

The book cover features a series of overlapping organic shapes in shades of orange, teal, and green. A large orange circle in the upper left contains the word 'ONE'. To its right, a teal shape contains the word 'WITH'. Below these, a large green shape contains the words 'MY LORD'. In the lower right, a dark green shape contains the subtitle 'The Life-Changing Reality of Being in Christ'. At the bottom, a teal shape on the left and a dark green shape on the right contain the author's name 'SAM ALLBERRY'. Thin white lines radiate from the top right and bottom left corners.

# ONE WITH MY LORD

The Life-Changing  
Reality of Being  
in Christ

SAM ALLBERRY

“Like a glass of water when you have a headache and don’t realize it’s from dehydration, *One with My Lord* is the book you didn’t know you needed. In his distinctively inviting style, Sam Allberry helps us drink in one of the most vital and consistently taught truths of Scripture: that we are ‘in Christ’ and that this changes everything. I highly recommend that you read this book and take time to process what it means.”

**Rebecca McLaughlin**, author, *Confronting Jesus: 9 Encounters with the Hero of the Gospels*

“For too long the glory of the Christian’s union with Christ has been overlooked, understated, and misunderstood. In this book, Sam Allberry has done a wonderful job of drawing our attention to the mystery and the majesty of this union. *One with My Lord* is a delight to read, an encouragement to our faith, and a witness to God’s welcome of his children in Christ.”

**Kyle Worley**, Pastor, Mosaic Church, Richardson, Texas; Cohost, *Knowing Faith Podcast*

“Being ‘in Christ,’ Sam Allberry says, is ‘the Bible’s primary way of talking about what it means to be a follower of Jesus.’ Allberry helps us see the wonder of salvation and the Christian life through the lens of union with Christ. In his delightfully clear and accessible style, he takes us through various aspects of what it means to be a man or woman ‘in Christ.’ This warmly pastoral work is grounded in careful reading of the Scriptures and serious theological reflection. Allberry shows us that union with Christ is richer, broader, and deeper than we might have imagined, with very practical implications for everyday life. Read this book and be encouraged.”

**Mark D. Thompson**, Principal, Moore Theological College

“Sam Allberry’s writing is always refreshing and rooted in real experience, but this book really stands out. Allberry leads us gently through many different scriptures, not only to help us understand even the trickier passages but also to show how it all fits together. He clears up our misunderstandings, relates to our confusions and failures, and still makes it all about Jesus! *One with My Lord* is a vital and deeply pastoral book that helps us make more sense of both the Bible and our messy lives.”

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Preaching; writer; preacher; cultural apologist



*One with My Lord*

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# One with My Lord

*The Life-Changing Reality of Being in Christ*

Sam Allberry

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*One with My Lord: The Life-Changing Reality of Being in Christ*

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*For Brian and Leslie Roe*

*“They refreshed my spirit.”*

*1 Corinthians 16:18*





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# Introduction

WHEN I LAST HAD any extended time watching daytime TV—I was at home, sick—it became quickly apparent to me that we have a fixation with properties. There were shows about renovating homes, finding homes in the country or in the Caribbean, homes being auctioned, homes on a budget, homes of the super wealthy. Even when we're not wanting or needing to move to a new home, it can be instinctive to look up property prices. When I'm on vacation, I'll often find out how much it would cost to live there and wonder about what life would look like if *that* was where I was based.

It is not hard to see why we're fixated on things like this. Many of us have a deep sense that once we find the right home, everything else will fall into place. Work will be more meaningful, time off more peaceful, family life more fulfilling. For some it is all about location—the right amount of bustle, the right amount of space. Or maybe it's the environment—being up in the mountains or down by the coast. Or maybe it's the house itself—whether its roomy enough, cozy enough, old enough, or modern enough. Whatever it is, once that's sorted out, life will finally start to flourish.

There is a sense in which this instinct is right. We're physical creatures. Having a sense of place, of belonging, matters. And the Bible says there *is* an environment in which we can truly flourish, somewhere we *will* truly feel we belong, where life *will* slot into place—somewhere that will feel deeply *right*.

But it is not a physical location. It doesn't have a zip code. You won't find it on your GPS app. And there's not an economic threshold you need to reach to even think about getting in on it. It's an entirely different kind of place.

Before I recently moved to the United States, I spent several years living in a British town called Maidenhead, which doesn't have much to distinguish it other than that its railway bridge has two of the widest brick spans in the world and that the neighboring town is Windsor. Windsor, of course, is the year-round home of the British monarch.

This proximity to Windsor made quite a difference. As local residents, we had free access to the castle any time it was open. You could even see it in the distance from just up the road from my house. But more than that, it meant we lived in the *Royal* Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead and in the *Royal* County of Berkshire.

But this is not the only royal place where we can find ourselves. As Christians, we find ourselves in an altogether perfect spiritual location: in *Christ* himself.

Being in Christ is the topic of this book because it is the heart-beat of the Christian faith. It is a way of understanding our relationship with Jesus that might be unfamiliar to us but that is reflected on virtually every page of any New Testament letter. It reminds us that as well as being our Savior, our Lord, our teacher,

and our friend, Jesus is also—in a way—our home, our place, our location. And we, as well as being those who submit to him, worship him, follow him, and imitate him, are those who now find ourselves to be *in* him.

This, it turns out, is no minor detail. It is what helps us best understand how we relate to Christ, how we can receive all that he has done for us, how we can move forward confidently with him, and how we find ourselves now deeply bound up with others also seeking to do the same. It is what makes the Christian life make the most sense. It is all these things because it is the Bible's primary way of talking about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. And once we're clear on that, we can be much clearer on *him*. It is, simply, the only place to be.



## Found in Christ

*... in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.*

PHILIPPIANS 3:8–9

I CAN PINPOINT the exact moment I finally had to admit I was middle aged. I was traveling through London and needed to make a quick connection at Paddington Station. The plan was to bound up the stairs from the underground station, glance quickly at the main departures board to check the platform of my connection, and get to the train just in time to board before it left—and to do all this without having to break my stride. In reality, I did bound up the stairs from the underground. I did glance at the departures board. And then I stopped.

I couldn't read any of the information on the board. It was a digital display. All the characters had a blurry halo; I could make out the individual letters and numbers only by walking right up to the board and squinting hard at it. (Amazingly, I made my



connection—if barely.) For years I had prided myself on having great eyesight. Now I knew I needed glasses.

But I hadn't realized just *how much* I needed them.

When I finally got them, I could see the departures board at Paddington Station. But what surprised me was just how clearly I could now see *everything else*. It was like the whole world was now in high definition. I could now see distant trees and buildings in crisp detail. Everything was now more focused, much clearer.

### Spiritual Spectacles

I had a similar experience when I started reflecting on two words that occur together repeatedly in the New Testament—"in Christ." These words are used to describe the true reality of Christian believers. It is a doctrine theologians call *union with Christ*, the idea that when people come to faith in Jesus, they are united to him spiritually. They are not just followers of Christ; they are in some sense now situated *in* him.

This idea is key to understanding the heart of the Christian faith. It brings it all into much better focus. What had seemed to me somewhat blurry truths and concepts now had a sharper definition. The contours of the Christian landscape were easier to see. The connections between different parts of Christian truth were now more obvious and vital. I now had a clearer vision of things.

*Lens* seems to be the right word for thinking about it. I knew, at some level, that I had a relationship with Jesus and that this meant being deeply connected to him. I had seen the "in Christ" language and related expressions throughout the New Testament. But I had never thought to dwell on them and consider what they might mean. As I started to look at this concept, I found myself

looking through it: seeing everything else through the lens of this truth. It changed my whole world.

When I first became a Christian, I was primarily thinking in terms of being a follower of Jesus. I knew he was my Lord and Savior. I knew he would do a far better job of running my life than I could. I knew that he had died for me and risen again, that I could trust him with my life. All that was true, gloriously so. But I didn't really understand how it all fit together. There was Christ, somewhere over there, and here was I, at a distance, wanting with all my heart to keep up with him. I knew who he was and what I was called to. I knew that somehow he would help me be a follower. But that's as far as I could understand it. Conceptually, it was as if Jesus was at the other end of the universe from me, and I was always going to struggle to follow him at such a distance.

### **A Preferred Designation**

One of the surprises when we turn the pages of the New Testament is how little the word "Christian" comes up. Given that this is *the* book for Christians, you would expect it to be littered with references to Christians and Christianity.

In fact, the word "Christian" appears only three times, the first of which is as a nickname for these new followers of Jesus: "And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians" (Acts 11:26). Many think this was initially intended to be demeaning, the equivalent of "little Christs" or "Christlings," but it evidently stuck and—whatever the intentions—clearly was no great embarrassment to Christians, as we've happily carried the label ever since.

But whereas the word "Christian" is used only three times in the New Testament, the language of being "in Christ" and related

expressions (e.g., “in him”) occur many dozens of times. Paul alone uses this terminology more than 160 times. You can open the Bible on the page of virtually every New Testament letter and see this language, often several times. This is the New Testament’s default way of speaking of followers of Jesus. A few examples will show us how striking this pattern is.

At one point in his writing to the Corinthians, Paul describes an anonymous Christian man:

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. (2 Cor. 12:2–4)

Paul is talking about a (so far) nameless Christian who has been given a unique spiritual experience. Paul is a little fuzzy on some of the details. This man saw something of “the third heaven,” but Paul doesn’t know if it was a vision or whether he was literally there in person. Twice he admits, “I do not know, God knows.”

We might think that uncertainty understandable if this were someone else’s experience and if Paul were only describing what he had heard secondhand. But Paul goes on to show that he has actually been talking about himself. He talks about “the surpassing greatness of the revelations” and how easily he might have become conceited by seeing them (2 Cor. 12:7). Paul had been given backstage access to parts of heaven no one else normally gets to see.

For various reasons, Paul has been reluctant to ever share about this experience, but circumstances have compelled him to. Opponents in Corinth are running a smear campaign against Paul, trying to turn the Corinthian church away from him. One of their arguments seems to be that they had an inside track with God, that they had experienced special visions and revelations from God. So Paul is trying to do two tricky things at once: (1) show his readers that such visions alone are not signs of spiritual maturity and authority and (2) demonstrate that he's not just saying this because he's never had any. This isn't a case of sour grapes. Paul is in the awkward position of having to explain that he actually *has* had visions and revelations—in fact, surpassing anything his opponents had experienced—while at the same time trying to show that this is not the sort of thing a Christian should boast in. The fact that this extraordinary revelation occurred fourteen years ago and that Paul has never once mentioned it until now shows that it has not been the focus of his ministry.

So in his awkward reluctance to bring this up, Paul initially talks about this experience using third-person language—"I know a man who had an amazing vision of heaven"—before spilling the beans that it was really him all along.

What is significant for us is the language Paul uses to do this. If it were us writing today, we would probably say something like "I know a Christian man who fourteen years ago . . ." But Paul says, "I know a man in Christ." That, to him, is the most natural and obvious way to talk about himself. And he's presuming it's the most natural and obvious way for his readers to understand it too. He doesn't have to include a sidebar explaining what "being in Christ" means. He just refers to "a man in Christ," and everyone

knows exactly what he's talking about. It was the go-to terminology. On a census form, Paul presumably wouldn't put "Christian" but "a man in Christ." If it is so instinctive for Paul, and not so for us, it suggests that we are missing something significant about what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

### **"In Christ" in the New Testament**

Another example comes in the book of Acts. Luke is describing the growth of the early church. They have already faced some significant obstacles: opposition from some of the local authorities insisting that Peter and John no longer preach to anyone in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:17), as well as the beginnings of problems within the Christian community, with Ananias and Sapphira judged by God for trying to deceive everyone about how much they had been giving to the Lord (Acts 5:9). Yet through it all, the apostles remained faithful. The whole church was gripped by a fear of God (Acts 5:11).

Luke then gives this summary of the progress of the ministry at that point:

Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women. (Acts 5:12–14)

A lot is happening—preaching, signs and wonders, and various powerful, supernatural healings that Luke goes on to describe. And in the midst of it all, unprecedented numbers of people are

believing and responding. Luke stresses the remarkable results: “more than ever”; “multitudes of both men and women.” The gospel is bearing dramatic fruit. People are pouring into the kingdom.

But the language Luke uses is striking. He could have said that “more than ever believers were added *to the church*,” or “multitudes of both men and women *became Christians*.” But instead he says, “Believers were added *to the Lord*”—not added to the Lord’s *followers* but added to the Lord *himself*. Once again, this is not how we would instinctively describe things. We talk about the church growing, but Luke talks about people being added to Jesus. *He*—not just a group of people or some kind of religious institution—is what they are joining. They are coming into *him*. When someone becomes a believer, that individual is being added to the Lord. If we find that a strange way to talk, it means we’re not seeing something that is apparently obvious to Luke. If being a Christian is first and foremost to be “in Christ,” then becoming a Christian is to be “added to the Lord.”

Paul uses very similar language in how he describes people coming to faith. We tend to overlook the last chapter of Romans, as it is dominated by Paul sending greetings and messages to a long list of people. It is easy to skip over it. We don’t know these people, and it feels a little bit like the end credits to the book. But these are names Paul wants us to know. They mean something to him and to the cause of the gospel he has just spent the fifteen previous chapters unpacking for us. This is not a distraction from the gospel; it is part of how it is so thoroughly grounded in Paul’s life.

Among the twenty-seven names he mentions, Paul includes his friends Andronicus and Junia—“my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ

before me” (Rom. 16:7). Andronicus and Junia were people Paul could strongly identify with. They are his kinsmen and fellow prisoners. But he also says they were “in Christ before me.” They had been believers longer than Paul had. Like Luke in Acts 5, Paul defaults to expressing this reality in terms of their being joined to Christ. Being a Christian before Paul means they were “in Christ” before Paul.

The whole of Romans 16 is shot through with this perspective. Paul highlights Phoebe, “a servant of the church at Cenchreae,” who will require the assistance of the believers Paul is writing to. So he calls on them not just to “welcome her” but to “welcome her in the Lord” (Rom. 16:1–2). She, like them, is also in this sphere of being in Christ, and it is to shape and define the way they receive her. Similarly, Prisca and Aquila, who have also labored alongside Paul, are described as “my fellow workers in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 16:3). The union in Christ they share with Paul also encapsulates the work they do for the Lord. In the same way, Ampliatus is Paul’s “beloved in the Lord” (Rom. 16:8). Even Paul’s affections are wrapped up in all this.

Given this pattern, we should not be surprised to see the way the language of being in Christ touches even seemingly mundane parts of Paul’s writing, such as how he greets his readers. Paul opens his letter to the Philippians in this way: “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons” (Phil. 1:1). These Christians have a dual address. Geographically, they are in Philippi. But spiritually, they are in Christ. That Paul puts this spiritual location first suggests that it takes priority. If they had had GPS technology, it would have located them in what we know today as northeast Greece. But what really mattered was where they were located in relation to Jesus. These saints are “in” Christ. In fact (as we’ll see), they can only be saints in the first place—people now set

apart for Jesus—*because* they are in Christ. It's impossible to be a saint anywhere else. If they're in Christ, it's impossible *not* to be a saint. Being in Christ is not incidental; it defines who they are as believers. It is what is most fundamental to what it means to be a Christian.

These are just a handful of examples of where we find the language of being “in Christ” rather than the kind of language we typically use in Christian circles today. We could consider many dozens more. Being in Christ is central to how the New Testament describes the Christian life.

### What “in Christ” Means

The centrality of this concept is explained by how foundational it is. The New Testament authors did not latch on to this language and push it to the forefront of their writing just out of personal preference. This isn't a case of “You like *tomayto*, and I like *tomahito*.”<sup>1</sup> We need to have this idea at the heart of our thinking.

Pastor Rory Shiner gets at why this matters so much by imagining that we're at an airport wanting to fly to his home city of Perth, Australia:

What relationship do you need to have with that plane?

Would it help, for example, to be *under* the plane? To submit yourself to the plane's eminent authority in the whole flying-to-Perth caper?

Would it help to be *inspired* by the plane? You go to the airport, you watch it take off, and you whisper to yourself, “One day, I could do that too . . .”?

1 George Gershwin and Ira Gershwin, “Let's Call the Whole Thing Off,” recorded March 3, 1937, Los Angeles, CA, Brunswick.



What about *following* the plane? You know the plane is going to Perth, and so it stands to reason that if you take note of the direction it goes, and pursue it as fast as your little legs will carry you, you too will end up in Perth.

Of course, the key relationship you need with the plane is not to be under it, behind it or inspired by it. You need to be *in* it.

Why? Because by being in the plane, what happens to the plane will also happen to you.

The question “Did you get to Perth?” will become part of a larger question, “Did the plane get to Perth?” If the answer to the second question is yes, and if you were in the plane, then what happened to the plane will also have happened to you.<sup>2</sup>

The same is true of us and Christ: if we are in Christ, what happens to him happens to us. Nevertheless, it is still a strange concept to us. What can it actually mean to say that someone is “in Christ”? Does Jesus have a zip code? Can I find him on Google Maps?

One thinks of Nicodemus’s response to Jesus in this exchange:

Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (John 3:3–4)

Jesus just dropped the bombshell that to even see the kingdom of God, one would need a second birth, to be “born again”—literally, “born from above.” This is not simply another attempt at the birth

2 Rory Shiner, *One Forever: The Transforming Power of Being in Christ* (Kingsford, AU: Matthias Media, 2012), 34.

all of us experienced when we entered this world; Jesus is saying there needs to be a new type of birth, one from heaven and not from earth.

But apparently missing that nuance, Nicodemus responds by pointing out the absurdity of trying to go through a second physical birth. The idea of any mature adult, let alone an older man, having to climb back into a mother's womb is certainly absurd in the extreme. It's the kind of thing online memes are made of.

But Jesus was talking not about another "normal" birth but about something quite different: a spiritual birth. Just as we need a physical birth to be able to experience life on this earth, so too we need a spiritual birth to be able to experience true life in God's kingdom.

We have a similar issue with understanding what it means to be "in Christ." For most of us, our only category for thinking about where we are is spatial. At this very moment, as I'm writing, I'm in a particular physical location—in a friend's house in the leafy village of Shincliffe, on the outskirts of the ancient city of Durham in northeast England. (A lovely place, by the way.) I'm not anywhere else. I'm "in Durham." To be "in Christ" does not contradict that. Jesus doesn't have a particular zip code that I need to find my way to. Just as it is possible to have both a physical birth and a spiritual birth, so too it is possible to have a physical, geographical location as well as a spiritual one. And just as I don't have to have been born of a particular woman to be able to go through a spiritual rebirth, so also I don't need to be in any particular place on earth to be able to find myself in Christ.

### **"In Christ" Illustrations**

Perhaps because it is a somewhat alien concept to us, Scripture often unpacks our union with Christ using illustrations of more

familiar things. Sometimes being told what something is *like* is a good way to begin understanding what that something is.

### *A Tree and Its Branches*

Jesus speaks of his people's union with him as being like the relationship a branch has with a tree: "I am the vine; you are the branches" (John 15:5). We don't need to be familiar with vineyards specifically to get the point (though there are important reasons Jesus uses vineyards as an example here, as we'll see in due course). We know about the relationship a branch needs to have with a tree.

I've mentioned that as I'm writing this chapter, I'm staying at my friends' house just outside the city of Durham. Next to the house is the River Weir, which winds its way through County Durham. This particular stretch of the river is lined by tall oak and sycamore trees. On a previous visit a few months ago, I sat working and heard an unusually loud sound of creaking. I looked around to see if a piece of furniture was about to collapse, and just as I realized that the noise didn't seem to be coming from within the room, I heard a sudden crashing sound from outside. A huge branch had just torn itself off one of the larger oak trees. The branch itself was thicker than many of the sycamore trees around it and took out one of these on its way down. It's still there, some months later. Other than its size and conspicuous position, what makes this branch immediately identifiable is its lack of color. The woodland around it is alive in all shades of green, but the branch is a dull brown and its foliage withered and gray.

We know why. When a branch is removed from its tree, it dies. It loses connection with its source of life.

The same is true of our relationship with Jesus. We can't expect to flourish spiritually if we're apart from him. As Michael Reeves puts it, "The Vine holds nothing back from its branches, pouring all its life into them."<sup>3</sup> So if we disconnect from the vine, we—like that giant branch—will quickly wither and die. There is no spiritual life apart from Jesus.

Little wonder, then, that he goes on to talk about the need for us to "remain" or "abide" in him. Our being in Christ needs to be ongoing. Christianity, it turns out, is not about a quick one-off transaction with Jesus. The heart of the Christian life is Jesus himself. The only true life we can experience is drawn from him. We depend on him and have no spiritual life without him.

### *A Body and Its Head*

Trees aren't the only things that have limbs. Bodies do too, and I'm depending on the relationship between a limb and my head to be able to write this. Paul notes,

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 held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Eph. 4:15–16)

We may be familiar with other scriptures in which the people of God are likened to a body, with each playing a different part. In those passages, the point is normally about our relationship

3 Michael Reeves, *Christ Our Life* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2014), 84.

with one another, how each of us is needed and each of us needs everyone else. But here the illustration is adjusted—we're not just like parts of a body relating to one another but like a body itself relating to its head. The focus is not our individual relationships to the rest of the church but our relationship as a church to Christ. We are the body, and he is the head. And while every part of the body has its own contribution to make, the head is utterly indispensable. We have prosthetic limbs for those who lose an arm or a leg, but there is no such thing as a prosthetic head.

So our relationship to Jesus is not just static (as that of a branch to a tree might seem to be): we are to “grow up in every way into him who is the head.” The head is not just the source of our life; it shapes who we are and what we become. We are not just empowered by it but directed by it. The growth of the church—what “makes the body grow,” in Paul's language—is ultimately its head. The whole body is involved—“each part is working properly”—but it is Christ alone who is behind the maturing and growth of the church.

### *A Spouse in a Marriage*

The Bible repeatedly uses the language of a marriage to describe the relationship of God's people to the Lord, and in the New Testament this is applied to the church's relationship to Jesus. Collectively, the church is Christ's bride:

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. (Eph. 5:31–32)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (Rev. 21:1–2)

While the church is the bride of Christ, Paul also uses marital-related language to say something of the individual believer's relationship to Christ:

Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two will become one flesh." But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. (1 Cor. 6:16–17)

In marriage, the man and woman become "one flesh." The two become one physically. Similarly, Paul shows us that the believer and Christ become one spiritually. We are "joined to the Lord"—that is what it means to become a Christian—and so become "one spirit with him." The oneness we have with Jesus is in some ways akin to the oneness a husband and wife experience (and which is so distorted by someone sleeping with a prostitute, as some in Corinth evidently needed to hear). The husband and wife in a marriage are made one without being fused together—they are still two individual people. So too with our relationship to Jesus. We are not absorbed or dissolved into Jesus. We do not lose our unique personality and distinctiveness. In fact, we become our truest selves by being in Christ.

Paul shows us that marriage points to Jesus and his people: "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and

the church” (Eph. 5:32). We need to be clear which way around this analogy is meant to be understood. In our familiarity with the human institution of marriage, we tend to put it in the conceptual foreground and then think Paul is saying that our relationship to Jesus is a bit like *that*. But it is the other way around. The true reality is the gospel—our union with Christ and all that comes with it. The church’s marital union with Jesus is the true and ultimate marriage, and our earthly marriages are something like *that*. So Paul is not merely saying that the pattern for marriage is a bit like what we have going on with Jesus; he’s saying that if we don’t think about our union with Christ in the right way, there is a danger we won’t think about marriage in the right way. Our fullest understanding of marriage needs to be grounded in the doctrine of our union with Jesus. The “one flesh” relationship will be best understood as we honor and appreciate the dynamics of our “one spirit” relationship with the Lord.

Each of these illustrations—branches, bodies, brides—highlights a different aspect of this relationship to Jesus. He is our source of life, our directing and defining head, and one who is closer to us than any other relationship we can enjoy. John Stott sums it up neatly:

The relationship which is thus depicted is something much more than a formal attachment or nodding acquaintance, something more even than a personal friendship; it is nothing less than a vital, organic, intimate union with Jesus Christ, involving a shared life and love.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> John Stott, *Life in Christ: A Guide for Daily Living* (1979; repr., London: Monarch Books, 2003), 41.

Christ is more needed, more close, and more vital than we ever realized.

Without an understanding of what it means to be in Christ, our view of the Christian life becomes blurry. The ideas will still be there, of course—we'll know that we're justified through the death of Christ alone, that we will one day join him in resurrection life, that in the meantime we're to commit ourselves to walking in holiness, and that all this is to be understood and worked through in the context of a local church. The pieces will be in place, but they won't fully cohere—they'll seem like separate elements, each of which we admire in its own way but which, like Lego bricks poured out onto the table, are meant to fit together and make a whole. Union with Christ is the lens through which all these parts of the Christian life can be seen most sharply and beautifully.