



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 16.7 – The Doctrine of the Election of Grace (Predestination)

The Mystical Union between God and Believers in Christ

The doctrine of the election of grace is a source of great comfort and strength for believers in Christ. Another teaching of God's Word that gives comfort and strength to believers is the teaching that God Himself (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) makes His home in the hearts of all believers in Christ. This teaching is known as the mystical union between God and believers in Christ.

Since there are other unions that are spoken of in Scripture, it is important that we are clear on the differences between these other unions and this mystical union between God and Christians. The apostle Paul told the Athenians that there is a kind of union between God and all persons on earth. This union is a union between the Creator and Preserver of all human beings with the human beings He created. Paul quoted one of the heathen poets who truthfully said: **"We are also His offspring"** (Acts 17:28). Because God **"gives to all life, breath, and all things"** (Acts 17:25), it is true of all human beings that **"He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being"** (Acts 17:27-28). No one, believer or unbeliever, can make a single move or breathe a single breath without the creative and preserving power of God at work within us. We can call this the general cooperation of God with all human beings. We studied this union in chapter 5 on preservation or providence.

Another union that the Bible teaches is the personal union of the two natures in Christ. Jesus is both true God and true man at the same time, and yet He is not two persons but one person. We studied this union in detail in chapter 6 on Christology.

There is also a union between the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper with Christ's own body and blood. This union is known as the sacramental union. This means that as we are partaking of the bread, we are also partaking of the Lord's body, and as we are partaking of the wine, we are also partaking of the Lord's blood. For there is a **"communion"** or fellowship between the material and spiritual elements of the Lord's Supper. We studied this union in chapter 11 on the Lord's Supper.

We also want to distinguish the mystical union of Christ with His believers from other types of mysticism, such as the concept of pantheism, which makes no distinction between the Creator and His creation. Pantheism says that God is all and that all is God. There are other mystical ideas that have been imagined in the minds of men that bear little or no resemblance to the teachings of Scripture. We must be careful not to add or subtract from what God Himself tells us about this mystical union on the pages of holy Scripture.

We consider first the teaching of Jesus Himself, as He consoled His disciples on that Thursday evening before His arrest. After instituting the Lord's Supper in the presence of His twelve apostles, He had a long discussion with them, as recorded in chapters 14-16 of John's Gospel. This is followed by His high priestly prayer, recorded in chapter 17. There are many references to the mystical union in these chapters.

After speaking of the union between Himself and the Father (**"I am in the Father, and the Father in Me"** – John 14:10-11), Jesus went on to say: **"I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever – the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you"** (John 14:16-17). Then Jesus said to them: **"At that day you will know that I am in My Father,**

and you in Me, and I in you” (John 14:20). In response to a question from His apostle named Judas (not Iscariot) Jesus then said: **“If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word: and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make our home with him”** (John 14:23). The context indicates that **“We”** refers at least to God the Father and God the Son, and possibly also God the Holy Spirit as well, since the Holy Spirit was mentioned in a previous verse. Notice that the union Jesus is talking about is a union between God and those who love Jesus and keep (that is, treasure) His word.

In the fifteenth chapter of John’s Gospel we find Jesus using the picture of a vine and its branches to explain the union between Himself and those who believe in Him. **“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing”** (John 15:4-5). The fruit spoken of here is the good that is accomplished by those who are mystically connected to Christ, as the branches are connected to the vine. Without this connection there can be no good fruit. As believers are in Christ, so also Christ is in them, giving them the power and strength to do what is actually good in the sight of God. **“Without faith it is impossible to please Him”** (Hebrews 11:6).

In His prayer to His heavenly Father that followed this discussion with His apostles, Jesus also referred to this mystical union. He prayed: **“I do not pray for these (apostles) alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me”** (John 17:20-23). Notice that as Jesus dwells in each believer individually, and the believers are joined not only to Christ but to one another, as they participate in this mystical union with Christ and God. Since Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dwell in each believer in Christ, so each believer is joined to every other believer, so that all believers together make up a temple of God, the dwelling place of the Most High. This union cannot be seen, even as faith in the heart is not seen, but it is a spiritual reality that we can take comfort in and rejoice in and believe in.

Another illustration that Jesus used to explain the mystical union is the picture of a person eating and drinking. Every believer in Jesus is like a man being sustained by eating Christ’s flesh and drinking His blood. Jesus said: **“Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me”** (John 6:54-57). Jesus is not referring to the Lord’s Supper in these words, and they cannot be understood in that way. Jesus is referring to faith in Him and faith in His saving flesh and His saving blood as the connection between Him and His believers so that they are in Jesus and Jesus is in them.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians: **“Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me”** (Galatians 2:20). Everyone who trusts in the Son of God who gave Himself on the cross to take away our sins can have the same confidence that Paul had and say with Paul: **“Christ lives in me.”** For that reason, Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth: **“Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price”** (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

In his letter to the Romans Paul makes a distinction between **“those who are in the flesh”** (unbelievers) and those who are **“in the Spirit”** (believers in Christ). He writes: **“Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you”** (Romans 8:8-11).

Paul prayed for the Ephesian Christians **“that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height – and to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God”** (Ephesians 3:16-19).

There is no way we can attain this presence of God in us through some kind of mystical experience by incantation or ceremony or ritual. Since faith comes by the hearing of God’s Word, and this mystical union with God is a gift to all believers in Christ, the Holy Spirit is the One who comes to us through the means of grace, bringing Christ and His Father with Him. Because Christ is in every believer and every believer is in Christ, what Jesus will say on Judgment Day to His believers is certainly true: **“Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me”** (Matthew 25:40). And when Paul was the Pharisee Saul, attempting to persecute believers in Christ, the risen Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus and told him: **“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? ... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”** (Acts 9:4-5).

Our Lutheran confession, the *Formula of Concord*, points out that *“this indwelling is a result of the righteousness of faith which precedes it”* (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 572). We should not put our trust for salvation in this indwelling of Christ and the Holy Spirit, but we should put our trust for salvation in Christ’s obedience for us in His life, death, and resurrection. It is through what Christ did for us in His life and death that we are forgiven and enjoy the promise of eternal life. But in times of tribulation and persecution it is a comfort for us to know both that God chose us to be His from eternity and promises to be with us to the end, and that God Himself at the present time is living in us.

Questions

1. What is meant by the mystical union between God and believers in Christ?
2. What is the difference between this mystical union and the cooperation of God with all persons on earth?
3. Prove from Scripture that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit dwell in the believers in Christ.
4. Explain what Jesus meant by the picture of the vine and branches.
5. Explain what Jesus meant by the picture of eating the bread of life.
6. In what way is every believer in Christ a temple of the living God?
7. Why did the risen Christ say to Paul that Paul was persecuting Him?
8. How should we use the mystical union in our daily lives?