ONE WITH THE HEAD, ONE WITH THE BODY: ECCLESIAL IMPLICATIONS OF UNION WITH CHRIST FOR MEMBERSHIP, BAPTISM, AND COMMUNION.

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ABSTRACT. John Murray once wrote of the doctrine of union with Christ that ‘It is not simply a step in the application of redemption…it underlies every step of the application of redemption.’ Union with Christ is a doctrine with significant soteriological import. However, it is not only in the realm of soteriology that union with Christ bears significance. This article seeks to explore the ecclesial implications of union with Christ. After working towards a definition of union with Christ, the ecclesial implications will be considered for baptism, membership, and communion.

KEYWORDS: union with Christ, ecclesiology, soteriology, baptism, membership, communion

Introduction

In 1955, in his acclaimed volume, Redemption Accomplished and Applied, John Murray penned that the doctrine of union with Christ was ‘the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation. It is not simply a step in the application of redemption…it underlies every step of the application of redemption…Indeed the whole process of salvation has its origin in one phase of union with Christ’ (Murray 1955: 171). Murray was after the connectedness that comes with the doctrine of union with Christ and the conversation of soteriology. Indeed, he, and many who have come before and after him, demonstrated how much of the ordu salutis finds its genesis in the sacred union between Christ and his people. There is a systematic connection between participation in Christ and each thread of the soteric enterprise. If you pull any one strand the whole fabric of redemption will begin to tear.

This woven reality of union and salvation is not the only loci of theology tightly wounded. The arms of union with Christ’s theological implications are not satisfied to grapple with soteriology alone. On the contrary, ramifications from the cosmos-changing event of Christ’s union of himself to his people manifest in almost

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every lane of systematic theology. The purpose of this essay is to traverse one of these lanes—ecclesiology—in hopes of demonstrating the ecclesial implications of union with Christ. By way of jurisdiction, this essay will treat three areas of ecclesiology as test cases: membership, baptism, and communion. In terms of method, we will first work towards a definition of union with Christ, place the doctrine in its covenantal context, then apply the conversation to the ecclesial test cases. Let us then proceed with this thesis in mind: The doctrine of union with Christ bears ecclesial significance and should impact the way churches participate and practice church membership, baptism, and communion.

Towards a Definition of Union with Christ

Writing in the introduction to his first book-length treatment on the doctrine of union with Christ, Robert Lethem penned a telling line. After demonstrating the importance of the doctrine throughout church history, using emphatic statements from theologians ranging from the Reformation to the present, Letham said, ‘When one asks what in fact this union consists in, however, what it actually is, there is a general silence’ (Letham 2011: 1). Letham is observant here, for when it comes to defining the doctrine of union with Christ, superlatives abound greater than articulations of definition.

Disagreement is the leading culprit aiding the difficulty of arriving at a definition. Students of the conversation’s antiquity see, in a short time, the discussion tends to create more questions than answers and can divide those who are usually together. Consensus is out on several queries, including What is the relationship between union with Christ and justification? Does an ontological union with an impeccable and perfect Christ render forensic soteriology redundant at best or irrelevant at worst? Is the proper language for the conversation that of ‘participation’ or ‘mystical union?’ Is union with Christ a step in the ordo salutis, or should it be an umbrella category for all soteriology? Is the ‘in’ of ‘in Christ’ locative, ontological, or a designation of sphere? Does uniting the church to Christ lead to an eastern understanding of theosis?

{Several scholars have done the helpful work of compiling or at least bringing some of the varying positions into conversation. Cf. Evans 2015: 12-30; Clark, Evans 2016; Evans 2008; Barrett 2019: 469-503.}

Though disagreements proliferate, what seems unanimous is the significance of the doctrine itself. One after another, theologians, both past and present, marvel at the mystical union. One of the most oft-quoted instances is found in Calvin’s Institutes:
We must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to us. Therefore, to share in what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us…all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him (Calvin 2008: 349).

Vanhoozer determined that the theme was so prevalent in the Pauline corpus that he stated, ‘to be or not to be in Christ was, for Paul, the only question’ (Thate, Vanhoozer, Campbell, 2014: 3). Constantine Campbell affirmed Vanhoozer’s assessment of Pauline emphasis and said, ‘The theme of union with Christ in the writings of the apostle Paul is at once dazzling and perplexing. Its prevalence on every page of his writing demonstrates his proclivity for the concept… yet nowhere does he directly explain what he means by it. This creates a problem for any student of Paul’s theology, since union with Christ is both important yet obtuse’ (Campbell 2012: 21). The literary exchange regarding a definition of union with Christ leaves readers in ambiguity and astonishment. However, for this essay, we will move forward knowing that union with Christ refers to the pneumatological work wherein the Spirit unites believers to the humanity of Christ such that what he has and is in his humanity becomes theirs as his active and passive obedience. All their soteric benefits are applied to them.

**The Covenantal Context of Union with Christ**

Before we move to examine the ecclesial implications of union with Christ, it will prove important to place the doctrine in its proper covenantal context. Union with Christ is the intersection of Sinai and Zion. The author of Hebrews compares the two mountains in chapter twelve. He said of Sanai that, ‘they could not endure the order that was given, if even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned. Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear”’ (Hebrews 12:20-21). This is contrasted with the joy of Mount Zion, of which the author said, ‘but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem’ (Hebrews 12:22a).

In the person and work of Christ, Sinai and Zion meet. He is the one who mediates the New Covenant and fulfills the prolegomenous requirement of accomplishing the Old Covenant. The completion of the law is found in this one man, Jesus Christ, and his covenantal fulfillment on behalf of all who are ‘in him.’ Therefore, any conversation of union with Christ must include this covenantal context.

Any sinner grafted into Christ has been united to the mediator of the New Covenant who has satisfied the demands of Sinai on their behalf, which grants them a place on the better mountain of Zion. Foreign, then, to the doctrine of union with Christ is an unholy branch grafted into the pure vine. For, we shall see, the mem-
bers of the body will reflect the head of the body. If the head is holy, the body can rest in the holiness given them by the head. This covenantal context plays a vital role in developing argumentation for a believers’ church, believer’s baptism, and a believer’s Table.

Union with Christ and Church Membership

Over a century ago, Augustus Hopkins Strong bemoaned the lack of literature surrounding the topic of union with Christ. He said, ‘the majority of printed systems of doctrine, however, contain no chapter or section on Union with Christ, and the majority of Christians much more frequently think of Christ as a Savior outside of them, than as a Savior who dwells within’ (Strong 1909: 795). Strong would rejoice to know that the literary silence regarding union with Christ has ended.

The renaissance in works dealing explicitly with the subject of union with Christ demonstrates a number of themes. One important theme is the communal aspect of this great doctrine. This foundational idea is simple and entails little controversy; any controversy comes after examining implications. The foundational connection between union with Christ and Christ’s community of the Church is that to be grafted into the Head—Christ himself—is to be grafted into the Body. In his work, Paul and Union With Christ, Constantine Campbell includes the communal aspect of union with Christ in his four-fold definition. Campbell stated:

Union gathers up faith union in Christ, mutual indwelling, Trinitarian, and nuptial notions. Participation conveys partaking in the events of Christ’s narrative. Identification refers to believer’s location in the realm of Christ and their allegiance to his lordship. Incorporation encapsulates the corporate dimensions of membership in Christ’s body (Campbell 2012: 413-414).

Campbell is right to include ‘incorporation’ in his definition of union with Christ. The New Testament knows no such thing as a believer united to Christ and not united to his body. Three biblical texts prove pertinent for our discussion: (1) Ephesians 2:19-22; (2) John 15:5; (3) and John 17:22-23.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote concerning ‘the new man’ being formed in the Church consisting of both gentiles and Jews. He stated, ‘So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God’ (Ephesians 2:19). The communal identity of this passage shows up early as Paul, addressing Gentiles, claimed that they are ‘fellow citizens’ and ‘members’ with the saints. Moreover, this citizenship is ‘built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord’ (Ephe-
The stability of the structure, according to Paul, is that it has a sturdy cornerstone in Christ. Furthermore, Paul invokes union language as he states, ‘In Him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit’ (Ephesians 2:22). The product of the structure is that we, as believers—first Jews and now Gentiles—are being built together. Yet the locative reality is ‘in him,’ which provides the source of the communal life of the Christian.

This is also the principle behind John 15:5. The author moves from an architectural metaphor to an agricultural one. In Ephesians, the unity of the body was rooted in the cornerstone of Christ; in the fourth gospel, the unity of the body is rooted in the vine of Christ. Both the cornerstone and the vine provide the necessary and antecedent conditions for the Church’s membership in one another. However, the *crux interpretum* of our discussion is John 17:20-23. John stated, ‘I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.’ He continued, ‘The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.’

In this passage there is a double foundation. The foundation of communion shared between the saints is built on the foundation of Christ’s union with them. However, in a statement laced with theological implication, Jesus’ prayer in chapter seventeen builds on the prolegomenous foundation of *perichoresis* in the Trinity ad intra. Stephen Holmes defines *perichoresis* as interpenetration such that the ‘ontological identity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: each necessarily fully and mutually filled and was filled by the others as each is an instantiation of the same ineffable substance’ (Holmes 212: 120).

Systematically, bringing in the concept of interpenetration of perichoresis in the Trinity *ad intra* proves helpful to the reader in understanding the circumstances of union with Christ and the community of Saints. D.A. Carson is insightful here, using the distinction of persons in the Godhead in light of interpenetration: ‘The Father and the Son are distinguishable (the pre-incarnate Word is ‘with’ God, 1:1; the Son prays to his Father; the Father commissions and sends, while the Son obeys), yet they are one’ (Carson 1991: 568). Of course, building off Carson, a helpful clarification comes by way of the eternal modes of subsistence. The eternal modes of subsistence are the ultimate and only basis of distinction between the persons of the Godhead. Nevertheless, if the perichoretic relationship of the Godhead is the archetype, then the unified yet distinguishable relationship between the saints with membership in the church is the ectype. Again, Carson helps us here: ‘the believers, still distinct, are
to be one in purpose, in love, in action undertaken with and for one another, in joint submission to the revelation received’ (Carson 1991: 568). In one sense, an ecclesial implication of union with Christ is that Christians must forfeit the notion of supreme individuality. Yet, this is done in a manner in which the parts of the whole are still distinguishable and identifiable as parts. This implication should be understood as an ontological implication of union with Christ in that it speaks to what the church is—that is, an identifiable body of believers who, while maintaining a distinguishable identity, nevertheless come together as ‘one body’ that subsides in the head, vine, and cornerstone that is Christ.

This is not the only ontological implication of union with Christ for the Christian community. The second deals explicitly with the type of person who comprises this community. When understood in its proper covenantal context, another ecclesial implication of the doctrine of union with Christ is a commitment to a pure and unmixed believers’ church. John Hammett picks up on the proximity between union with Christ, church membership, and a covenantal context, ‘Membership in the body of 1 Corinthians 6:15-17 and Ephesians 5:30 is associated with union with Christ and the image of marriage, suggesting that church membership, like marriage, involves a covenantal commitment’ (Hammett 2015: 171). While Hammett refers to the covenantal nature of the horizontal relationship between members of the body, there is another implication for the vertical covenantal relationship between those grafted to the body and the head.

In the person and work of Christ, the law has been fulfilled, and righteousness—through passive and active obedience—has been obtained. Acting as the head of the body, any who have been grafted into the body have Christ as their representative and receive, therefore, the benefit of his obedience imputed to them. The merits of the Church’s covenant-fulfilling representative is the basis for their forensic pardon. This soteriological gift is granted to the believer by faith in union with Christ. Consequently, union with Christ leads to salvation. As Paul instructed the Ephesian church, ‘in Christ’ there is ‘every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places’ (Ephesians 1:3). This includes the spiritual blessing of salvation. As Lane Tipton writes, ‘all saving benefits of the gospel, including justification, sanctification, or adoption, are given to believers only in terms of faith-union with the crucified and resurrected Christ of Scripture’ (Tipton, 2007: 24-25).

Therefore, what emerges from a dogmatic account of union with Christ and the ecclesial community is a believing church made up of regenerate members who have received the blessing of salvation. The logical syllogism is reasonably straightforward:

Premise one: It is inconsistent to conceive of a member of Christ's church not united to Christ himself. As we've seen in the numerous analogies of the New Testa-
ment, Christ is the lifeblood of the Church. If the church is a temple, he is the corner-
stone (in the architectural metaphor). If the church is a body, he is the head (in the
anatomical metaphor). And if the church is a branch, he is the sustaining vine (in the
agricultural metaphor). There is no life in the church apart from union with Christ.

Premise two: It is inconsistent to conceive of a member of Christ’s church who is
united to Christ himself and yet unregenerate. To use the agricultural metaphor of
abiding in John 15, just as it is impossible for a branch unattached to the vine to bear
fruit, it is just as impossible for those branches attached to the vine not to bear fruit.
In Christ, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, including the divine perfection of
holiness; none grafted into the holy cornerstone remain unholy.

Conclusion: If all who are united to Christ become members of his body, and all
who are members of his body are purified and regenerated by his grace and righ-
teousness, then every member of the church ought to be redeemed and regenerated.
Unlike the Old Covenant, the New Covenant community is not a mixture of believ-
ing and unbelieving members. The covenantal context of union with Christ bears the
ecclesial implication of a believers’ church.

While the two ecclesial implications of union with Christ mentioned above are
ontological, another type of consequence exists in virtue of our union with Christ—
ethical implications. Since it would take an entire volume to exhaust the ethical-ec-
clesial implications of union with Christ, we will focus on only two.

The first is that of church discipline. Given the syllogism above, this conclusion
comes without much trouble. If those united to Christ are united to his body, then
the dogmatic and ecclesial implication is that the Church must endeavor to keep the
purity of her members and remove those members who seem to be lacking the vital
connection of union with Christ. Moreover, as we will see, union with Christ in the
ordinances entails a ‘proclamation’ of Christ in communion as it does in mem-
bership. Jonathan Leeman has said that church membership leads to ‘making Christ’s
covenantal presence on earth public in a particular time and place. Not only that,
curch membership is the office that a believer assumes in exercising that same over-
sight of other believers, an office created by one’s justification and formally autho-
rized by Jesus’ keys’ (Leeman 2016: 362).

In other words, union with Christ is a proclamation of Christ that necessitates
church discipline to keep the message and messengers pure. Far from being just a
systematic implication of the given propositions, this ecclesial implication is a bib-
lical reality that the reader has already come across. For, in John 17, as Jesus recalls
the perichoresis shared between him and the Father and the consequential unity be-
tween believers, he states that this unity serves ‘that the world might know that you
have sent me.’
The final ethical-ecclesial implication rooted in union with Christ is familial. Readers can see from both Romans 8 and Ephesians 2 that a consequence of the horizontal union of believers is a new family. This new family has been adopted in Triune love such that they can speak the script of Christ, their brother, and call God, 'Abba, Father.' Moreover, this familial tie means that any 'dividing wall of hostility' has been nullified. No social, ethnic, or religious barrier can come between the members of Christ's new united family.

**Union with Christ and the Ordinances**

To move onto the implications of union with Christ for the ordinances is not to confess the irrelevance of the previous material. On the contrary, the discussion is needed and logically prior to the discussion surrounding union with Christ and the ordinances. Church membership and the implications above, along with the covenantal context, are foundations on which we build the dogmatic case of a union-informed understanding of baptism and communion. Again, Jonathan Leeman is helpful here, 'Church membership therefore depends upon the local church's affirmation and oversight of an individual believer's profession of faith, which it does through the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper' (Leeman 2016: 362).

Robert Peterson was correct to conclude that, 'although baptism and the Lord's Supper have several meanings, they hold their most basic and profound meaning in common—union with Christ' (Peterson 2014: 395). Moreover, Peterson succinctly captured the temporal significance of union with Christ on the ordinances when he stated, 'baptism signifies union with Christ once and for all, while the Lord's Supper signifies ongoing union and communion with Christ' (Ibid.).

Similarly, Grant McCaskill moves Peterson's idea a step further and states that the role of the sacraments is one of 'demarcation.' He states, 'The sacraments have been understood to demarcate the sacramental community as those whose identity is governed by the death and resurrection of Jesus. In representing the Church's union with God in such terms, the sacraments declare that participation is of a particular shape and kind' (McCaskill 2013: 192).

If McCaskill is correct, the observant reader may anticipate the primary ecclesial implication of union with Christ for baptism given the conclusions thus far. Bringing Letham, Peterson, and McCaskill together, baptism serves as the ‘once-for-all’ ordinance to ‘demarcate’ those who have been united to Christ and is, therefore, the body’s public affirmation of a profession of faith. Consequently, the credo-baptistic understanding of regeneration prior to baptism seems to do the most justice to the doctrine of union with Christ.
Several verses are important to articulate a relationship between union with Christ and baptism, but perhaps none more than Romans 6:1-5. The passage's importance to this conversation necessitates its full quotation:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:1-5)

First, it is important to note that the recipients of this passage are those ‘who have died to sin.’ These are regenerate believers who have already been united to Christ by faith, and Paul is therefore reminding them of what is already true of their lot. Thomas Schreiner confirms the believing nature of the recipients, ‘Yet to separate baptism from other dimensions of the conversion experience is mistaken. For Paul, the events of baptism, faith, reception of the Spirit, repentance, and confession of Christ are one complex, and all occur at conversion’ (Schreiner 2018: 312). He continues, ‘Paul refers to believers as baptized because unbaptized Christians would be an anomaly’ (Ibid.).

Second, the purpose of this pericope is to answer Paul’s rhetorical question, ‘Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?’ This question is rhetorical because, for Paul, the answer is obvious. Michael Bird describes the thought as ‘incompatible,’ saying that there is an ‘incompatibility between baptism into Christ and remaining in sin’ (Bird 2016: 196). Bird continues to describe baptism Paul has in mind here, saying, ‘Baptism is the sign and seal that believers have entered into the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and its liberating power is manifested in them’ (Ibid.). Paul answers his question with emphasis, ‘By no means!’ Paul knows that those who have been united to Christ and have partaken in this grace will experience the ‘double grace’ of justification and sanctification such that they will put off the old self.

The final relevant detail in this passage is that Paul says that we are not only baptized into Christ’s death but we are united into his resurrection. Here, the implications of union with Christ for the ordinance of baptism become controversial, yet the logic is again straightforward. First, if we concede with Leeman, Peterson, and McCaskill that baptism is an initiation rite into membership with the church, our previous conclusion of membership requiring regeneration would lead us to the credobaptist conclusion that only those who have clung to Christ by faith should receive such an initiation rite. Second, even if the systematic account of the previous pages
were nullified, the credobaptist impulse seems validated in this passage as none are baptized into his death who are not united with Christ in his resurrection.

A second pertinent passage is Galatians 3:24-27, ‘so then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus, you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.’ The significance of this passage parallels the former. There is a correlation between forensic justification found in union with Christ and baptism into Christ. This passage makes explicit the means to obtain this union, namely ‘through faith.’ Moreover, readers ought not to miss the encompassing word ‘all.’ ‘All’ who have taken hold of Christ by faith in union with Christ have ‘put on Christ’ and become ‘sons of God.’

The ecclesial implication of union with Christ is that there seems to be proximity between trusting Christ by faith, forensic justification, the believer’s union with Christ, and baptism. These realities come together to make a case for the credobaptist understanding of baptism.

We turn now to communion. It is not difficult to find sources which attempt to demonstrate its relationship with the doctrine of union with Christ. The Scriptures make this relationship explicit in themselves. The two most significant passages for a discussion on union with Christ and communion are in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians: 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. The former states, ‘the cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.’ The latter states, ‘For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “this is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, after supper saying, “this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.’

These two passages are fitting to be the concluding passages examined. They bring together multiple themes discussed throughout this essay. As Robert Peterson observed about the former text, ‘First Corinthians 10:16 tells of vertical fellowship with Christ in the Supper, and verse 17 tells of horizontal fellowship with other believers in the Supper based on that vertical fellowship’ (Peterson 2014: 404).

Peterson is after the interconnectivity of union with Christ and the Lord’s Supper. As we saw with church membership, the believer’s union with Christ influences the believer’s union with fellow believers. This ecclesial implication of union with Christ
is carried into the Supper. Moreover, the ectypal relationship of the one-and-the-many in the body of Christ demonstrates the archetypal relationship of the perichoretic relationship of the Godhead *ad intra* resurfaces analogously in the one bread and many members. The members of the Godhead, the individual members, and the individual morsels of bread are all identifiable and distinguishable, yet though they are many, they are one. This is a direct ecclesial implication of union with Christ on the creature side of the creator/creature distinction.

Finally, like the believers-only church and the believers-only baptism, another ecclesial implication of union with Christ is a believers-only Table. Again, the covenantal context of union with Christ is important here. 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 instructs that participation at the Table is participation in the body and blood of Christ. This is covenantal language, and if there was any doubt, Paul makes this explicitly clear in the next chapter as he quotes Jesus himself invoking the New Covenant of his blood. This is consequential as we have seen no partaking in the ‘blood’ nor the ‘body’ of Christ apart from a faith-union with Christ. Consequently, if baptism is the initiation and once-for-all rite of union with Christ, communion is the reoccurring sign of the New Covenant for which the price is faith and trust in Jesus Christ as Lord.

**Conclusion**

The thesis of this paper is that the doctrine of union with Christ is not void of ecclesial significance and should impact the way churches participate and practice church membership, baptism, and communion. Throughout the essay, we have worked through a definition of union with Christ, the covenantal context of the believer’s union with Christ, and then sought to apply these realities to church membership, baptism, and communion. If our conclusions are correct, union with Christ should impact the way local churches practice all three ecclesial events. In summary fashion, and to tie the thesis with our conclusion, these implications are: (1) union with Christ entails a believers-only church in which regeneration is a prerequisite to church membership; (2) union with Christ entails that those who are united to the head are, without exception, united to the body, and this unification means the nullification of both supreme individuality and any ‘dividing walls of hostility’; (3) union with Christ entails a robust practice of church discipline as being united to the body means the call of acting as an ambassador of Christ demonstrating the embassy of Christ’s rule; (4) union with Christ entails believers’ baptism as all, without fail, who are baptized into the death of Christ are baptized into the resurrection of Christ; (5) union with Christ entails a believers-only communion as partakers in the Supper are participating in the blood of Christ and the body of Christ for which faith in Christ is a prerequisite.
Bibliography


