Matthew Ude

August 4th, 2019

### The Mystical Union

**Colossians 1:21-29 NKJ** <sup>21</sup> And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled <sup>22</sup> in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight-- <sup>23</sup> if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister. <sup>24</sup> I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, <sup>25</sup> of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, <sup>26</sup> the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. <sup>27</sup> To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. <sup>28</sup> Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> To this *end* I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.

**Having presented to us a clear and wondrous picture of who and what Christ is in verses 15 - 20, Paul now presents us with the mystery of the theosis. Which is that Christ is in us and through that indwelling of Christ we are growing in the image of God.**

The term mystic or mysticism is not often used in our church if it is used it probably conjures up the idea of a gloomy room filled with incense, a man in robe sitting and meditating. The goal of the mystic is to achieve spirituality or enlightenment. His goal is to achieve a type of divinity. This is of course impossible outside of Christ. Yet with Christ this is exactly what we are accomplishing.

The eastern churches have a word for this, "theosis." This means becoming God.

Athanasius, that great defender of the faith taught, "God became man that men might become god."

Paul Gerhard, an accomplished Lutheran theologian and hymn writer, taught: "God became man that we might become divine."

We might be a little uncomfortable with this wording, but we confess the same thing when we teach:

God became the son of man that we might become the son of God.

or

God became the image of man that we might become the image of God.

This mystical union, that is the indwelling of Christ in us, is an important part of our faith and life but it needs to be kept in the right context. Paul teaches us three key lessons in our text today to keep this truth in the correct light.

### **1. Christ for us always comes before Christ in us**

Paul states this unequivocally at the beginning of our text: You were aliens but you were reconciled through his death.

This term "alien" in the Greek does not simply mean a stranger or one who lives far away. Rather the term implies one of a broken relationship. One who was close but now is far away. Like one who was married and is now divorced. Or like a son who ran away but didn't just run away but committed an unspeakable act because of which he can never return to his father. This implies a close relationship that is now broken.

This is much worse than one who is simply a stranger or unknown. With this type of broken relationship there is a hole within us yearning for God. This type of broken relationship always leads to anger and hatred. As Paul says points out we are enemies, that is those filled with hatred. .

We are those who are cut off, divorced, expelled from God, and therefore enemies filled with hatred.

We are filled with hatred in our minds. To the Greek the mind was the symbolic essence of a person. That is what Paul is saying here that hatred of God , that wickedness of actions is the very heart and essence of who and what we are. It is not simply a small part of us but the very essence of us.

This is a relationship that we cannot fix. But which God fixed for us. We are the ones who divorced ourselves from Him, but God reconciled us, brought us back through the death of Christ.

Thus it is Christ who died for us, by which we are saved. Christ for us not Christ in us which saves us.

Nor does the Christ in us ever replace the Christ for us, for Paul continues "if you stand firm in the faith." Notice this standing firm in the faith does not mean the doing of good deeds. For Paul explains "grounded in the hope of the Gospel which you heard."

It is Christ for us which will present us holy and blameless before God in the end. If we remain in that faith, that hope. What faith? What hope? The faith that Christ died for us. Thus Christ for us is the source of our justification. It is not something we start with and later replace with the Christ in us. Christ for us always remains that only source of our salvation.

**We misuse the Mystical Union whenever we attempt to replace the Christ for us with the Christ in us.**

## **2. The indwelling does not replace the external**

Just as the Christ in us can never replace the Christ for us as the source of justification. So also the Christ in us can never replace the external Christ as the source and strength of our faith and life. It is always through the teaching of the word and the use of the sacraments that Christ grows in us and we become the image of God.

Another mistake people make in the correct understanding of the Mystical Union in the church is to think that the Christ in us is more important than the Christ outside us, and that we can replace the outer Christ with the inner Christ. So such people say I have the Holy Spirit in me I don't need the Word.

But notice how Paul stresses over and over again the preaching of the Gospel.

It is the external Christ as he comes to us in his word and sacraments that becomes the internal Christ. that is to say without the constant nourishment of the Word, the Holy Spirit, Christ and faith are cast out of us by our wicked and sinful nature.

Paul reminds us that we must "mortify the flesh."

The glory of our hope, the mystery of our faith, is this that Christ dwells in me. But this is accomplished only through the external Christ in His word and Sacraments

We often talk about the sacramental church. By this we mean that we are church that gathers around the sacraments as our strength and source. The early Christian church did not use the word sacrament but meant the same thing when they talked about the mysteries.

In Paul's letters and in the early church the sacraments were called "the mysteries" because Paul makes it clear that the mystical union, Christ dwelling within us, is given to us in these sacraments.

Thus as we refer to ourselves as a sacramental church, they may well have referred to themselves as a mystical church. Mystical not in the sense that the word is meant today, but meaning those who make proper use of the mysteries, that is the sacraments.

Thus the Mystical Union is wrongly understood when the sacraments become either too important to the exclusion of teaching the word, or too unimportant so that they are regarded as simply a ritual in which nothing really happens.

### **3. This theosis, this becoming of God, means growing in the holiness and righteousness.**

The mormons and eastern mystics also talk about becoming god. But their goal is mistaken. They seek to become like god in authority or in power or in abandonment of the material. Paul and scripture show us that becoming the image of God is to grow in love and righteousness and holiness. It is in these things that we become the image of God.

Thus because Paul grows in the image of God we see him delighting to suffer for others, as he confess in our text: " I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body"

Does this seem odd to you, that Paul would say seemingly, "by my suffering I fill what is lacking in Christ?"

As strange as this may sound it is nothing compared to what Paul has already claimed. That we should be gods. That God should dwell in us. That God should die to reconcile us. All of these things are far more shocking than that Paul should through his suffering fill what is lacking in Christ.

After all it is not Paul who is doing this but Christ who dwells in him. Look at what he says in the last verse, " striving according to His working which works in me mightily." It is God's work , and God's power that is at work though Paul. Even though it is Paul who suffers it is God who accomplishes.

But what Paul means is this:

There is nothing insufficient in the work of Christ. There is nothing lacking in His work of redemption for us. All is paid, all is finished. But now that forgiveness has to be preached, those saints must be brought into the house of God.

There is nothing lacking in the work of Christ, but now His body, which is the church is not yet complete. And for this end Paul suffers and labors that through the preaching of the Gospel the saints might be brought to Christ and Christ might dwell in them and His body might be complete.

Thus once again Christ is all fullness and all fullness dwell in him. He who reigns above the heavens lives in our hearts and is transforming us day by day into His image. For this reason we also with Paul suffer. We suffer for one another. We suffer for the preaching of the gospel. Yet it is not we but Christ who works through us, so that He who is all in all might also be all in all within us as well.

**Amen**