

Our problem when we seek union with someone else and seek to gratify our own self is, whose will is going to win? A couple gets married and the minister says, “The two shall become one”—but *which* one? I want it to be *me*. Union with God does not mean that I will get whatever I want. It does not mean the world will bend to my will. It is not the same as being in a constantly good mood.

PARTICIPATION IN CHRIST

As we’ve seen, union is not the loss of the self. And it’s not the gratification of the self. Rather, **it is the participation of the self in the life of God.**

When you enter the Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, you are immediately overwhelmed by the largest stained-glass window built this century. The window is dominated by images of three gardens. The church’s pastor Adam Hamilton says that the story of salvation can be told by these three gardens. The first is the Garden of Eden, where we were invited into union with God and where union was lost.

On the far right is the garden described at the end of the Bible, where the tree of life grows leaves used “for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:2). Union restored.

In the middle is the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus experienced *disunion* from God so that we could be reunited with him.

When I was a boy, my grandmother, who lived with us, had a favorite old hymn called “In the Garden.” She would sing it in her old-lady tremulous voice: “And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own . . .”

Even when that song was popular, it was often criticized for being sentimental, and I suppose it was, but it spoke to my grandmother. She had been a widow many years when she lived with us, and although she did not complain, you could hear the longing and ache in her voice when she sang that song. Salvation is a return to the Garden, a return to union.

We die in isolation. We thrive when we are connected.

We were made for union with God.

This idea can sound esoteric or like an experience reserved for monks and mystics, but you have already tasted it: When you were so caught up in a moment of play, or music, or work, or creating, or relating that was so filled with life that you lost all concern for yourself and yet felt more yourself than ever. When you knew yourself to be not alone. When you were drawn toward being your best self. When you were overcome with gratitude or joy. When you were surrendered.

C. S. Lewis writes that not only do we long for beauty, we long for something else so deep, it can hardly be put into words —“to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.” Now we hardly ever taste such a thing. But “all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get *in*.”^[10]

As we saw earlier, the apostle Paul never talks about how to become a Christian, but he does talk about being “in Christ” or about Christ being in us. A search of the New Testament turns up more than 150 instances of the phrase.[11] Where did this idea of being “in Christ” come from, and what does it mean? Richard Hays writes that the foundation of Paul’s thought was not some abstract doctrine but the very narrative of the gospel story about Jesus. “Paul’s readers have come to *participate* in the story of Jesus.”[12]

Klyne Snodgrass puts it like this: “In Paul’s understanding, Christian identity derives from being in Christ, from participation in Christ. . . . Participation is *the* essential ingredient in Christianity.”[13]

Paul experienced this participation so deeply that he could say things like “I am no longer living, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Martin Luther said, “You are so cemented to Christ that He and you are as one person, which cannot be separated but remains attached to him forever.” His wife, Katharina, put it more simply when she said on her deathbed, “I will stick to Christ as a burr to a cloth.”

Salvation means participation in Christ.

There is a difference between merely *living* in a country that is a democracy and *participating* in democracy. Participation means action: I read, I learn, I act, I vote, I write, I volunteer.

There is a difference between attending a dance and dancing. Participation means action: I risk, I ask, I move, I rumba or twist or waltz or moonwalk or Macarena or twerk.

Miroslav Volf notes that we have a “wrongly centered self that needs to be de-centered by being nailed to a cross.”[14] To participate in Christ means that my ego and will have received a new center so that my experience of daily life becomes changed. It is not passive on my part. It is full of action. I invite him, I ask, I pray, I learn, I thank, I give. I engage in practices that make space for God. However, these practices, contrary to what many think, are not the primary expression of participation with God. They are a “means of grace,” vehicles through which I receive power and freedom so that the ordinary moments of my ordinary life can be an exercise in participation in Christ. I am inspired, encouraged, guided, convicted, strengthened, and made confident in my working and playing and relating. I die to fear and pride and misguided desire so that I can live in love and joy and peace.

THE VINE AND THE BRANCHES

Let’s return to Jesus’ picture of the vine and the branches. Jesus tells his disciples,

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

JOHN 15:4-5, NRSV

This is where most people get God wrong.

The branch's job is not to produce fruit. The branch's job is to continually receive life from the vine—to abide. The fruit is a by-product of abiding.

The branch is you and me. (Just as banks have branch offices, so does the Kingdom of God—and that's us!) The fruit is the external manifestation of what's going on inside the branch. It's our behavior. It's the things we do and say all day long.

People think, *God's up there, and in addition to all the other stuff I have to do every day, I have to do some things to keep God happy. I have to go to church. I have to give some money. I have to read the Bible. And I have to avoid some things. I have to avoid stealing. I have to avoid lying—unless I'm really, really in trouble. I have to avoid saying bad words—especially when I'm in church.*

But their inner dimension of heart and personality—the inside of the branch—remains untransformed. They don't love. They don't even *know* they don't love because they're too busy trying to produce fruit.

Then people will think, *This takes effort. It means giving up a lot of good stuff. I sure hope God is real so I get rewarded for this some day.* This has the tendency to make religious people judgmental toward nonreligious people. *They get to party on Saturday night and sleep in on Sunday. No fair.*

Jesus knows exactly how this works. Jesus tells a story about a wayward son, and his older brother is the picture of a religious person. Jesus says the wayward son “set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living” (Luke 15:13).

The older brother is filled with judgment and superiority and is furious with his father when the father welcomes the wayward brother back. Here's what the older brother says: “When this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!” (Luke 15:30).

The interesting thing is that Jesus' story doesn't say anything about prostitutes. Where does the older brother get that idea? Most likely his thoughts run like this: *Oh, my foolish younger brother. Breaking my father's heart. Squandering his money. I wonder how he's spending it. Probably on sex. That's what I'd do if I thought I could get away with it. If I'm going to miss out on the good stuff, I better get commended for my moral superiority, and I better get eternally compensated.*

That's what's going on in the older brother's branch.

What's going on inside the branch is that stream of ceaseless thoughts and feelings and desires and perceptions and intentions that just seem automatic. And the “fruit” is the external manifestation—words and actions and habits—that *reveal* what's going on inside the branch. The great problem religious people have is they think God is way out there somewhere and they have to try as hard as they can to produce fruit—to say and do the right thing—to please this impossible-to-please God.

But you will never produce the right fruit by trying to produce the right fruit.

You will never say and do the right thing by trying to say and do the right thing.

You will never obey the law by trying to obey the law.

You will never do the right actions by trying to do the right actions.

The inside of the branch must change. The automatic flow of thoughts and desires and intentions must change from being ego centered and conflicted and greedy and fearful to confident and grateful and humble and joyful and ready to love.

How does that happen?

“I am the vine; you are the branches. Abide in me . . .”

Jesus means this in a literal sense. C. S. Lewis writes, “When Christians say the Christ-life is in them, they do not mean simply something mental or moral. . . . This is not simply a way of saying that they are thinking about Christ or copying Him. They mean that Christ is actually operating through them; that the whole mass of Christians are the physical organism through which Christ acts—that we are His fingers and muscles, the cells of His body.” [15]

Practically speaking, how do I pursue this?

I abandon myself, mind and will, to God.

Primarily, it involves that ceaseless flow of conscious experience that lies at the heart of intimacy. We consist of our conscious experiences—our awareness and thoughts from one moment to the next. Just like the roots of a seed reach out to take in something from beyond it, our thoughts are constantly reaching out and taking in things from beyond us—for better or worse, wisely or foolishly.

This is why Paul says,

Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

PHILIPPIANS 4:8-9

This is life on the vine. This is what salvation looks like.

Apart from the vine, my mind takes in worry and discontentment. My friend Santiago, who got his MBA from Harvard, said his professor would ask them about each business they studied by saying, “Who’s winning today: greed or fear?” Those were the only two choices. Those are the predominant thoughts of the human mind disconnected from God: “I want”; “I’m afraid.” When I’m off the vine, my thoughts are like anchors. They weigh me down constantly. Am I successful? Why doesn’t X like me? What if I need more money?

On the vine, we take in God’s thoughts, God’s life. Greed and fear are replaced by gratitude and confidence—gratitude for God’s goodness and affection; confidence in his presence and strength.

This is why the first psalm says,

Blessed is the one . . .

whose delight is in the law of the LORD,

and who meditates on his law day and night.

That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.

PSALM 1:1-3

Years ago we got a little orange tree for our first house. The scent of orange blossoms is my favorite California smell. I planted it, watered it, fertilized it, put Miracle-Gro on it. I loved that tree.

One week when we were gone, our six-year-old neighbor came and dug up all the tree's roots. When we got home, our tree was dead.

Why? Because the health of the roots is the health of the tree. Without good roots, there is no fruit.

Our thoughts are the roots of our spirit. Our job is not to try to generate more God-pleasing actions by greater willpower. Our job is to abide—to be rooted in Christ.

This is what Jesus gets at when he says, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you . . ." (John 15:7, NRSV). Often we are tempted to turn that into a burden: *Now in addition to everything else I have to do, I'm supposed to memorize Scripture verses or else God won't be happy with me.*

But words will *inevitably* abide in us. The words that abide in us are simply the thoughts that flow through our minds. They can be good or bad. We may choose them intentionally or allow

them to dwell haphazardly. But one truth is certain: we are formed by the words that abide in us.

So Jesus is not really calling us to do something in addition to what we already do. He's calling us to do what we already do in a different way: to seek to have *his* words be the ones abiding in our minds.

This is what it means to be *with* someone. When we're with another person, they are the one most present in our thoughts. When we are present with another person, we *think* of them—think of what they've said, how we know them. Their bodily presence and facial expression and voice guide our thoughts. Even if our bodies are separated, we can speak with someone over the phone or Skype with them and see their faces. With memory, we can in a sense abide with those who are no longer living.

But because Jesus is present on earth through his Spirit, without limitation of body, he is *really* and *literally* able to communicate and commune directly with us. And this moment-by-moment communion with us is what allows us to obey him:

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

JOHN 15:9-15, NRSV

“You are my friends if you do what I command you.” Imagine: What might it be like to live as a friend of Jesus for a day?

You might start first thing in the morning. If you're not a morning person, if no one wants to be around you until you've had your coffee—if even *Jesus* doesn't want to be around you until you've had your coffee—get your coffee first. Coffee is from Jesus too. (“I am the vine; you are the bean.”)

Then, take the Lord's Prayer. Walk through it one phrase at a time.

“Our Father.” Think of the tenderest picture of father love you know, and bask in the thought that your heavenly Father loves you. Sit with it.

“Hallowed be your name.” *Help me and everyone else today realize what a wonderful person you are.*

“Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” *I'm perfectly safe all day because I'm in your kingdom, and your kingdom is never in trouble, and neither are those in it.*

Invoke God's presence. Walk through your plans for the day with God, and invite him to be with you. Form the conscious intention *Today I will abide on the vine.*

But I am imperfect, you might think, and my rival kingdom is strong. What do I do when I get it wrong? What do I do when I disobey for the thousandth time, or I worry, or I lust, or I lie, or I yell at my kids, or I get drunk, or I betray my closest friend?

Get back on the vine.

The vine isn't going anywhere. The vine is very patient. The vine will never say, “You stupid branch. I'm so tired of your poor performance. Don't even think about coming back.”

George Carlin used to talk about the difference between how you score points in football and how you score points in baseball. Football is a violent effort: you attack your enemies by throwing bombs and engaging in a ground attack until you soften up their defenses and make it to the end zone.

In baseball, there's no battle. You just come home.

With the Father, it's much more like baseball than like football. It's not a grueling battle. As with the Prodigal Son in Jesus' story, you come to your senses in the far country. You just come home. The Father is always waiting.

THE LORD OF THE DANCE

Union with God is all a gift of grace. It is a response to his love and acceptance and invitation and abundant goodness.

Some time ago my wife, who is a lovely dancer, asked me if I would take dance lessons so we could dance together. I was not sure. My people are not a dancing people. But I love my wife, and it was clear that there would be many advantages to doing this, so I said yes.

We went to the studio and were given a little book that had pictures of footsteps placed appropriately for waltz and fox-trot and rhumba. This was good. I'm good with books. I can deal with books.

I read the book.

I knew the book.

I could even *do* the book.

But there was no grace. Picture, if you've seen *Young Frankenstein*, Peter Boyle as the Monster lumbering to "Puttin' on the Ritz," and that's me. On a good day. The secret of a body in motion, the ability to flow effortlessly to music, was not present, to say the least.

Then I asked my wife to dance. She has grace. She grew up dancing and has a way of moving with fluidity and joy that has always been beautiful to me.

And the strangest thing happened. A little of her grace spilled over into me. Only a little, but it was enough to keep me dancing and to make me hunger for more. I began to move with more grace when I was dancing with her than I ever experienced on my own.

Dancing is about more than knowing the book and doing the book. In a dance, the partners are no longer separate. They know

each other, adjust to each other, delight in each other, accommodate each other.

Many centuries ago the church fathers and mothers used the term *perichoresis* to describe the Trinity. *Peri-* means "around" (think of a perimeter); *chorein* means to move or to make room for. The picture is of a kind of divine rotation. While sin causes us to want the world to revolve around us, within the Godhead there is a kind of decentering: the Father and Son and Holy Spirit make room for, move toward, and circle one another with love. The word is so lovely that over time it came to suggest a kind of "circle dance" of the Trinity, where the delight in serving and loving so fills the members of the Trinity that dance is the only adequate picture.

We were made to be united with God because God himself is a union of three persons in perfect oneness. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis describes the union of the Trinity as "almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance. The union between the Father and the Son is such a live concrete thing that this union itself is also a Person. . . . Each one of us has got to enter that pattern, take his place in that dance. There is no other way to the happiness for which we were made." [16]

Jesus spoke once about how people neither responded to John the Baptist's austerity ("We sang a dirge, and you did not cry") nor to his own party-going, sinner-accepting, life-giving joy ("We played the flute for you, and you did not dance," Luke 7:32).

That's Jesus on the flute. In the memorable words of Edward Schillebeeckx, "Being sad in Jesus' presence was an existential impossibility."^[17] You gotta dance.

There is a Christmas carol about Jesus that is hundreds of years old called "Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day." In it, Jesus, the "Lord of the Dance," sings,

*Tomorrow shall be my dancing day;
I would my true love did so chance
To see the legend of my play,
To call my true love to my dance.*

We were made to dance.

When the dance is done right, you can hardly tell where one person stops and the other starts. They have become one. And yet each feels more fully themselves than ever.

Just as there's a physical reality, so there is a spiritual reality. That reality can provide you with love and security and confidence and sufficiency and contentment and gratitude and peace and joy.

This is wonderful, and union is a great gift to us, but it never comes solely for *us*. In union with God, the default mode of my will becomes to bless. The will that is disconnected from God constantly seeks what it wants. The will that is "on the vine" constantly moves outward in blessing. In union we learn to bless constantly—bless the e-mails we write (we'll write them better), bless the brownies we bake (they'll taste better), bless other

drivers on the road. (They'll drive better. Probably. For sure you will.) Jesus prayed that we could know oneness with him and the Father "so that the world may believe" (John 17:21).

"If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit" (John 15:5). By abiding in Jesus, fruit—love, joy, peace, and so on—is the natural by-product. But fruit isn't for the branch's benefit. Fruit is the result of an overflow, an abundance of life. A vine bears fruit to spread the seeds of new life.

When Jesus restores Peter to union with him, he asks Peter three times to care for the sheep that Jesus loves.

Later, before he ascends to heaven, Jesus tells his disciples, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." And he gives them this command: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). The two go together.

Out of union, love flows. Jesus is calling his true love to the dance. And the invitation we receive becomes an invitation to others. What goes around comes around.

[1] Amanda White, "Smells Ring Bells: How Smell Triggers Memories and Emotions," *Brain Babble* (blog), January 12, 2015, <https://www.psychologytoday.com>.