

Preparing for Our Heavenly Union with God

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Q. 82. What is the communion in glory which the members of the invisible church have with Christ?

A. The communion in glory which the members of the invisible church have with Christ, is in this life, immediately after death, and at last perfected at the resurrection and Day of Judgment. (Westminster Larger Catechism)

At the time of my study and writing of this article, I have been emotionally walking with a lifetime friend and mentor as he fights a battle against a serious form of cancer. Observing someone close to you preparing to meet God moves a discussion such as this one out of the realm of the merely academic and speculative to that of pastoral and personal. So this article is dedicated to Pastor David Long, who first taught me and now is showing me many of the truths which it contains.

CLARIFYING THE DEFINITION OF WHAT IS MEANT BY OUR ‘HEAVENLY UNION WITH GOD’ OR ‘COMMUNION IN GLORY’

As we speak of our heavenly union with God, the modern, rather simplistic thought of “just going to heaven” might cloud our thinking. For this popular Gnostic-like ‘justification by death’ anti-gospel and antichrist message is so popular in our day. In contrast, the teaching of Scripture on this subject is more complex, yet more beautiful, and far more profound than contemporary thought portrays it. As Q. 82 of the Westminster Larger Catechism cited above states, referring to this topic as our “communion in glory,” there are three stages of our heavenly union with God that we must consider.

First, our heavenly union with God involves, in part, our regenerated state. As the catechism states, the communion in glory that the members of the invisible church have with Christ is “in this life.” In the gospel, Christ is our Immanuel or “God with us.” Heaven comes to us in the gospel as God dwells with His people who are His holy temple through the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. This earthly experience of our heavenly union has been the primary focus of the three preceding articles.

The next stage of our heavenly union with God encompasses what is known as the intermediate state. As the Larger Catechism explains, “The communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death is, in that their souls are then made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies...” (WLC 86). This intermediate state is more glorious than our regenerated state as believers experience the direct,

immediate presence of God upon death. However, as the name implies and this catechism answer alludes, the intermediate state is not the completeness of our heavenly union. For, if I may quote this rightly provocative statement from N. T. Wright, “Heaven is important, but it’s not the end of the world.” The catechism states that the third stage of our heavenly communion is where it will be at “last perfected.”

The third stage of our communion in glory is known as our resurrected state. Upon Christ’s glorious return to the earth, the righteous who were with him and those still on earth shall be united to their bodies raised in immortality. Then, as the Larger Catechism explains, “They shall be received into heaven, where they shall be fully and forever freed from all sin and misery; filled with inconceivable joys, made perfectly holy and happy both in body and soul, in the company of innumerable saints and holy angels...” These truths are glorious enough, yet the answer goes on to describe this in relationship to the Trinity, as it states this happiness will “especially” come by being “in the immediate vision and fruition of God the Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, to all eternity” (WLC 90). Sadly, too many treatments on our heavenly union almost equate the second and third stage, not giving full emphasis to the resurrection state.

So as the terms ‘heavenly glory’ and ‘communion in glory’ are used, there is a movement with which this article is primarily concerned, emphasizing where the earlier stages are limited experiences of, and even preparation for, the final one. If a military unit stages a war exercise, there is a glory in that event. Yet the glory of that preparatory event is minuscule in comparison to that army’s full conquest of the enemy and victory celebration. So too the church militant is moving toward becoming the church triumphant, but the fullness of that final state will not occur until the glorious day of Christ’s return and the invisible church’s resurrection when the consummation of the new heavens and new earth takes place. Thus, this sense of movement from one stage to the next is what is meant when we speak of preparing for our heavenly union with God.

Now let us think upon a particular facet regarding the basis for this heavenly union that further highlights this sense of movement.

LAYING FORTH THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR OUR HEAVENLY UNION WITH GOD

In his work on the Trinity, Robert Letham reminds us that there are three unions which “are the very heartbeat of what God is and all that he has done for us.”¹ Letham explains that first and foremost God himself is a being of union. God as one being exists as three persons in a union that is eternal and indivisible, in such a manner that preserves the distinctiveness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit yet also gives them perichoretic knowledge of one another.

The second union regards the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became man in response to the eternal counsel of the Godhead. As such, even now in his resurrected and exalted state Christ has a human body and soul existing in perfect union with his divine personage.

The third is the union we have with Christ in our salvation and is the heavenly union of which we speak. When we are granted faith in Christ and repentance over our sins, Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit comes and “dwells with you and will be in you.” (John 14:17)

These truths are agreed upon and summarized by Thomas Boston:

¹ Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology and Worship* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 466.

There are three mysterious unions in our religion. (1.) The substantial union of the three persons in one Godhead. (2.) The personal union of the divine and human natures in Jesus Christ. (3.) The mystical union betwixt Christ and believers, which is that wherein Christ and believers, are so joined, that they are one Spirit, and one mystical body, 1 Cor. 6:17 and 12:13.²

The implications of these unions are indicated by John Murray when he says:

There is another phase of the subject of union with Christ that must not be omitted. If it were overlooked there would be a serious defect in our understanding and appreciation of the implications of this union. These are the implications which arise from the relations of Christ to the other persons of the trinity and from our relations to the other persons of the trinity by reason of our union with Christ.³

Thus, each of these unions are related, for as Letham states, “The coming of the Holy Spirit is, in effect, the coming of the entire Trinity. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit take up residence with the one who loves Jesus.”⁴ Indeed, in the highly Trinitarian passage of Ephesians 1:3-14, which is just one long sentence in the original Greek, twelve different times Paul refers to our union with Christ by saying “in Him” or “in Christ” as he recounts the blessings of salvation Christ has given to us. Yet Paul does so in such a way that he explains how our union with Christ gives us the experience of the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the sealing power of the Spirit. Proper Christology always brings us to a robust Trinitarianism. To give a corollary to Gregory’s famous statement on the Trinity—on how the one takes our minds to the three and then back again—one cannot meditate on Christ for long without having his mind taken to the Father and the Spirit as well.⁵

What this ultimately should inject into the knowledge of our salvation is that we are being inexorably drawn by each experience of it further into union with God and further toward this union’s consummation as described above. In John 14, Jesus says that the Spirit “will be with you forever” (John 14:16) and that through the Spirit the Father and Son will come to the believer and “make our home with him” (John 14:23). The Triune God makes his home in us ultimately to prepare us to bring us home to him (John 14:1-3). Twenty years after his famous *Discourse on Communion with God*, John Owen added a chapter to his premier work to address this point.

² Thomas Boston, “Of Union with Christ,” in *The Whole Works of the Late Reverend and Learned Mr. Thomas Brooks, Minister of the Gospel at Etterick*, Vol. 1 (Charleston, SC: Forgotten Books, 2012), 546.

³ John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 171.

⁴ Letham, 469.

⁵ John Calvin. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, 1559 edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1.13.17.

Thus, therefore, we see how the Father is in the Son, and the Son in the Father; how they both are in all things, and all things in them: what communion Christ hath with his church; how his church, and every member thereof, is in him by original derivation, and he personally in them, by way of mystical association, wrought through the gift of the Holy Ghost; which they that are his receive from him, and, together with the same, what benefit soever the vital force of his body and blood may yield; — yea, by steps and degrees they receive the complete measure of all such divine grace as doth sanctify and save throughout, till the day of their final exaltation to a state of fellowship in glory with him, *whose partakers they are now in those things that tend to glory*.⁶

This glory we are now tending toward is indescribable in many ways, as John Calvin states in the *Institutes*.

But since the prophecy that death shall be swallowed up in victory (Hosea 13:14), will then only be completed, let us always remember that the end of the resurrection is eternal happiness, of whose excellence scarcely the minutest part can be described by all that human tongues can say. For though we are truly told that the kingdom of God will be full of light, and gladness, and felicity, and glory, yet the things meant by these words remain most remote from sense, and as it were involved in enigma, until the day arrive on which he will manifest his glory to us face to face (1 Cor. 15:54).⁷

So in essence this article is attempting to explain how to prepare for an event that is inexplicable, what angels themselves long to understand. Yet this heavenly union, planted by the Spirit into our hearts at our conversion, grows and sends us onward toward our inevitable destiny. Paul expresses the indescribable nature of our heavenly union when he shares his prayer for the church at Ephesus.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:14-19)

Thus, even as we go on seeking to understand this heavenly union, we must pray that we may do so. The people of God are to be filled with all the fullness of God, which will ultimately occur when the perfect comes at the resurrection. With this biblical and theological knowledge, how do we prepare for the consummation of our heavenly union?

INSTRUCTING FURTHER OUR SOULS AND THOSE WHOM WE LOVE IN OUR HEAVENLY UNION WITH GOD

Though many instructions could be given for this preparation, three primary ones will be encouraged here.

⁶ John Owen. “A Vindication of some Passages in a Discourse concerning Communion with God,” *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2010), 285 (emphasis added).

⁷ Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.25.10.

1. Grow in holiness to prepare for this union.

The eternal, holy God is calling each believer through his Holy Spirit to an eternal, holy enjoyment of him. Each battle he wins in mortification and each step he takes in sanctification are movements toward glorification. Yet the believer must live in awareness of this goal. As the Apostle John tells us, “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (I John 3:2-3).

In his famous sermon *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*, Thomas Chalmers explains how growth in holiness is aided by seeing it as preparation for heaven. Chalmer’s thesis is that we will only give up an object we love if we have a greater object to love. Thus, he states, “The love of the world cannot be expunged by a mere demonstration of the world’s worthlessness. But may it not be supplanted by the love of that which is more worthy than itself?”⁸ After illustrating this thesis in a variety of ways, he concludes his message by imagining a man “standing on the margin of this green world” and looking beyond into a vast, dark unknown void. He would not be compelled to leave the world he knows for that which is unknown. But then Chalmers holds up another scenario:

But if, during the time of his contemplation, some happy island of the blest had floated by; and there had burst upon his senses the light of its surpassing glories, and its sounds of sweeter melody; - and he clearly saw, that there, a purer beauty rested upon every field, and a more heartfelt joy spread itself among all the families; and he could discern there, a peace, and a piety, and a benevolence, which put a moral gladness into every bosom, and united the whole society in one rejoicing sympathy with each other, and with the beneficent Father of them all. - Could he further see, that pain and mortality were there unknown; and above all, that signals of welcome were hung out, and an avenue of communication was made for him - perceive you not, that what was before the wilderness, would become the land of invitation; and that now the world would be the wilderness?⁹

Only those growing in holiness can be suited for the happiness of heaven. As J.C. Ryle explains:

When an eagle is happy in an iron cage, when a sheep is happy in the water, when an owl is happy in the blaze of noonday sun, when a fish is happy on the dry land, then, and not until then, will I admit that the unsanctified man could be happy in heaven.¹⁰

2. Develop your talents to prepare for this union.

Often teachings on heaven and communion with God are devoid of any sense of the resurrection, and are couched in terms that seem to describe a perpetual intermediate state. Yet the intermediate state is not the resurrected or perfected state. Consider that though there is great glory in heaven as it now exists, it has not yet reached its perfected state.

- The creation of God groans for full redemption.

⁸ Thomas Chalmers, “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection,” *The Works of Thomas Chalmers, D.D.* (Philadelphia: A. Towar, Hogan & Thompson, 1833), 381.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 388.

¹⁰ J.C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Wilmington, DE: Associated Publishers and Authors and London: J. Clarke, 1956), 24.

- Christ, the firstfruits of the resurrection, has not seen the full harvest gathered.
- Christ and his people have not yet been vindicated before the world.
- Believers who have died in Christ have not received their resurrected bodies.
- The wicked have not been judged.
- Satan still roams on this earth has not yet been cast into the lake of fire.
- Heaven's last enemy, death, has not yet been swallowed.

Indeed, the Scriptures indicate that believers who have died in the Lord are aware that heaven has not been brought to its perfected state. In Revelation, John sees the martyrs of the early church crying out with loud voices, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:10). Only at Christ's final return will all things be completed. As Murray states succinctly, "Glorification is resurrection."¹¹

Therefore, the people of God need to live with the resurrected state as the ultimate reality before them. The Bible is clear that our eternal rewards in the age to come depend upon, and are connected to, what we have done in this age in service to Christ (Matthew 25:14-46; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15). Thus, the performance of this work should show an awareness of eternity. There is great need for this teaching to be recaptured lest, without it, we become Gnostic, not seeing that what we do as believers in this life has eternal bearing on our lives in the world to come. Reflecting on what our eternal responsibilities will be is as mysterious as trying to understand what living in an immortal, resurrected body will be like. Yet anyone who desires to prepare themselves for an eternal union with the Triune God of the new heavens and new earth through the mediation of God incarnate should view and use their gifts and opportunities for service in the regenerated state as preparation.

3. Receive suffering as soul-humblings to prepare for this union.

To wean us from this world and humble us in preparation for eternity, God often brings suffering into the life of the believer. We hear the apostle connecting these concepts when he says to the Romans, "If we are children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Romans 8:17). Apparently the leaders of the church should be leading in the suffering for Christ's sake but recognize that results in glory. "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed" (1 Peter 5:1). Indeed, all of God's people should take heart in their sufferings and humiliations because of their preparatory nature. "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Corinthians 4:16-17).

Again, Ryle observes the Christian humbling himself for heaven.

¹¹ Murray, 181.

The riper he is for glory, the more, like the ripe corn, he hangs down his head. The brighter and clearer is his light, the more he sees of his shortcomings and infirmities of his own heart. When first converted, he would tell you he saw but little of them compared to what he sees now. Would anyone know whether he is growing in grace? Be sure that you look within for increased humility.¹²

Yet even with these applications before us, thinking merely of an individual preparing himself and others around him to go to heaven upon his death is an insufficient consideration of this subject. “Each saint of God who dies has his own appointed season and therefore his own time to depart and be with Christ. We can see that this event is highly individualized.”¹³ By noting the “highly individualized” nature of our passing from the regenerated state to the intermediate one, Murray is pointing toward the greater and more glorious reality yet to come.

Yet however glorious is the transformation of the people of God at death and however much they may be disposed to say with the apostle that to depart and to be with Christ is far better (cf. Phil. 1:23), this is not their glorification. It is not the goal of the believer’s hope and expectation.¹⁴

LOOKING MORE CLOSELY AT PASTORAL THEOLOGIANS’ EMPHASIS ON OUR HEAVENLY UNION WITH GOD

Murray leads us to one further delineation that must be made regarding this subject. In the contemporary evangelical church, heaven is almost exclusively considered in an individualistic manner. Modern society focuses on an individual’s entrance and experience in heaven almost to the exclusion of corporate considerations.

However, one of the emphases in the Westminster documents is the expression they give to our union with God in more corporate terms. Thus, the Catechism’s statement, expressed in terms of the “communion in glory which the members of the invisible church have with Christ,” gives a driving, Biblical principle for us in contemplating the communal nature of heaven. When Christ prayed his high priestly prayer recorded in John 17, he repeatedly spoke of his followers in such corporate terms reflected in verses such as John 17:24: “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”

Again, Murray says, “This truth that glorification must wait for the resurrection of the body advises us that glorification is something upon which all the people of God will enter together at the same identical point in time.”¹⁵ The church through the ages has never had a joint experience, yet that will occur on the day of the resurrection.

In pastoral theology, this goal of the people of God journeying toward their consummate glory together impacts instruction on caring for the church. One common theme in works on pastoral theology is the idea of pastoral ministry preparing the congregation to be heaven-ready. For instance, in the fourth century, one of the Great Cappadocians Gregory Nazianzen stated this aim of pastoral ministry in full Trinitarian language:

¹² Kenneth Prior, *The Way of Holiness: A Study in Christian Growth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 88.

¹³ Murray, 175

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

The scope of our art is to provide the soul with wings, to rescue it from the world and give it to God, and to watch over that which is in His image, if it abides; to take it by the hand, if it is in danger; or to restore it, if ruined; to make Christ dwell in the heart by the Spirit: and in short, to deify, and bestow heavenly bliss upon, one who belongs to the heavenly host.¹⁶

Gregory then says that the shepherds of God's people must:

feed His flock with knowledge...(so that Christ may) give strength and power unto His people, and Himself present to Himself His flock resplendent and spotless and worthy of the fold on high, in the habitation of them that rejoice, in the splendour of the saints, so that in His temple everyone, both flock and shepherds together may say, Glory, in Christ Jesus our Lord, to Whom be all glory for ever and ever. Amen.¹⁷

Likewise, a millennium later, Martin Bucer framed his guidance for pastoral ministry by explaining what the nature and characteristics of the church are:

Namely, that it is the most united gathering and communion; that its extent is seen in that believers and all the elect are led to Christ the Lord and are built up and provided for, so that they neither lose nor lack any good thing, whether corporal or spiritual, but are constantly led on and encouraged to perfect salvation of body and soul.¹⁸

Though examples could be multiplied, suffice it to say that if the whole of God's people will one day participate together in the consummation of our union with Christ, ministers would do well to prepare them for such a day.

VIEWING MINISTRY TO THE CHURCH AS NECESSARY PREPARATION FOR OUR HEAVENLY UNION WITH GOD

With these truths in mind, ministers should be preparing their sheep for a heavenly glory with God. Three further corporate preparations can be given.

Use each Lord's Day as a stepping stone toward heavenly glory.

As George Swinnock said about the Lord's Day, "Prepare to meet thy God, O Christian!"¹⁹ If the church is on a spiritual pilgrimage to eternity with God, then week-by-week as she gathers for worship each Lord's Day the congregation has taken a step closer to this great event. The minister should emphasize the holiness of the Lord's Day—the holy day, the holy sacraments, the holy Word of God, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the holiness of the saints—to remind the church of its journey toward eternal union with God. Each Lord's Day is bringing the church closer to the Day of the Lord.

¹⁶ Philip Schaff, *Nicene & Post-Nicene Series 2 Vol 7: Cyril Of Jerusalem: Catechetical Lectures, Gregory Of Nazianzum: Orations, Sermons, Letters, Prolegomena* (London: A&C Black, 1980), 209.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 227.

¹⁸ Martin Bucer, *Concerning The True Care of Souls*, trans. by Peter Beale (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 6-7.

¹⁹ J.I. Packer, *The Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision for the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 257.

Preach the Word of God corporately to the people.

Often the minister's aim is to make personal applications of the Scriptures. Yet so much of the Bible is written to the congregation of God's people and was to be read and applied corporately. Thus, the minister should not only address each person but also see the whole body of Christ and preach to it corporately. He should urge each member of the church to supply what is lacking in others. If we comprehend in preaching that we are preparing the bride for Christ (Ephesians 5:25-27), for an eternity of dwelling with the Triune God in what Edwards refers to as "the world of love," then we will be deliberately helping them see the Trinity at work in their lives for the sake of the body of Christ.

Structure the service deliberately to be Trinitarian in its essence.

The minister must be intentional in planning the worship service to guide the congregation in this direction the implanted Spirit is taking them. One simple yet effective means of encouraging more heavenly mindedness in the congregation is insuring that names of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are used in the worship service. The Father should be prayed to in the name of the Son as the presence and power of the Holy Spirit is sought. The preaching of Christ should regularly acknowledge the Father's plan and the congregation's reliance on the Spirit's work. Singing should draw attention to the Triune God at work.

Perhaps in the Reformed Presbyterian Church, our eyes have been somewhat blind to this truth when the Psalms are sung. We properly encourage seeing the Christology of the Psalms (Luke 24:27, 44). Yet, does the noting of Christ also include the other persons of the Godhead? Consider the most well know psalm, Psalm 23. We readily recognize the shepherd is Jesus Christ. Yet do we also see the Shepherd is leading us on paths of righteousness that takes us through the valley of the shadow of death to the destination of dwelling forever in the Father's house, just as Jesus promised in John 14:1-3? Do we see that the Shepherd provides through the Spirit the peaceful food of green pastures, the refreshing drink of quiet waters, the anointing of oil upon our heads, and the provision of a table in the midst of enemies? The minister must show the congregation regularly that through Christ we enjoy now this heavenly union even as he leads us toward its final consummation.

Sinclair Ferguson reminds us of this truth when he says,

I've often reflected on the rather obvious thought that when his disciples were about to have the world collapse in on them, our Lord spent so much time in the Upper Room speaking to them about the mystery of the Trinity. If anything could underline the necessity of Trinitarianism for practical Christianity, that must surely be it!²⁰

Being brought to where Christ's death and resurrection ultimately were designed to take us is "the perfect and full communion" (WLC 90).

²⁰ Letham, 375 (see also 423).