



## Part 4: Chapter 9

# “Christ Is Made Ours:” Calvin’s Doctrine of Union

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### Significance

Is union with Jesus Christ a significant subject for John Calvin (1509-1564), the great French Reformer? Yes! First, here is an explicit statement from Calvin to this effect: union with Christ is “accorded by us the highest degree of importance” (*Institutes* 3.11.10).<sup>1</sup>

Second, consider Calvin’s own theological presentation. Book 3 of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is entitled, “The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us From It, and What Effects Follow.” Roughly speaking, this third book unfolds the doctrine of salvation or soteriology. Book 3 of Calvin’s *Institutes* begins (and develops) the truth of union with Christ:

First, 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 for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to

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<sup>1</sup> All citations of the *Institutes* are from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960).

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become ours and to dwell within us. For this reason, he is called “our Head” [Eph. 4:15], and “the first-born among many brethren” [Rom. 8:29]. We also, in turn, are said to be “engrafted into him” [Rom. 11:17], and to “put on Christ” [Gal. 3:27]; for, as I have said, all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him (*Institutes* 3.1.1).

In other words, soteriology for Calvin is treated under the theme of *unio cum Christo*!

Third, union with Christ is necessary for the glory of the Lord Jesus. Calvin declares this to be

the highest honour of the Church, that, until he is united to us, the Son of God reckons himself in some measure imperfect. What consolation is it for us to learn, that, not until we are along with him, does he possess all his parts, or wish to be regarded as complete! Hence, in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, when the apostle discusses largely the metaphor of a human body [I Cor. 12:12-31], he includes under the single name of Christ the whole Church [v. 12] (Comm. on Eph. 1:23).<sup>2</sup>

The importance of union with Christ in the theology of the Genevan Reformer is widely recognized in the secondary literature, with dogmaticians, Calvin scholars and writers on the mystical union from around the globe all in agreement.

First, as an example of a dogmatician, we cite Abraham Kuyper: “The theologians who represent divine truth most purely lay most stress upon” union with Christ, states the prolific Dutchman, before adding that “among the reformers ... not one of them has presented this *unio mystica*, this spiritual union with Christ, so incessantly, so tenderly, and with such holy fire as” Calvin.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations from Calvin's commentaries are from the 22-volume Baker (repr. 1993) edition, with all italics being in the original.

<sup>3</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, repr. 1946), pp. 324-325.

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Second, Scottish Calvin scholar Ronald Wallace writes,

Calvin notes that in defining the means by which we are saved it is better to use the phrase *in Christ* rather than *by Christ* [Comms. on Rom. 6:11; I Cor. 1:5], for the former phrase has more expressiveness and force and denotes the union with Christ which is such a necessary part of the Gospel.<sup>4</sup>

Third, the American Rankin Wilbourne, author of a recent book on the mystical union, states,

For Calvin, union with Christ is not—cannot be—an optional aspect of our salvation. The person of Christ is our salvation. Every benefit of the gospel comes to us through and only through our union with him. For Calvin, the mystery of our spiritual connection to the living, incarnate, crucified, resurrected, and ascended Lord is what it means to be “saved.”<sup>5</sup>

Finally, Constantine R. Campbell of the Anglican Church of Australia states that *unio cum Christo* “features so prominently” in Calvin “but not consistently in the Reformed tradition.”<sup>6</sup> This is a sad defect in some sections of Protestantism historically.<sup>7</sup> Especially where this weakness obtains today, pastors and believ-

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1959), pp. 17-18; italics Wallace's. “This union between Christ and us,” according to another Scotsman, Alasdair I. C. Heron, “lies at the very heart of Calvin's theology” (*The Holy Spirit* [Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1983], p. 103).

<sup>5</sup> Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2016), p. 106.

<sup>6</sup> Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), p. 440.

<sup>7</sup> Richard A. Muller would offer cautions against too sweeping a criticism here, though his survey deals only with Reformed theologians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (*Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012], e.g., pp. 203-205, 211, 212-213, 219, 222, 238-243).

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ers need to recover the scriptural doctrine of union with Christ, which is ably set forth by the French Reformer.

In Calvin's theology, his teaching on union with Christ is not only remarkable but, as these opening remarks suggest and as the rest of this chapter will demonstrate, it is also highly biblical yet clearly distinctive, as well as theologically profound and deeply moving.<sup>8</sup>

### Revelation, Description and Imagery

Calvin knew that the truth of union with God—never mind the fact that it is only through Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit—was too deep for the unaided reason of the pagan philosophers, even the best of them.

The ancient philosophers anxiously discussed the sovereign good, and even contended among themselves over it. Yet none but Plato recognized man's highest good as union with God, and he could not even dimly sense its nature. And no wonder, for he had learned nothing of the sacred bond of that union (*Institutes* 3.25.2).

Calvin explains that this "mystery" of "Christ in you" (Col. 1:26-27) is only revealed through the gospel of the incarnation and cross of the Son of God, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the catholic or universal church:

Here we have a commendation of the gospel—that it is a wonderful secret of God ... Here he [i.e., Paul] calls it a *sublime secret*, which was *hid from ages and generations*, that is, from the beginning of the world, through so

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<sup>8</sup> On the last page of his work on Calvin's life and theology, François Wendel makes this penetrating and intriguing statement: "The imprint of his personality can best be seen in the emphasis that he put upon this or that doctrine, and in the practical consequences that he was concerned to draw from his notion of union with the Christ" (*Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet [London: William Collins, 1963], p. 360).

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many revolutions of ages. Now, that it is of the gospel that he speaks, is evident from Romans 16:25, Ephesians 3:9, and other similar passages (Comm. on Col. 1:26).

Our commentator continues his exposition of the “mystery,” as taught in various New Testament texts, in connection with union with the Lord Jesus:

... all that secret is contained in Christ, and ... all the riches of heavenly wisdom are obtained by them when they have Christ ... He [i.e., Paul] adds, *in you*, because they now possess Christ, from whom they were lately so much estranged, that nothing could exceed it. Lastly, he calls Christ the *hope of glory*, that they may know that nothing is wanting to them for complete blessedness when they have obtained Christ (Comm. on Col. 1:27).

Though Calvin nowhere provides us with a definition of union with Christ, here are two of his moving descriptions of this blessed reality:

Christ is made ours ... [Our union with Jesus is] that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union ... so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed ... we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body ... because he deigns to make us one with him (*Institutes* 3.11.10).<sup>9</sup>

Christ is not outside us but dwells within us. Not only does he cleave to us by an indivisible bond of fellowship, but with a wonderful communion, day by day, he grows more and more into one body with us, until he becomes completely one with us (*Institutes* 3.2.24).

In these two quotations and throughout his writings, Calvin views union with Christ as both mutual and dynamic. It is a mu-

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<sup>9</sup> The first four words of this quotation have been taken as the opening clause of the title of this chapter. Calvin also uses this, and similar, language elsewhere.

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tual union, for, individually, I am in Him and He is in me, and, collectively, we are one with Him and He is one with us. Christ is made ours and we are made His! It is a dynamic union, for Christ “grows more and more into one body with us” (*Institutes* 3.2.24), and we “grow together into him [Eph. 4:15]” (*Institutes* 3.24.5). Calvin describes this mutual and dynamic union in terms of forming and birthing:

That Christ should be formed in us is the same thing with our being formed in Christ; for we are born [again] so as to become new creatures in him; and he, on the other hand, is born in us, so that we live his life (Comm. on Gal. 4:19).

What are the images that Calvin uses to portray our union with the Lord Jesus? First, plant imagery: roots, branches and the vine. Second, anatomical (body) imagery: head, body and members. Third marital (conjugal) imagery: husband and wife. Christ is made ours as our vine, our head and our husband!

Why these images? These are the ones used in inspired Scripture.<sup>10</sup> Whereas the ancient monks quarried the Song of Solomon when they considered union with Christ, John Calvin especially dug into the epistles of Paul.

Which of these biblical images does Calvin most use? Whereas the marital imagery of union with Christ dominates in the pre-Reformation church and Herman Hoeksema gravitates to plant imagery, the Genevan Reformer prefers anatomical imagery. The Bible verse to which he most frequently appeals in this connection is Ephesians 5:30: “For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Paul Wells: “Union with Christ is presented in a rich and varied bouquet of language in the New Testament texts” (“Calvin and Union with Christ: The Heart of Christian Doctrine,” in Joel R. Beeke and Garry J. Williams (eds.), *Calvin: Theologian and Reformer* [Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010], p. 74).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Dennis E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism*

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### Nouns and Adjectives

What nouns and phrases does Calvin use to portray the truth of our union with Christ? It is

- a mystical union or union with God
- a bond or fellowship or communion
- a partaking of Christ or a sharing in Him
- an engrafting or joining
- being in the Spirit or being indwelt by the Spirit
- a growing together or becoming one

Putting many of these concepts together, Christ is made ours in a mystical union or bond of fellowship by engrafting, so that we partake of Him and grow together in Him through the indwelling Spirit.

The above are easily recognized as biblical words or phrases, or expressions of scriptural ideas. But which of them does Calvin use most often when he writes of union with Christ? Engrafting<sup>12</sup> or our being grafted or ingrafted into Jesus.<sup>13</sup> By our theologian, this engrafting into Christ, surprisingly, is developed more often in anatomical imagery than in plant imagery.<sup>14</sup> Reasons for this may include Calvin's translation of Christ's statement, "I am the true vine," as "I am the vineyard" (Comm. on John 15:1)<sup>15</sup> and the measure of reserve he shows in his commentary on Romans 11:16-21 with its plant imagery, including its references to olive trees and the engrafting of branches.<sup>16</sup>

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of St. Bernard (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), pp. 90, 105.

<sup>12</sup> Latin: *insero* (sow, plant, put in, insert), *insitio* (graft, grafting).

<sup>13</sup> Tamburello, *Union with Christ*, pp. 85, 90, 99, 111.

<sup>14</sup> If we simply consider the *Institutes*, instances of anatomical engrafting (e.g., 3.2.24; 3.2.35; 3.6.3; 3.11.10; 3.13.5; 3.22.7; 3.24.5; 4.17.33) exceed those of the engrafting of branches (e.g., 4.15.5). Calvin also speaks of believers being engrafted into the church (e.g., 4.17.1).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Wells, "Calvin and Union with Christ," p. 74.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin does, however, develop the arboreal imagery in some detail in his

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What adjectives does Calvin use to describe our union with Christ? Here are many, if not all, of the main ones:

- spiritual, supernatural and heavenly
- holy and sacred
- blessed and wonderful
- inseparable and everlasting
- indestructible, indivisible and indissoluble
- secret, mysterious and incomprehensible
- close and intimate

Thus Christ is made ours in a wonderful union that is supernatural and sacred, as well as indestructible, incomprehensible and intimate!<sup>17</sup>

### Intimate

Just how close or intimate is our union with Christ? Robert Letham states that in Calvin's (Latin) writings, "This union is stronger and closer than merely fellowship (*consortis*) or affinity, association, or partnership (*societatis*)."<sup>18</sup>

Let us follow the argument of the French Reformer himself in his commentaries on I Corinthians 6, Colossians 1 and Galatians 3. The earthly marriage "bond" between a man and a woman "is

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commentary on Romans 6:5, including in these remarks on God's sovereign grace as indicated by the verb "ingrafted:" "There is great force in this word, and it clearly shows, that the Apostle does not exhort, but rather teach us what benefit we derive from Christ; for he requires nothing from us, which is to be done by our attention and diligence, but speaks of the grafting made by the hand of God."

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Westminster Larger Catechism*:

Q. 66. What is that union which the elect have with Christ?

A. The union which the elect have with Christ is the work of God's grace, whereby they are spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husband; which is done in their effectual calling.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Letham, *Union with Christ in Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2011), p. 109.



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so close and indissoluble, that it surpasses the relationship which subsists between a father and a son.” Calvin draws the lesson that this “would tend to magnify the efficacy and dignity of the spiritual marriage which subsists between us and Christ” (Comm. on I Cor. 6:16).

Calvin goes further:

... our connection with Christ is closer than that of a husband and wife, and ... the former, accordingly, must be greatly preferred before the latter ... [for we] are not merely *one flesh* with Christ, but also *one spirit*. Thus there is a comparison between greater and less (Comm. on I Cor. 6:17).

Elsewhere, our commentator writes, “we are united with him more closely than our limbs with the body.”<sup>19</sup> Calvin even states,

Farther, we know that there is so great a unity between Christ and his members, that the name of *Christ* sometimes includes the whole body, as in I Corinthians 12:12, for while discoursing there respecting the Church, he comes at length to the conclusion, that in Christ the same thing holds as in the human body (Comm. on Col. 1:24).

Calvin explains what it means that New Testament believers “have put on Christ” or are clothed with Him:

The greater and loftier the privilege is of being the children of God, the farther is it removed from our senses, and the more difficult to obtain belief. He [i.e., Paul] therefore explains, in a few words, what is implied in our being united, or rather, made one with the Son of God; so as to remove all doubt, that what belongs to him is communicated to us. He employs the metaphor of a garment, when he says that the Galatians *have put on Christ*; but he means that they are so closely united to him, that, in

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Wendel, *Calvin*, p. 235.

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the presence of God, they bear the name and character of Christ, and are viewed in him rather than in themselves (Comm. on Gal. 3:27).

Do you see the comparisons and progression? Our bond with Christ is closer than (1) the father-son relationship, (2) earthly marriage and even (3) the union between the limbs of our body, for we are (4) “one flesh” and (5) “one spirit” with our Saviour. Yea, Christ is made ours so that “sometimes,” Calvin says, (6) “the name of Christ ... includes the whole body” of the church. Indeed, (7) “in the presence of God, they bear the name and character of Christ, and are viewed in him rather than in themselves.” Christ is made ours intimately!

### Osiander on Justification

True doctrine is often clarified and reinforced over against heresy. This is what happened with Calvin's teaching on union with Christ in opposition to Andreas Osiander (1498-1552), a German author and an older contemporary of Calvin.<sup>20</sup> Osiander was a Lutheran Reformer of Nuremberg and, towards the end of his life, a theological professor in Königsberg.<sup>21</sup>

Osiander's bizarre speculations on union with Christ occur especially in connection with two doctrines. The first involves his teaching on justification (cf. *Institutes* 3.11.5-12). Osiander rejected the biblical and Reformation truth that the righteousness

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<sup>20</sup> Mark A. Garcia identifies “Calvin's 1559 refutation [in his *Institutes*] of the Lutheran controversialist Andreas Osiander” as “the single most significant text and event for Calvin's theology of saving union with Christ” (*Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin's Theology* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008], p. 7). Garcia reckons that in “Calvin's response to the theology of Andreas Osiander ... pneumatic Christology, sacrament, and salvation are brought together in an unprecedented way” (p. 195).

<sup>21</sup> These two cities were both marked by significant events at the end of World War II (1939-1945), for Nuremberg was the venue for the famous war trials of Nazis (1945-1946), and Königsberg was granted to the USSR (1945) and renamed Kaliningrad (1946).

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of God in justification is Christ's lifelong obedience to the law of God, which is imputed to our account and received by faith alone.

Instead, for Osiander, the righteousness of God in justification is His "essential righteousness," the righteousness of the divine essence or Being. According to Osiander, justification is our union with the eternal "essence" or "substance" or "nature" of God or Christ. The Deity is "transfused" or "infused" or "poured" into us, so that we are "mixed" and "mingled" with the divine Being.

This is how Calvin presents Osiander and his doctrine in *Institutes* 3.11.5:

- "his desire to transfuse the essence of God into men"
- "He says that ... Christ's essence is mixed with our own"
- "[He] pretends that we are substantially righteous in God by the infusion both of his essence and of his quality"
- "he throws in a mixture of substances by which God—transfusing himself into us, as it were—makes us part of himself"
- "he reckons ... Christ's essence [is] mingled with ours"

This is *not* the way in which Christ is made ours in justification!

Osiander's doctrine of "essential righteousness," Calvin calls, "something bordering on Manichaeism" and "some strange monster" (*Institutes* 3.11.5). He identifies it as an "abominable error" (*Institutes* 3.11.12), a "wild dream" (*Institutes* 3.11.5) and a "delusion" (*Institutes* 3.11.6), which produces "such a fog" as would "darken" peoples' "minds" (*Institutes* 3.11.5).<sup>22</sup>

François Wendel is right:

There is no question, when Calvin is speaking about union or communion with Christ, of any absorption into

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<sup>22</sup> The Lutherans also condemned Osiander and his doctrine of "essential righteousness," including in their *Formula of Concord* (1577).

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Christ, or any mystical identification that would diminish human personality in the slightest degree.<sup>23</sup>

Since, in Osiander's doctrine of "essential righteousness," justification is our being infused with the eternal essence of the Deity, what will this do to justification as a legal blessing, God the judge's declaration that we are innocent of all sin and righteous before Him? What then of the truth of imputation, that Christ's obedience is reckoned to our account? Calvin presents the German theologian's position and attitude: "Osiander laughs at those men who teach that 'to be justified' is a legal term ... Also, he despises nothing more than that we are justified by free imputation" (*Institutes* 3.11.11).

Calvin proceeds to teach that justification is legal and necessarily includes imputation (*Institutes* 3.11.11-12), over against Osiander, as well as Rome and the Federal Vision, which likewise hate and deride these vital gospel truths.

Let us return to a quote earlier in this chapter, the one from which we gleaned the first part of its title, and preface it with two important observations. The first concerns its location: it is in the midst of Calvin's polemic against Osiander regarding justification. Second, it presents union with Christ in organic terms.

Christ is made ours ... [Our union with Jesus is] that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union ... so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed ... we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body ... because he deigns to make us one with him (*Institutes* 3.11.10).

Notice that, in this very context, Calvin speaks of the legal blessing of justification in connection with union with Christ. In the middle of the citation above (for it contains several ellipses), our

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<sup>23</sup> Wendel, *Calvin*, p. 235.

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Reformer states, “[Christ’s] righteousness [is] imputed to us ... because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him.” Moreover, immediately after the quotation above, Calvin adds, “For this reason, we glory that we have fellowship of righteousness [i.e., imputed, legal righteousness] with him.”

Do you see what Calvin is saying? Christ is made ours—not by His essence being mingled with ours (contra Osiander) but—by His indwelling us spiritually. In this union with Christ, we enjoy legal justification, the imputation to us of Christ’s righteousness. Moreover, it is precisely here that our great theologian declares that the “mystical union [is] accorded by us the highest degree of importance” (*Institutes* 3.11.10)!<sup>24</sup>

This is the complete quote, whose full sense and greater force should now be evident:

I confess that we are deprived of this utterly incomparable good [i.e., justification] until Christ is made ours. Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him. For this reason, we glory that we have fellowship of [imputed] righteousness with him (*Institutes* 3.11.10).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> This line is quoted in the very first paragraph of this chapter.

<sup>25</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. calls this “the fullest single passage, and certainly the most striking, in expressing the relationship between union, justification, and imputation” in Calvin’s *Institutes* (“Justification and Union with Christ (*Insti-*

## Osiander on the Lord's Supper

Osiander's corruption of union with Christ not only occurs in his doctrine of justification but also in his teaching on the Lord's Supper.<sup>26</sup> Do you recall Osiander's ecclesiastical affiliation? He was a Lutheran. Lutheranism's doctrine of the Lord's Supper is called consubstantiation, though Lutherans do not care for the term. According to Lutheranism, Christ is bodily present in, under and along with the bread and the wine in the sacrament.

Osiander's doctrine of essential righteousness is congenial to the Lutheran view of the Lord's Supper (though not the creedal Lutheran and Reformed doctrine of justification), whereas it is utterly incompatible with the Reformed teaching on the Lord's Supper (and union with Christ). Osiander saw the connection in his theology between his views of justification, union with Christ and the Lord's Supper. So did Calvin!

The Genevan Reformer summarizes Osiander's teaching in these two places in *Institutes* 3.11.10:

The fact, then, that he insists so violently upon essential righteousness [i.e., Osiander's doctrine of justification] and essential indwelling of Christ in us [i.e., Osiander's doctrine of union with Christ] has the result ... he holds that God pours himself into us as a great mixture, just as he fancies a physical eating in the Lord's Supper.

Osiander, by spurning this spiritual bond [of union with Christ], forces a gross mingling of Christ with believers [in justification]. And for this reason, he maliciously calls "Zwinglian" all those who do not subscribe to his mad error of "essential righteousness" because they do not hold the view that Christ is eaten in substance [i.e., in His divine essence] in the Lord's Supper.

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tutes 3.11-18)," in David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback [eds.], *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008], p. 265).

<sup>26</sup> In his magnum opus, Calvin deals with a third related and heretical area of Osiander's theology: the image of God (*Institutes* 1.15.3-5; 2.12.6-7).

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This is emphatically *not* how Christ is made ours at the Lord's Supper!

The *Consensus Tigurinus* (1549), which is mostly the work of John Calvin, explains what it really is to partake of the Lord Jesus in the second Christian sacrament:

Because Christ feeds our souls through faith by virtue of his Spirit, by the eating of his flesh and the drinking of his blood which are here figured, it is not therefore to be understood as though there were an intermingling or transfusion of substance. But we draw life from the flesh once offered in sacrifice and the blood poured out for expiation.<sup>27</sup>

### Holy Spirit as Agent

Calvin's biblical understanding of union with Christ comes into even sharper focus if we bring in here his treatment of the roles of the Holy Spirit and faith. The blessed Spirit is the personal bond uniting us to Jesus, and the divine agent through whom He blesses and governs us:

... the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself (*Institutes* 3.1.1).

... the secret power of the Spirit is the bond of our union with Christ (*Institutes* 4.17.33).

[Christ] unites himself to us by the Spirit alone. By the grace and power of the same Spirit we are made his members, to keep us under himself and in turn to possess him (*Institutes* 3.1.3).

[It is through] the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits (*Institutes* 3.1.1).

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<sup>27</sup> James T. Dennison, Jr. (ed.), *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation: Volume 1, 1523-1552* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), p. 544.

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What adjective describing union with Christ do we derive from this? Union with Christ is *spiritual*, with spiritual in the Bible meaning “pertaining to the Holy Spirit.” Christ is made ours spiritually!

This is Calvin's argument in *Institutes* 3.1.2. Jesus Christ came into the world and wrought our redemption by the power of the Holy Spirit. He received the Spirit in all His fullness at His exaltation at God's right hand in heaven, so that He gives the Spirit to His elect, in order to unite us to Himself and bestow His blessings upon us. Pneumatology is vital for *unio cum Christo* for Christ is made ours by the Spirit.

Clearly, for Calvin, the Holy Spirit is a personal bond between believers and Christ. Calvin, as well as biblical and Reformed theology, grounds this not only in the Spirit's role as the personal bond between Jesus Christ and the holy Trinity, but even in His inter-Trinitarian role as the personal bond between the Father and the Son or Word:

Also, we ought to know that he is called the “Spirit of Christ” not only because Christ, as [the] eternal Word of God, is joined in the same Spirit with the Father, but also from his character as the Mediator (*Institutes* 3.1.2).

Ronald Wallace summarizes Calvin on the role of the Holy Spirit in terms of descent and ascent, in uniting us with the Lord Jesus:

In speaking of the union between Christ and His people Calvin can speak, with reservations, of the Holy Spirit as bringing Christ down into the lives and hearts of His people. He prefers to speak of the Holy Spirit as raising men up from earth to Heaven, there to dwell with Christ and there to partake of Christ. He can speak of the Holy Spirit as the link which binds us to Christ and also as the channel by which everything which Christ has and is derived to us.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, pp. 20-21.



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Our Reformer even quotes two texts from I John on the believer's knowledge or assurance of union with Christ through the Holy Spirit:

“We know that he abides in us from the Spirit whom he has given us” [I John 3:24]. Likewise, “From this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit” [I John 4:13] (*Institutes* 3.1.4).<sup>29</sup>

Christ is made ours by the Spirit and we know it by the Spirit!

### Faith as Means

Having considered Calvin on the agency of the Holy Spirit in our union with Christ, what is the role of faith? Out of the many quotes from Calvin's writings that could have been chosen regarding *unio cum Christo* through faith, here are three from his *Institutes* taken from strategic locations:

It is true that we obtain this by faith (*Institutes* 3.1.1).

Christ was given to us by God's generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us in faith (*Institutes* 3.11.1).

As I explained in the previous book [i.e., book 3], it is by faith in the gospel that Christ becomes ours and we are made partakers of the salvation and eternal blessedness brought by him (*Institutes* 4.1.1).

Christ is made ours by means of faith!

Calvin explains this clearly and richly in his *Confession of Faith in [the] Name of the Reformed Churches of France* (1562):

13. How We Partake of Jesus Christ and His Benefits—of Faith

Now we understand that we are made partakers of all his blessings by means of faith; for this it is which brings

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. “John Calvin's Confessional Documents on Assurance” and “John Calvin's Other Writings on Assurance” ([www.cprc.co.uk/quotes/#assurance](http://www.cprc.co.uk/quotes/#assurance)).

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us into communication with Christ, in order that he may dwell in us, that we may be ingrafted into him as our root, that we may be members of his body, that we may live in him, and he in us, and possess him, with all his benefits. And that it may not be thought strange that we attribute such virtue to faith, we do not take it for a fleeting opinion, but for a certainty which we have of the promises of God, in which all these blessings are contained, and by which we embrace our Lord Jesus Christ as the surety of all our salvation, and apply to our own use what he has received of God his Father to impart unto us. This faith we likewise know that we cannot have if it be not given us from above, and as Scripture declares (Eph. 2:9; 1:18) till the Holy Spirit enlightens us to comprehend what is beyond all human sense, and seals in our hearts what we ought to believe.<sup>30</sup>

Wallace observes that for Calvin,

Faith unites man to God and makes God to dwell in man. It should be noted that the movement of faith in the laying hold of what is in Heaven and bringing it down to earth is reciprocal, in Calvin's thought, to the movement of the Holy Spirit who brings the heavenly grace of Christ down into the human heart, and raises our hearts up into Heaven in response to His grace.<sup>31</sup>

So is Calvin saying that the Spirit unites us to Christ *and* that faith unites us to Christ? Yes! Is our Reformer teaching that the Holy Spirit brings Christ and His grace down to us, and us up to Him, *and* that faith brings Christ and His grace down to us, and us up to Him? Yes!

What about faith's source or origin? Throughout his writings, Calvin repeatedly and emphatically teaches that "faith itself has

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<sup>30</sup> John Calvin, *Treatises on the Sacraments*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Great Britain: Christian Heritage, 2002), pp. 144-145.

<sup>31</sup> Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, p. 23.

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no other source than the Spirit.” In fact, “faith is the principal work of the Spirit” in the elect (*Institutes* 3.1.4).

This is Calvin’s conclusion: “To sum up: Christ, when he illumines us into faith by the power of his Spirit, at the same time so engrafts us into his body that we become partakers of every good” (*Institutes* 3.2.35). In other words, Christ’s Person and blessings are only known and received through the agency of the Holy Spirit and by the means of faith:

Christ, then, is the source of all blessings to us: from him we obtain all things; but Christ himself, with all his blessings, is communicated to us by the Spirit. For it is by faith that we receive Christ, and have his graces applied to us. The Author of faith is the Spirit (Comm. on I Cor. 6:11).

This is how it all fits together. The Spirit unites us to Christ and He does this by means of the faith He works in us. The Holy Spirit gives us faith so that, through believing God’s Word and trusting in Christ crucified and risen, we are, and know ourselves to be, in union with Christ, enjoying Him and His benefits. This is how Christ is made ours: through the agency of the Spirit and by means of faith alone!<sup>32</sup>

The French Reformer’s teaching on the intimate relationship between the Holy Spirit, faith and the mystical union raises the question, What about Calvin and the bond of faith? David Engelsma explains,

It is plain that Calvin conceives faith not only as the activity of knowing and trusting in Jesus Christ, but also as union with Christ, although Calvin does not explicitly make this distinction. When later Reformed theology makes this distinction, it is true to Calvin. Faith is not exclusively an activity; faith is also, and more basically, union with Christ. For this reason, Calvin makes faith the

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<sup>32</sup> The *Heidelberg Catechism* succinctly relates the Spirit, faith and union with Christ: “the Holy Ghost ... is ... given me, to make me, by a true faith, partaker of Christ and all His benefits” (Q. & A. 53).

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beginning of the saving work of the Spirit ... First one is, and must be, united to Christ by the bond of faith. Then through this bond, Christ and all his benefits come into the heart of the elect child of God.<sup>33</sup>

### Parties Who Are United

We have come a fair way in our treatment of John Calvin's doctrine of union with Christ. We have seen how he speaks of its importance and its revelation in the "mystery" of the gospel. We have quoted several of his most beautiful descriptions of it. We have considered the imagery he employs, as well as the nouns, phrases and adjectives he uses to explain it. We have noted Calvin's emphatic repudiation of the notion that union with Christ is our being transfused with the divine essence, as per Andreas Osiander. We have examined the roles of the Spirit and faith in our intimate union with Christ, with the Spirit being the divine agent of union and faith being the necessary means of union.

But we have not precisely delineated who the parties are who are united. We begin with *anthropology*. Following Scripture, Calvin teaches the Christian to think this about himself: "I am a human being, not an angel.<sup>34</sup> I am united to Christ in both my body and my soul.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, I, body and soul, am united to Jesus Christ

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<sup>33</sup> David J. Engelsma, *The Reformed Faith of John Calvin: The Institutes in Summary* (Jenison, MI: RFP, 2009), p. 194. For more on "this distinction" in "later Reformed theology," see Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, rev. and ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thompson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, repr. 1978), pp. 540-542; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 4: *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), pp. 121-122; Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grandville, MI: RFP, 2005), vol. 2, pp. 62-66, 70-72; David J. Engelsma, *The Belgic Confession: A Commentary*, vol. 2 (Jenison, MI: RFP, 2019), pp. 7-10.

<sup>34</sup> We are not here dealing with Christ's or our relationship to angels, whether fallen or unfallen.

<sup>35</sup> E.g., Calvin: "Observe, that the spiritual connection which we have with Christ belongs not merely to the soul, but also to the body, so that we are *flesh of his flesh*, etc. (Eph. 5:30)" (Comm. on I Cor. 6:15). W. Gary Crampton rightly identifies the French theologian as a dichotomist, holding to a bipartite view of

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now while I am yet a sinner and I will be united to Him in the next life when I am sinless.”

What more should be said about the “when” of my union with Christ? Our Reformer would have each believer make this amazing confession: “I was united to Jesus Christ before I was even born! In God’s eternal election prior to the creation of the world, I was ‘chosen *in* Christ’ (Comm. on Eph. 1:4). Some 2,000 years ago, when the Son of God became incarnate and died on the cross for all the sins of His elect church, I was in Him.”

Following Calvin’s biblical instruction, the Christian gladly professes, “Whereas, in God’s eternal election and Christ’s atoning sacrifice, I was in Him but He was not in me, now I am in Him and He is in me! This wonder took place earlier in my life, when Christ was made mine inwardly by irresistible regeneration, so that He indwells me by the Holy Spirit in the mystical union. I know and enjoy this by faith alone.” The believer continues, “Christ will be made mine perfectly at my final glorification in the new creation.”

But who is the One to whom I was, am and forever will be united in both body and soul? Here we move from anthropology to *Christology*. The child of God confesses, “I am united to the Person of Christ in both His natures—not only in His Deity, in contrast to Osiander (*Institutes* 3.11.6), but also in His humanity, both His body and His soul.” As Lewis B. Smedes puts it, “Calvin is sure that union with Christ is a union with his whole self, especially His humanity.”<sup>36</sup> Christ is made mine—all of Him is united to all of me!

According to Scripture and, therefore, Calvin, we are united to

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human beings: “Calvin maintains, along with the vast majority of Reformed scholars, that man has two parts: a physical body and a non-physical spirit or soul” (*What Calvin Says* [Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1992], p. 49).

<sup>36</sup> Lewis B. Smedes, *All Things Made New: A Theology of Man’s Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 50.

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Christ in His threefold office as prophet, priest and king,<sup>37</sup> and so we are the beneficiaries of all that He earned for us and conveys to us in the exercise of His glorious Messianic office.<sup>38</sup> We are united to Him in both His states: His state of humiliation (His lowly birth, life of suffering, sacrificial death and burial) and His state of exaltation (His bodily resurrection, glorious ascension, almighty session and second coming). Because of our *unio com Christo*, we share in His spiritual graces and gifts, blessings and benefits, privileges and powers. “For what keeps coming back in Calvin is the idea that there is no participation in the benefits of Christ other than by communion with his person.”<sup>39</sup>

Since Christ is made ours, we are united to Him in His one Person, two natures, two states, three offices, all His redemptive acts, and all His blessings and benefits. Calvin would certainly have agreed with *Westminster Confession* 26:1: “All saints that are united to Jesus Christ their head by his Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory.”

Moving from anthropology and Christology, we come to *theology*. Since Christ is made ours, and He is the Mediator between God and us, we are united to the living God:

... this perfect essence of Deity, which is in Christ, is profitable to us in this respect, that we are also perfect in him. “As to God’s dwelling wholly in Christ, it is in order that we, having obtained him, may possess in him an entire perfection” (Comm. on Col. 2:10).

The God to whom we are united is, of course, the blessed Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit:

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<sup>37</sup> Calvin treats Christ’s threefold office in *Institutes* 2.15.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Calvin: “For he [i.e., Christ] was anointed by the Father, that he might pour forth on us a manifold abundance from his own fullness” (Comm. on I John 2:20; cf. *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord’s Day 12).

<sup>39</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 3: *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), p. 523.

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... not only Christ but also the Father and the Holy Spirit dwell in us ... [We ought to consider] the manner of the indwelling—namely, that the Father and Spirit are in Christ, and even as the fullness of deity dwells in him [Col. 2:9], so in him we possess the whole of deity (*Institutes* 3.11.5).

Christ is made ours and, therefore, so is the holy Trinity, to whom we are inseparably joined, both body and soul, in this life and in the next!

### Soteriology in General

Near the beginning of his chapter entitled “Calvin on Salvation,” treating our Reformer’s doctrine of soteriology, W. Gary Crampton states, “The salvation of the elect from start to finish is due to their relationship with Christ; that is, their being in union with him.”<sup>40</sup> David Engelsma is correct: “Calvin wants us to conceive of salvation as *union with Christ*, and such a union that Christ himself is *in us*.”<sup>41</sup> Rightly understood, one can even say that soteriology for Calvin is union (cf. *Institutes* 3.1.1).

If book 2 of Calvin’s *Institutes* deals with Christology (Jesus’ Person and work of obtaining redemption for us), book 3 is soteriology with *unio cum Christo* a vital aspect of it. As T. H. L. Parker puts it, “in Book III ... the objectivity of the previous book [i.e., book 2] is transmuted into subjectivity, *Christus pro nobis* into *Christus in nobis* through His Holy Spirit.”<sup>42</sup>

Older writers also recognized this. Calvin’s teaching on soteriology is ably summarized by the German Reformed theologian, Caspar Olevianus (1536-1587). Notice how often Olevianus’ faithful epitome of book 3 of Calvin’s *Institutes* speaks of union with Christ (using varied terminology):

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<sup>40</sup> Crampton, *What Calvin Says*, p. 71.

<sup>41</sup> Engelsma, *The Reformed Faith of John Calvin*, p. 193; italics Engelsma’s.

<sup>42</sup> T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), p. 120.

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So long as Christ is separated from us we have no benefit from him. We must be ingrafted in him like branches in the vine. Hence the [Apostles'] Creed, after treating of Christ, proceeds in its third article, *I believe in the Holy Spirit*—the Holy Spirit being the bond of union between us and Christ. In like manner, the Third Book of the Institutes treats of the Holy Spirit which unites us to Christ, and, in connection with it, of faith, by which we embrace Christ with a double benefit—viz. that of gratuitous righteousness which he imputes to us, and regeneration [or sanctification], which he begins in us by giving us repentance. In order to show the worthlessness of a faith which is not accompanied with a desire of repentance, the author, before proceeding to a full discussion of justification, treats at length from chapter 3-10 of repentance, and the constant study of it—repentance, which Christ, when apprehended by faith, begets in us by his Spirit. Chapter 11 treats of the primary and peculiar benefit of Christ when united to us by the Holy Spirit—viz. justification. This subject is continued to the 20th chapter, which treats of prayer, the hand, as it were, to receive the blessings which faith knows to be treasured up for it with God, according to the word of promise. But, as the Holy Spirit, who creates and preserves our faith, does not unite all men to Christ, who is the sole author of salvation, chapter 21 treats of the eternal election of God, to which it is owing that we, in whom he foresaw no good which he had not previously bestowed, are given to Christ, and united to him by the effectual calling of the Gospel. This subject is continued to the 25th chapter, which treats of complete regeneration [i.e., glorification] and felicity, namely, the final resurrection to which we must raise our eyes, seeing that, in regard to fruition, the happiness of the godly is only begun in this world.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Caspar Olevianus, "Method and Arrangement, or Subject of the Whole Work," in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (London: James Clark & Co., 1949), vol. 1, pp. 28-29.



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In union with Christ, believers receive all these unspeakably rich blessings through the Holy Spirit and by faith alone. Calvin is at great pains to stress that no one can partake of Christ apart from His benefits and no one can receive his blessings without being joined to Him: “the gifts of God dwell in us in such a manner, that nevertheless, we are partakers of them only so far as we are members of Christ” (Comm. on Phile. 6).

Similarly, here are two excerpts from *Institutes* 3.2.24:

... he makes us, ingrafted into his body, participants not only in all his benefits but also in himself.

... since Christ has been so imparted to you with all his benefits that all his things are made yours, that you are made a member of him, indeed one with him, his righteousness overwhelms your sins; his salvation wipes out your condemnation; with his worthiness he intercedes that your unworthiness may not come before God’s sight.

Calvin draws the conclusion:

I do not see how anyone can trust that he has redemption and righteousness in the cross of Christ, and life in his death, unless he relies chiefly upon a true participation in Christ himself. For those benefits would not come to us unless Christ first made himself ours (*Institutes* 4.17.11).

### **Justification**

Following Holy Scripture and the Reformation, John Calvin presents justification as wholly legal, a declaration by God the supreme judge of all (e.g., *Institutes* 3.11.2; 3.12.1). He rightly identifies the two components in justification: “we say that it consists in [1] the remission of sins and [2] the imputation of Christ’s righteousness” (*Institutes* 3.11.2).

Calvin’s definition of justification not only includes its negative and positive components, but also (and rightly) involves union:

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... we define justification as follows: the sinner, received into communion with Christ, is reconciled to God by his grace, while, cleansed by Christ, he [1] obtains forgiveness of sins, and [2] clothed with Christ's righteousness as if it were his own, he stands confident before the heavenly judgment seat (*Institutes* 3.17.8).

Calvin stresses that justifying righteousness is not intrinsic to believers for it is only found in union with the Lord Jesus:

You see that our righteousness is not in us but in Christ, that we possess it only because we are partakers in Christ; indeed, with him we possess all its riches ... To declare that by him alone we are accounted righteous, what else is this but to lodge our righteousness in Christ's obedience, because the obedience of Christ is reckoned to us as if it were our own? (*Institutes* 3.11.23).

Our justification is based upon the cross for the Lord Jesus alone is our complete substitute. His holy life and atoning death *for* us are reckoned *to* us by faith, through which "we embrace Christ" and enjoy "communion with Him," as Calvin wrote to Roman Catholic Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto or James Sadolet.

As all mankind are, in the sight of God, lost sinners, we hold that Christ is their only righteousness, since, by His obedience, He has wiped off our transgressions; by His sacrifice, appeased the divine anger; by His blood, washed away our sins; by His cross, borne our curse; and by His death, made satisfaction for us. We maintain that in this way man is reconciled in Christ to God the Father, by no merit of his own, by no value of works, but by gratuitous mercy. When we embrace Christ by faith, and come, as it were, into communion with Him, this we term, after the manner of Scripture, the *righteousness of faith*.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoletto, *A Reformation Debate: Sadoletto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply*, ed. John C. Olin (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976), pp. 66-67; italics original.

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Calvin also teaches that union with the Son of God, and His satisfaction for sin and imputed righteousness, is the way in which the infinitely holy Triune God, who hates all iniquity, loves His elect who are totally depraved of themselves.<sup>45</sup>

### Sanctification

For Calvin, not only are we are sanctified in Christ but we are sanctified through His sanctification of Himself. Our theologian repeatedly makes this distinctive point with appeal to John 17:19:<sup>46</sup>

[Jesus] explains more clearly from what source that *sanctification* flows, which is completed in us by the doctrine of the Gospel. It is, because he consecrated himself to the Father, that his holiness might come to us; for as the blessing on the first-fruits is spread over the whole harvest, so the Spirit of God cleanses us by the holiness of Christ and makes us partakers of it. Nor is this done by imputation only, for in that respect he is said to have been *made to us righteous*; but he is likewise said to have been *made to us sanctification* (I Cor. 1:30) because he has, so to speak, presented us to his Father in his own person, that we may be renewed to true holiness by his Spirit. Besides, though this sanctification belongs to the whole life of Christ, yet the highest illustration of it was given in the sacrifice of his death; for then he showed himself to be the true High Priest, by consecrating the temple, the altar, all the vessels, and the people, by the power of his Spirit (Comm. on John 17:19).

It avails not, indeed, a little to increase our confidence, that we are united to the Son of God by a bond so close,

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<sup>45</sup> E.g., *Institutes* 2.14.5; 2.15.6; 2.16.3; 2.17.2; 3.11.11; 3.24.5; Comms. on John 17:26; II Cor. 1:20; cf. Crampton, *What Calvin Says*, p. 71.

<sup>46</sup> “Calvin,” states Wallace, “finds deep meaning in the text, John 17:19, ‘For their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth,’ which he seldom fails to quote whenever he speaks about sanctification” (*Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, p. 13).

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that we can find in our nature that holiness of which we are in want; for he not only as God sanctifies us, but there is also the power of sanctifying in his human nature; not that it has it from itself, but that God had poured upon it a perfect fulness of holiness, so that from it we may all draw. And to this point this sentence refers, "For their sakes I sanctify myself" (John 17:19). If, then, we are sinful and unclean, we have not to go far to seek a remedy; for it is offered to us in our own flesh (Comm. on Heb. 2:11).

... we who are defiled in ourselves, yet are priests in him, offer ourselves and our all to God, and freely enter the heavenly sanctuary that the sacrifices of prayers and praise that we bring may be acceptable and sweet-smelling before God. This is the meaning of Christ's statement: "For their sake I sanctify myself" [John 17:19]. For we, imbued with his holiness in so far as he has consecrated us to the Father with himself, although we would otherwise be loathsome to him, please him as pure and clean—and even as holy (*Institutes* 2.15.6).

Here is an admirable summary of the main elements of this teaching of John Calvin provided by James Philip:

The human nature which [the eternal Son of God] assumed was the temple which He Himself sanctified through His blood, and in which He consecrated Himself through death in order, as eternal High Priest, to offer Himself in expiation for our sins. Calvin follows on from this idea of the self-sanctification of Christ to point out, on the Old Testament analogy of the connection between the priest and the people he represents, that Christ consecrated and sanctified Himself to the Father that His holiness might come to us. Therefore the inward sanctifying work of the Spirit in the believer's life is simply the impartation to him of the sanctification that has already been worked out for him completely in Christ. God has made the human nature of Jesus which was sanctified by the

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Spirit the residing place of all the graces ... which are required [by us] ... Everything that has been given to Christ in His sanctification is given for the very purpose of being communicated and imparted to the church by the Spirit.<sup>47</sup>

For Calvin, both “parts” of sanctification are through our union with Christ: [1] the negative, the mortification of the old man, and [2] the positive, the quickening of the new man.<sup>48</sup>

Both things happen to us by participation in Christ. For if we truly partake in his death, “our old man is crucified by his power, and the body of sin perishes” [Rom. 6:6 p.], that the corruption of original nature may no longer thrive. If we share in his resurrection, through it we are raised up into newness of life to correspond with the righteousness of God (*Institutes* 3.3.9).

Calvin teaches progressive sanctification in this life through our union and communion with Christ.<sup>49</sup> In his commentary on I Thessalonians 5:23, our expositor not only makes two references to “progress” but also refers to sanctification as God’s work of renewal which involves the believer’s calling:

The Thessalonians, it is true, had been in part renewed, but Paul desires that God would perfect what is remaining. From this we infer, that we must, during our whole life, make progress in the pursuit of holiness. But if it is the part of God to renew the whole man, there is nothing left for free will. For if it had been our part to co-operate with God, Paul would have spoken thus—“May God aid or promote your sanctification.” But when he says, *sanctify you wholly*, he makes him the sole Author of the entire work ... As, however, so complete an entireness is never

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<sup>47</sup> James Philip, “Union with Christ” (no publication details given), pp. 19-20. This booklet contains five addresses given at the Inter-Varsity Fellowship Scottish Conference in St Andrews in 1973.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord’s Day 33.

<sup>49</sup> Crampton, *What Calvin Says*, pp. 79-80.

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to be met with in this life, it is befitting that some progress be daily made in purity, and something be cleansed away from our pollutions, so long as we live in the world.

### **Justification and Sanctification**

John Calvin was only too aware of the standard Roman Catholic polemic against the gospel truth of justification, that it is a rejection of both holiness and good works. In book 3 of his *Institutes*, our Reformer meets their objections in two striking ways.

First, notice how Calvin arranges his material on soteriology in the *Institutes*. After treating the Holy Spirit and faith (3.1-2), he deals with sanctification (repentance and the Christian life; 3.3-10) *before* justification (3.11-18)! Thus the reader can see how little the Reformation and its leading theologian are opposed to vital godliness, even before Calvin reaches his exposition of the pardon of our sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

Second, using brilliant biblical and theological insight, Calvin unites both justification (a complete legal act) and sanctification (a progressive organic work) "in Christ"—inseparably and un-mixedly. Christ is made ours as the One who both justifies and sanctifies us!

Though found throughout Calvin's literary corpus, we limit our quotes here to his *Institutes*, while observing their location in strategic places in book 3. The opening section of the first chapter of Calvin's soteriology contains this crucial line: "Paul, in speaking of ... [sanctification] and justification, says that we come to possess both, 'in the name of ... Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God' [I Cor. 6:11]" (*Institutes* 3.1.1).

After his eight chapters on sanctification, Calvin speaks of the "double grace" we have in Christ:

By partaking of him [i.e., the Lord Jesus], we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled

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to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father [i.e., justification]; and secondly, that being sanctified by Christ's Spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life [i.e., sanctification] (*Institutes* 3.11.1).

In the standard Battles version of the *Institutes*, section 1 of Calvin's chapter, "Refutation of the False Accusations by Which the Papists Try to Cast Odium Upon This Doctrine," is entitled, "Does the doctrine of justification do away with good works?" Here, appropriately, we provide two fine quotes from *Institutes* 3.16.1, giving the longest and clearest teaching in Calvin's magnum opus on the double benefits of justification and sanctification in Christ:

Why, then, are we justified by faith? Because by faith we grasp Christ's righteousness, by which alone we are reconciled to God. Yet you could not grasp this without at the same time grasping sanctification also. For he "is given unto us for righteousness, wisdom, sanctification, and redemption" [I Cor. 1:30]. Therefore Christ justifies no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify. These benefits are joined together by an everlasting and indissoluble bond, so that those whom he illumines by his wisdom, he redeems; those whom he redeems, he justifies; those whom he justifies, he sanctifies.

Although we may distinguish them [i.e., justification and sanctification], Christ contains both of them inseparably in himself. Do you wish, then, to attain righteousness [i.e., justification] in Christ? You must first possess Christ; but you cannot possess him without being made partaker in his sanctification, because he cannot be divided into pieces [I Cor. 1:13]. Since, therefore, it is solely by expending himself that the Lord gives us these benefits to enjoy, he bestows both of them at the same time, the one never without the other. Thus it is clear how true it is that we are justified not without works yet not through works, since in our sharing in Christ, which justifies us,

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sanctification is just as much included as righteousness [i.e., justification].<sup>50</sup>

Mark Garcia accurately observes that

in Calvin's thought ... the two basic saving benefits (justification and sanctification) are distinct and yet inseparable precisely because of a reality still more basic or fundamental: the believer's Spirit-effected *unio cum Christo*.<sup>51</sup>

Garcia refers to this "model" as "Calvin's *unio Christi-duplex gratia* soteriology," noting that it is "a prominent feature in Calvin's theology, whether expressed in positive, polemical-disputative, ecclesiastical (catechetical and sacramental), or pastoral (sermonic) form."<sup>52</sup>

### Other Soteriological Blessings

For Calvin, not simply justification and sanctification, but all the other elements of the *ordo salutis* or order of salvation are also only "in Christ." This serves our Saviour's glory:

... all parts of our salvation are contained in Christ ... [so] that he alone ought to shine forth, and to be seen conspicuous above all creatures, inasmuch as he is the beginning and end of all things (Comm. on Col. 1:14)!

The Genevan Reformer would have heartily approved of *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A. 69:

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<sup>50</sup> For more on Calvin's teaching on this "double grace" in Christ, see Angus Stewart, "John Calvin's Integrated Covenant Theology (3): The Blessings of the Covenant," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, vol. 42, issue 1 (November, 2008), pp. 3-16 ([www.cprc.co.uk/articles/calvincovenanttheology3](http://www.cprc.co.uk/articles/calvincovenanttheology3)).

<sup>51</sup> Garcia, *Life in Christ*, pp. 2-3. Earlier we quoted Caspar Olevianus' helpful summary of book 3 of Calvin's *Institutes*, in which he speaks of the Genevan Reformer's doctrine of the "double benefit" of justification and sanctification that believers receive in union with Christ. Here we add that Olevianus used his theological mentor's teaching in his own instruction (cf. R. Scott Clark, *Caspar Olevian and the Substance of the Covenant: The Double Benefit of Christ* [Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2005]).

<sup>52</sup> Garcia, *Life in Christ*, p. 3.



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

A. The communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ, is their partaking of the virtue of his mediation, in their justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union with him.

We are not at all surprised that Calvin, as a theologian of the sovereignty of God, rightly states that it is the Almighty who unites us to Jesus at the start of our Christian life (e.g., Comm. on II Thess. 1:1). The continuation of our salvation in union with our Redeemer is likewise all of grace:

What sort of foundation have we in Christ? Was he the beginning of our salvation in order that its fulfillment might follow from ourselves? Did he only open the way by which we might proceed under our own power? Certainly not (*Institutes* 3.15.5).

Calvin proceeds to list various elements in the *ordo salutis* that we have according to our eternal election in Christ (Eph. 1:4-5). After justification, he mentions adoption, preservation and eternal life as divine gifts to those “ingrafted into” Jesus.

He alone is well founded in Christ who has perfect righteousness in [the Lord Jesus]: since the apostle does not say that he was sent to help us attain righteousness but himself to be our righteousness [I Cor. 1:30]. Indeed, he states that “he has chosen us in him” from eternity “before the foundation of the world,” through no merit of our own “but according to the purpose of divine good pleasure” [Eph. 1:4-5, cf. Vg.]; that by his death we are redeemed from the condemnation of death and freed from ruin [cf. Col. 1:14, 20]; that we have been adopted unto him as sons and heirs by our Heavenly Father [cf. Rom. 8:17; Gal. 4:5-7]; that we have been reconciled through his blood [Rom. 5:9-10]; that, given into his protection, we are released from the danger of perishing and fall-

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ing [John 10:28]; that thus ingrafted into him [cf. Rom. 11:19] we are already, in a manner, partakers of eternal life, having entered into the Kingdom of God through hope (*Institutes* 3.15.5).

Then our theologian speaks of our salvation in terms of our wisdom, righteousness, purity, power and life in Christ alone:

Yet more: we experience such participation in him that, although we are still foolish in ourselves, he is our wisdom before God; while we are sinners, he is our righteousness; while we are unclean, he is our purity; while we are weak, while we are unarmed and exposed to Satan, yet ours is that power which has been given him in heaven and on earth [Matt. 28:18], by which to crush Satan for us and shatter the gates of hell; while we still bear about with us the body of death, he is yet our life (*Institutes* 3.15.5).

This is Calvin's conclusion, exalting Christ and abasing ourselves:

In brief, because all his things are ours and we have all things in him, in us there is nothing. Upon this foundation, I say, we must be built if we would grow into a holy temple to the Lord [cf. Eph. 2:21] (*Institutes* 3.15.5).

Then Calvin pivots to critique the Roman heresy that puts union with Christ *after* good works:

But for a long time the world has been taught otherwise. So all sorts of "moral" good works have been discovered whereby men are rendered pleasing to God before they are engrafted into Christ (*Institutes* 3.15.6).

Over against the poverty of popery, Calvin waxes eloquent regarding our riches in Christ. He begins using the third person plural pronouns: "they" and "them."

Believers have Christ abiding in them [I John 3:24], through whom they may cleave to God; Sharers in his

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life, they sit with him in the heavenly places [Eph. 2:6]; “They are translated into the Kingdom of God” [Col. 1:13 p.], and obtain salvation (*Institutes* 3.15.6).

Then our theologian switches to the second person singular pronoun: “you.”

Therefore, as soon as you become engrafted into Christ through faith, you are made a son of God, an heir of heaven, a partaker in righteousness, a possessor of life; and (by this their falsehood may be better refuted) you obtain not the opportunity to gain merit but all the merits of Christ, for they are communicated to you (*Institutes* 3.15.6).

It ought to be added here that Calvin is very clear that, because of the divine promise, not one of those who are truly united to the Lord Jesus will or can fall from grace fatally or finally:

Christ does not allow any of those whom he has once for all engrafted into his body to perish [John 10:28]; for in preserving their salvation he will perform what he has promised—namely, he will show forth God’s power, which “is greater than all” [John 10:29] (*Institutes* 3.22.7).

It is a promise which eminently deserves our observation, that all who are united to Christ, and acknowledge him to be Christ and Mediator, will remain to the end safe from all danger; for what is said of the body of the Church belongs to each of its members, since they are one in Christ (Comm. on Matt. 16:18).

Moreover, union with God’s beloved Son itself ensures the preservation and perseverance of all true believers. Christ is made ours inseparably!

Christ is the bond [of God’s love for us]; for he is the beloved Son, in whom the Father is well pleased. If, then, we are through him united to God, we may be assured

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of the immutable and unfailing kindness of God towards us. He [i.e., Paul] now speaks here more distinctly than before, as he declares that the fountain of love is in the Father, and affirms that it flows to us from Christ (Comm. on Rom. 8:39).<sup>53</sup>

All of this positively throbs with the assurance that we are saved and kept and loved in union with Jesus now and forever. Moreover, even our assurance of our eternal election is found only in Him.

First, if we seek God's fatherly mercy and kindly heart, we should turn our eyes to Christ, on whom alone God's Spirit rests ... No matter how much you toss it about and mull it over, you will discover that its final bounds still extend no farther ... if we have been chosen in him, we shall not find assurance of our election in ourselves; and not even in God the Father, if we conceive him as severed from his Son. Christ, then, is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election. For since it is into his body the Father has destined those to be engrafted whom he has willed from eternity to be his own, that he may hold as sons all whom he acknowledges to be among his members, we have a sufficiently clear and firm testimony that we have been inscribed in the book of life [cf. Rev. 21:27] if we are in communion with Christ (*Institutes* 3.24.5).

### Church and Means of Grace

Moving from soteriology, we come to ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. It is the church invisible, the believing company of the predestinate, who truly confess, "Christ is made ours!" For John Calvin, the believer's union with Jesus Christ necessarily involves union with Christ's body, the church. No one should

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<sup>53</sup> Similarly, the *Westminster Larger Catechism* explains that true believers cannot apostatize because of "their inseparable union with Christ" (A. 79).

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ever say, “I am in Christ but I have little or nothing to do with the church.”

Being a member of Christ automatically entails membership in the church organism (I Cor. 12:12-13) and requires membership in the church institute. Few, if any, in post-apostolic history have so frequently and so forcefully issued the call to all believers to join a faithful congregation that manifests the marks of a true church as the French Reformer.<sup>54</sup>

Calvin explicitly related union with Christ to membership in a visible instituted church. Here we provide one quote that is representative of many:

... nothing is more formidable than to be rejected from God’s flock. For no safety is to be hoped for, except as God collects us into one body under one head. First, all safety resides in Christ alone; and then we cannot be separated from Christ without falling away from all hope of safety: but Christ will not and cannot be torn from his Church with which he is joined in an indissoluble knot, as the head to the body. Hence, unless we cultivate unity with the faithful, we see that we are cut off from Christ (Comm. on Eze. 13:9).

Sometimes, Calvin even explains being “in Christ” ecclesiastically. For example, he writes, “in Christ, that is, in the kingdom of Christ, or in the Christian church” (Comm. on Gal. 5:6; cf. Comm. on II Cor. 5:17).

In his “Summary of Doctrine Concerning the Ministry of the Word and the Sacraments,” our theologian teaches that God uses

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. John Calvin, *Come Out From Among Them: ‘Anti-Nicodemite’ Writings of John Calvin*, trans. Seth Skolnitsky (Dallas, TX: Protestant Heritage Press, 2001). See also *Belgic Confession* 28-29, which was written by Guido de Brès, a disciple of Calvin, as well as David J. Engelsma, *Bound to Join: Letters on Church Membership* (Jenison, MI: RFPA, 2010) and *A Defense of the Church Institute: Response to the Critics of Bound to Join* (Jenison, MI: RFPA, 2012).

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the means of grace (the preaching of the Word and the partaking of the sacraments) to deepen our union and communion with Christ.

The end of the whole Gospel ministry is that God ... communicate Christ to us who are disunited by sin and hence ruined, that we may from him enjoy eternal life; that in a word all heavenly treasures be so applied to us that they be no less ours than Christ's himself. We believe this communication to be mystical, and incomprehensible to human reason, and spiritual, since it is effected by the Holy Spirit [by whom] he [i.e., God] joins us to Christ our Head, not in an imaginary way, but most powerfully and truly, so that we become flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone [cf. Eph. 5:30], and from his vivifying flesh he transfuses eternal life into us. To effect this union, the Holy Spirit uses a double instrument, the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments.<sup>55</sup>

The preaching of the Word is the chief means that God has appointed for our growth in grace. Calvin speaks eloquently of the spiritual power of the “doctrine administered” through the “pastoral office:”

Thus the renewal of the saints is accomplished; thus the body of Christ is built up [Eph. 4:12]; thus “we grow up in every way into him who is the Head” [Eph. 4:15] and grow together among ourselves; thus are we all brought into the unity of Christ (*Institutes* 4.3.2).

For Calvin, as well as the whole Reformed tradition, the two Christian sacraments are official means of grace that God has appointed in and for the church as holy instruments by which we grow into the Lord Jesus more and more. Ronald S. Wallace summarizes the Genevan Reformer's doctrine of the church and the

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<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Glen Clary, “Calvin on Union with Christ through Word and Sacrament” ([www.reformedforum.org/calvin-on-spiritual-union-with-christ-through-word-and-sacrament](http://www.reformedforum.org/calvin-on-spiritual-union-with-christ-through-word-and-sacrament)).

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means of grace in connection with our union with Christ: “Christ has bound the Church to Himself organically as His body, and the life of the Head flows to the members through the ministry of the Word and Sacrament committed to the Church.”<sup>56</sup>

### Baptism

This is the very first sentence in Calvin’s chapter on the first Christian sacrament, entitled “Baptism,” in his *Institutes*: “Baptism is the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God’s children” (*Institutes* 4.15.1).

“Baptism,” Calvin continues, “brings three things to our faith which we must deal with individually.” First, it is “a token and proof of our cleansing” (*Institutes* 4.15.1), for “we obtain in Christ continual and unceasing forgiveness of sins even unto death” (*Institutes* 4.15.3). Second, baptism is a sign and seal of our sanctification, “for it shows us our mortification in Christ, and new life in him,” appealing to Romans 6:3-4 (*Institutes* 4.15.5). Third, baptism is a “sure testimony to us that we are not only engrafted into the death and life of Christ, but so united to Christ himself that we become sharers in all his blessings.” Calvin reiterates this last point: “all the gifts of God proffered in baptism are found in Christ alone” in “the firmest bond of the union and fellowship which he has deigned to form with us” (*Institutes* 4.15.6).<sup>57</sup>

This is Calvin’s comment on the Trinitarian baptismal formula:

There are good reasons why *the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit*, are expressly mentioned; for there is no other way in which the efficacy of *baptism* can be experienced than when we begin with the unmerited mercy of *the*

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<sup>56</sup> Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 234.

<sup>57</sup> Later Calvin refers to this “summary” of these three things to which baptism “points,” and which we “obtain” through “fellowship” with Christ and “participation” in His redemptive acts (*Institutes* 4.16.2).

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*Father*, who reconciles us to himself by the only begotten *Son*; next, Christ comes forward with the sacrifice of his death; and at length, *the Holy Spirit* is likewise added, by whom he washes and regenerates us (Titus 3:5) and, in short, makes us partakers of his [i.e., Christ's] benefits (Comm. on Matt. 28:19; cf. *Institutes* 4.15.6).<sup>58</sup>

What a striking testimony to union with Christ in connection with baptism in Calvin's thought! The last three paragraphs demonstrate that, for the French Reformer, the definition of baptism, the three benefits of baptism (justification, sanctification and "all the gifts of God") and the baptismal formula all involve the mystical union. Christ becomes ours by inward, spiritual baptism, which ritual, water baptism signifies and seals!

After a chapter on baptism in general (*Institutes* 4.15), Calvin deals at length with paedobaptism, the baptism of the seed of believers (Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39), also known as infant or family or household or covenant baptism, over against the Anabaptists (*Institutes* 4.16). Again Calvin appeals to *unio cum Christo*, here drawing the parallel between the union of children with the "first" Adam in sin and union with the "last Adam" in salvation (Rom. 5:12-19; I Cor. 15:45-49):

For if it is admitted that they are among the children of Adam, they are left in death, since in Adam we can but die [Rom. 5:12ff.]. On the contrary, Christ commands that they [i.e., these "little children" in Israel] be brought to him [Matt. 19:14]. Why is this? Because he is life. Therefore, to quicken them he makes them partakers in himself, while these fellows [i.e., the Anabaptists] sentence them to banishment and death (*Institutes* 4.16.17).

Drawing upon his doctrine of the sanctification of Christ and of His elect in Him (cf. John 17:19), as set forth earlier, Calvin

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. "Form for the Administration of Baptism," in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), p. 258.



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explains how the children of believers are worthy recipients of baptism:

Truly, Christ was sanctified from earliest infancy in order that he might sanctify in himself his elect from every age without distinction. For, to wipe out the guilt of the disobedience which had been committed in our flesh, he took that very flesh that in it, for our sake, and in our stead, he might achieve perfect obedience. Thus, he was conceived of the Holy Spirit in order that, in the flesh taken, fully imbued with the holiness of the Spirit, he might impart that holiness to us. If we have in Christ the most perfect example of all the graces which God bestows upon his children, in this respect also he will be for us a proof that the age of infancy is not utterly averse to sanctification (*Institutes* 4.16.18).

### **Lord's Supper and Church Discipline**

Calvin transitions from the first Christian sacrament (*Institutes* 4.15-16) to the second (*Institutes* 4.17-18) by way of *unio cum Christo*:

For as in baptism, God, regenerating us, engrafts us into the society of his church and makes us his own by adoption, so we have said, that he discharges the function of a provident householder in continually supplying to us the food [of the Lord's Supper] to sustain and preserve us in that life (*Institutes* 4.17.1).

From this sacrament, godly souls “have a witness of our growth into one body with Christ such that whatever is his may be called ours,” Calvin states, before proclaiming eloquently,

This is the wonderful exchange which, out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality,

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he has conferred his immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that, receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself (which oppressed us), he has clothed us with his righteousness (*Institutes* 4.17.2).

Commenting on John 6:56, “He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him,”<sup>59</sup> and with one eye on the Roman Catholic abuse of this text in support of their blasphemous mass, Calvin explains,

while he [i.e., Christ] alone has life in himself, he shows how we may enjoy it, that is, by *eating his flesh*; as if he had affirmed that there is no other way in which he can become ours, than by our faith being directed to his flesh ... When he says that he *dwelleth in us*, the meaning is the same as if he had said, that the only bond of union, and the way by which he becomes one with us, is, when our faith relies on his death. We may likewise infer from it, that he is not now speaking of the outward symbol, which many unbelievers receive equally with believers, and yet continue separated from Christ (Comm. on John 6:56).

Robert Letham declares, “for Calvin,” it is in the Lord’s Supper that “union with Christ comes to particular expression.”<sup>60</sup> In fact, it is not an overstatement to claim that Calvin’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper is incomprehensible apart from the mystical union. His favourite text on both *unio cum Christo* and the second New Testament sacrament is Ephesians 5:30: “For we are flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones.”

For the Lord so communicates his body to us there that he

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<sup>59</sup> Clive Bowsher notes that John 6:56 is the “first instance of ‘in-one-another’ language in the Fourth Gospel” (*Life in the Son: Exploring Participation and Union with Christ in John’s Gospel and Letters* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2023], p. 26).

<sup>60</sup> Letham, *Union with Christ*, p. 105.

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is made completely one with us and we with him. Now, since he has only one body, of which he makes us all partakers, it is necessary that all of us also be made one body by such participation. The bread shown in the Sacrament represents this unity. As it is made of many grains so mixed together that one cannot be distinguished from another, so it is fitting that in the same way we should be joined and bound together by such great agreement of minds that no sort of disagreement or division may intrude (*Institutes* 4.17.38).<sup>61</sup>

*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 76, written by two of Calvin's faithful disciples, Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus, breathes the Genevan Reformer's doctrine of the Lord's Supper with its motif of union with Christ and use of Ephesians 5:30:

Q. What is it then to eat the crucified body and drink the shed blood of Christ?

A. It is not only to embrace with a believing heart all the sufferings and death of Christ, and thereby to obtain the pardon of sin and life eternal; but also, besides that, to become more and more united to His sacred body by the Holy Ghost, who dwells both in Christ and in us; so that we, though Christ is in heaven and we on earth, are notwithstanding *flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bone*; and that we live and are governed forever by one Spirit, as members of the same body are by one soul.

In this connection, Calvin makes this application: "The mystical union subsisting between Christ and his members should be [a] matter of reflection, not only when we sit at the Lord's table, but at all other times" (Comm. on Ps. 63:2). Christ is made ours more and more, as we eat and drink Him spiritually and sacramentally!

Amongst Calvin's justifications of church discipline is his appeal to *unio cum Christo*:

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. "Form for the Administration of the Lord's Supper," in *The Confessions and the Church Order*, p. 271.

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For since the church itself is the body of Christ [Col. 1:24], it cannot be corrupted by such foul and decaying members without some disgrace falling upon its Head. Therefore ... they from whose wickedness infamy redounds to the Christian name must be banished from its family (*Institutes* 4.12.5).

Thus ecclesiastical discipline, as Wendel remarks, "was made necessary, in effect, by the union of the faithful with Christ and his dignity as head of the Church."<sup>62</sup>

### Eschatological Orientation

After considering soteriology and ecclesiology, we come to eschatology. Here we mention two preliminary issues: the relationship between union with Christ in Calvin's thought and, first, the eschatological virtue of hope and, second, the location of the main treatment of the last things in his *Institutes*.

First, hope is the believer's spiritual attitude and outlook towards the future good promised in God's Word. Both our objective hope and our subjective hope are only in Jesus (Comm. on Titus 2:13). Heinrich Quistorp explains the vital role of *unio cum Christo* in eschatological hope according to John Calvin:

The hope of Christians is rooted in their fellowship with Christ. Through faith they are incorporated into His body. As members of His body they have an eternal destiny. "Believers should realize that their hope of the heavenly inheritance rests solely upon the fact that because of their implantation into Christ they are by grace viewed as righteous" [*Institutes* 3.13.5]. The head who has entered into glory will draw the members after Him: such is the hope of Christianity, of the body of Christ ... In Him the eternal inheritance is already essentially given to us. The future good of perfect righteousness and blessedness already exists in Christ. We do not need to go outside

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<sup>62</sup> Wendel, *Calvin*, p. 298.

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Christ since we already possess everything in Him. For His priesthood effects our entrance into the Kingdom of God. “It is impossible for us to wish for ourselves anything better” [Comm. on Heb. 9:11]. Outside the accomplished work of Christ and communion with Him there is no hope.<sup>63</sup>

Second, Cornelis Venema presents the rationale for Calvin’s placement of his main treatment of eschatology within his *Institutes*. Here again union with Christ is prominent.

The significance of this location for Calvin’s treatment of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting is not difficult to discern [*Institutes* 3.25, the last chapter of book 3]. The redemptive work of Christ as Mediator [book 2] is imparted to believers by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who unites believers to Christ and grants them all the benefits of redemption [book 3]. Through union with Christ, believers enjoy principally the double benefit of free justification or acceptance with God and renewal after the image of God [i.e., sanctification] [3.1-20]. The purpose of God the Father [3.21-24] in redemption is to restore believers to acceptance and favor, and to conform them to the image of Christ in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. The work of the triune Creator [book 1] and Redeemer [book 2] aims to bring those who are united to Christ to glory, and to repair the brokenness and disorder of sin in human life [book 3]. Calvin’s treatment of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting represents, accordingly, his account of the telos [i.e., goal] of the believer’s union with Christ [3.25]. In union with Christ, believers are justified, sanctified, and ultimately glorified [book 3]. Considering the location of chapter 25 of the *Institutes* it might well be titled “The Believer’s Glorification in Union with Christ.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Heinrich Quistorp, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Last Things*, trans. Harold Knight (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1955), pp. 20-21.

<sup>64</sup> Cornelis P. Venema, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Last Things: The Resurrection

## Intermediate State

John Calvin taught the truth of the blessed intermediate state of the believer in his soul with Christ in heaven, in the period between our present state in this fallen world and our eternal state in the new creation. Because of the mystical union, God's children must not be terrified of dying:

But though life be only begun in us, Christ declares that believers are so certain of obtaining it, that they ought not to fear *death*; and we need not wonder at this, since they are united to him who is the inexhaustible fountain of *life* (Comm. on John 5:24).

Christ will be made ours in a far higher way in heaven after we die (Comm. on Phil. 1:21-23)!

Here our theologian sharply opposes the Anabaptist heresy of soul sleep, that the child of God is unconscious between his death and his bodily resurrection on the last day. *Psychopannychia* (1534) is the earliest theological treatise Calvin wrote, though it was only published in 1542 and 1545.<sup>65</sup> Among Calvin's many biblical and theological arguments against Anabaptist soul sleep in *Psychopannychia* is his appeal to union with Christ.<sup>66</sup> Calvin explains,

Besides, it not only consoles us to think that Christ, our Head, did not perish in the shadow of death, but we have the additional security of his Resurrection, by which he constituted himself the Lord of death, and raised all of us who have any part in him above death, so that Paul did not hesitate to say, that "our life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). Elsewhere he says, "I live, yet not I, but;

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of the Body and the Life Everlasting (*Institutes* 3.25 et al)," in Hall and Lillback (eds.), *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes*, p. 445.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), pp. 165-167.

<sup>66</sup> This is a point also made in Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 203.

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Christ liveth in me” (Gal. 2:20). What remains for our opponents but to cry with open mouth that Christ sleeps in sleeping souls? For if Christ lives in them he also dies in them. If, therefore, the life of Christ is ours, let him who insists that our life is ended by death, pull Christ down from the right hand of the Father and consign him to the second death. If He can die, our death is certain; if he has no end of life, neither can our souls ingrafted in him be ended by any death! But why labor the point? Is there any obscurity in the words, “Because I live, ye shall live also” (John 14:19)? If we live because he lives, then if we die he does not live. Is there any obscurity in his promise, that he will remain in all who are united to him by faith, and they in him (John 6:56)? Therefore, if we would deprive the members of life, let us dissever them from Christ.<sup>67</sup>

Union with Christ in the intermediate state also rules out popish notions of purgatory. After refuting the folly of indulgences (*Institutes* 3.5.1-5), an imaginary way of getting out of an imaginary place, Calvin deals with Rome’s specious arguments for the existence of purgatory from the Bible (*Institutes* 3.5.6-10). He concludes,

Scripture supplies another far better and more perfect solace [than that of popery or paganism] when it testifies: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord” [Rev. 14:13] (*Institutes* 3.5.10).<sup>68</sup>

“To *sleep in Christ*, is to retain in death the connection that we

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<sup>67</sup> This work is available on-line ([www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/calvin\\_psychopannychia.html](http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/calvin_psychopannychia.html)). In the “Preface by John Calvin to a Friend,” he notes that the sixteenth-century Anabaptists were not the only ones who taught soul sleep. “Some Arabs” in the early church “maintained” it, and Pope John XXII (1316-1334) “broached it, and was forced to recant by the Theological Faculty of Paris.”

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Venema: “According to Calvin, the dogma of purgatory has no scriptural warrant and belies the believer’s union with Christ” (“Calvin’s Doctrine of the Last Things,” p. 449, n. 22).

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have with Christ," Calvin explains, "for those that are by faith ingrafted into Christ, have death in common with him, that they may be partakers with him of life" (Comm. on I Thess. 4:14).<sup>69</sup> Venema sums up Calvin's biblical teaching regarding the believer's intermediate state: "Death brings about a separation between the body and the soul," not a separation between the child of God and Jesus, for "the soul of the believer continues to enjoy conscious fellowship with Christ until the time of the general resurrection at the last day."<sup>70</sup>

Calvin expertly wields the sword of union with Christ against the two main heresies in this area of theology: the soul sleep of the Anabaptists and the purgatory of the Roman Catholics. Following God's Word, Calvin recognizes only the intermediate states of heaven (for those united to Christ) and hell (for those not united to Him), and denies the existence of an intermediate place (purgatory) between them. The *Westminster Confession* sums it up well: "Besides these two places for souls separated from their bodies, the scripture acknowledgeth none" (32:1).

### Second Coming

What is the Lord's glorious bodily return for Calvin? As well as the other many ways in which Scripture presents this blessed event, Calvin speaks of our Saviour's return in connection with our union with Christ:

Here we have a choice consolation—that the coming of Christ will be the manifestation of our life ... For if our life is shut up in Christ [Col. 3:3], it must be *hid*, until he shall *appear* (Comm. on Col. 3:4).

Commenting on the future appearing of Christ, when "we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (I John 3:2), Calvin writes,

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<sup>69</sup> Those who die outside of Christ are "cut off from all fellowship with God" and punished forever in hell (*Institutes* 3.25.12).

<sup>70</sup> Venema, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Last Things," p. 456.



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[John] teaches the same thing with Paul, in Colossians 3:3, 4, where he says, “Your life is hid with Christ in God: when Christ, who is your life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.” For our faith cannot stand otherwise than by looking to the coming of Christ. The reason why God defers the manifestation of our glory is this, because Christ is not manifested in the power of his kingdom.

Our theologian then states that our Lord Jesus comes to conform us to Himself in the image, likeness and glory of God:

[John shows] that the final end of our adoption is, that what has in order preceded in Christ, shall at length be completed in us ... to see Christ makes us like him ... this is to see him as a friend ... But as far as the image of God is renewed in us, we have eyes prepared to see God. And now, indeed, God begins to renew in us his own image, but in what a small measure! Except then we be stripped of all the corruption of the flesh, we shall not be able to behold God face to face ... we shall be partakers of the divine glory, for except our nature were spiritual, and endowed with a heavenly and blessed immortality, it could never come so nigh to God: yet the perfection of glory will not be so great in us, that our seeing will enable us to comprehend all that God is (Comm. on I John 3:2).

In a sermon on II Thessalonians 1:6-10, Calvin proclaims that the returning Christ will share His glory with us:

When St. Paul adds this [v. 10], it is as if he said, “He will come to make us sharers in His glory, that everything worthy to be honored and revered in Him will then be communicated to us.” Briefly, St. Paul declares that our Lord Jesus is not coming to keep His glory to Himself alone, but that it may be poured out upon all the members of His body.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on the Deity of Christ*, trans. Leroy Nixon (Audubon,

## General Resurrection

Our Saviour will return in great majesty and with the holy angels in order to raise the dead.<sup>72</sup> Calvin argues for the necessity of the glorious bodily resurrection of the church from our *unio cum Christo*:

And to separate him from ourselves is not permissible and not even possible, without tearing him apart. From this, Paul argues: "If the dead do not rise up again, then Christ did not rise up again" [I Cor. 15:16]. For he takes it as an agreed principle that it was not for himself alone that Christ was subjected to death, or that he obtained victory over death by rising again. Rather there was begun in the Head what must be completed in all the members (*Institutes* 3.25.3).

After the touching remark that "Christ rose again that he might have us as companions in the life to come," Calvin again stresses that our Saviour's unbreakable and living bond with us guarantees our resurrection:

He was raised by the Father, inasmuch as he was the Head of the church, from which the Father in no way allows him to be severed. He was raised by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Quickener of us in common with him (*Institutes* 3.25.3).

*Belgic Confession* 37 states that, on the last day, we in our souls shall be "joined and united with [our] proper bodies in which [we] formerly lived." The *Westminster Confession* refers to them as "the self-same bodies, and none other, although with different qualities" (32:2). Calvin agrees, identifying as "monstrous" "the error of those who imagine that the souls will not receive

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NJ: Old Paths Publications, repr. 1997), p. 299.

<sup>72</sup> Calvin treats the last two articles of the *Apostles' Creed*, which deal with eschatology ("the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting") in *Institutes* 3.25.

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the same bodies with which they are now clothed but will be furnished with new and different ones” (*Institutes* 3.25.7).

From the truth of union with Christ, Calvin fashions two main arguments against this blasphemous notion. First, these selfsame bodies have been joined to the Lord Jesus!

For it would be utterly absurd that the bodies which God has dedicated to himself as temples [I Cor. 3:16] should fall away into filth without hope of resurrection! What of the fact that they are also members of Christ [I Cor. 6:15]? (*Institutes* 3.25.7).

Second, the Lord Jesus (to whom we are united) was raised in the same body that He bore just three days before.

Besides, if we are to be provided with [brand] new bodies, how will head and members match? Christ arose: was it by fashioning a [completely] new body for himself? No, as he had foretold, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” [John 2:19]. He received again the mortal body which he had previously borne (*Institutes* 3.25.7).

Calvin’s teaching on our future bodily resurrection draws upon his doctrine that the whole believer, including his body, is united with Christ. Here we quote a longer section than that cited earlier from the French Reformer’s commentary on I Corinthians 6:15:

Observe, that the spiritual connection which we have with Christ belongs not merely to the soul, but also to the body, so that we are *flesh of his flesh, etc.* (Eph. 5:30). Otherwise the hope of a resurrection were weak, if our connection were not of that nature—full and complete.

From all this, Calvin draws this comforting lesson: “in the faith of the resurrection we have good ground of consolation, provided we are members of Christ, and are truly united to him as our Head” (Comm. on I Thess. 4:18).

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Appealing to Calvin's commentary on I Corinthians 15:44, Edward A. Dowey, Jr. explains that the nature of the resurrection bodies of the elect is spiritual because of the Holy Spirit whom we receive in *unio cum Christo*:

The spiritual body of the resurrection is not a spiritual substance, different from the animal body, but is deservedly called spiritual, because it will then receive its life from the quickening or life-giving Spirit rather than from eating and drinking! This is the way in which we are finally "conformed into the image of Christ," in the completing of our present spiritual regeneration.<sup>73</sup>

### Final Judgment and Life Everlasting

Our Lord Jesus will come again to raise the dead in order to bring absolutely every human being (as well as all the angels) before His great white throne of judgment. Here again *unio cum Christo* is crucial. Only those human beings who are righteous *in Christ* in this life will be able to stand *before Christ* on the last day. This too is included in Calvin's definition of justification quoted earlier:

we define justification as follows: the sinner, received into communion with Christ ... [1] obtains forgiveness of sins, and [2] clothed with Christ's righteousness as if it were his own, he stands confident before the heavenly judgment seat (*Institutes* 3.17.8).

Venema summarizes the Geneva Reformer's teaching on *unio cum Christo* in our Saviour's sacrifice in the past, and the believer's justification in the present and future:

Through fellowship with Christ, believers enjoy through faith an anticipation of the final verdict of free acceptance and favor with God. Justification in Calvin's conception is, therefore, a thoroughly eschatological benefit. By vir-

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<sup>73</sup> Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, p. 203.

## Union With Christ

tue of Christ's atoning death and resurrection, believers who are united to him enjoy the gospel pronouncement of free acceptance with God, which is no less than the present declaration of what will be publicly confirmed at the last judgment.<sup>74</sup>

Calvin elaborates on the comfort and honour that union with Christ provides regarding His final judgment, for we share with Him in this activity!

Hence arises a wonderful consolation: that we perceive judgment to be in the hands of him who has already destined us to share with him the honor of judging [cf. Matt. 19:28]! Far indeed is he from mounting his judgment seat to condemn us! How could our most merciful Ruler destroy his people? How could the Head scatter his own members? (*Institutes* 2.16.18).

What is said here as to *judging the world* ought to be viewed as referring to that declaration of Christ: *When the Son of Man shall come, ye shall sit*, etc. (Matt. 19:28). *For all power of judgment has been committed to the Son* (John 5:22) in such a manner that he will receive his *saints* into a participation with him in this honour, as assessors (Comm. on I Cor. 6:2).

We will not only be publicly vindicated at the final judgment and honoured as “assessors,” but we shall also be mercifully rewarded in *unio cum Christo*. For Calvin, according to Heinrich Quistorp's summary,

God gives the promised reward ... “because He crowns His earlier gifts by showering upon us new ones with the same generosity which He has manifested hitherto” [Comm. on II Tim. 4:8]. Thus God crowns in His children the work which He began in them.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Venema, “Calvin's Doctrine of the Last Things,” pp. 461-462.

<sup>75</sup> Quistorp, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Last Things*, p. 149.

## Calvin's Doctrine of Union

Our theologian presents the bliss of “life everlasting” in the new heavens and the new earth in terms of our union and communion in Jesus Christ:

If the Lord will share his glory, power, and righteousness with the elect—nay, will give himself to be enjoyed by them and, what is more excellent, will somehow make them to become one with himself, let us remember that every sort of happiness is included under this benefit (*Institutes* 3.25.10).

Clearly, union with Christ is a key feature in Calvin's instruction as regards both individual eschatology (the intermediate state) and general eschatology (Jesus' second coming, our bodily resurrection, the final judgment and the life everlasting). Christ will be ours in perfect blessedness forever and ever!

### ***Apostles' Creed***

Here it is fitting to present the theologically rich, highly eloquent, oft quoted, well-known and much loved Calvin quotation on the blessings that we receive in union with Christ. In these five (English) sentences, there are as many as 19 clauses that begin with “if we seek” or “if:”

If we seek salvation, we are taught by the very name of Jesus that it is “of him” [I Cor. 1:30]. If we seek any other gifts of the Spirit, they will be found in his anointing. If we seek strength, it lies in his dominion; if purity, in his conception; if gentleness, it appears in his birth. For by his birth he was made like us in all respects [Heb. 2:17] that he might learn to feel our pain [cf. Heb. 5:2]. If we seek redemption, it lies in his passion; if acquittal, in his condemnation; if remission of the curse, in his cross [Gal. 3:13]; if satisfaction, in his sacrifice; if purification, in his blood; if reconciliation, in his descent into hell; if mortification of the flesh, in his tomb; if newness of life, in his resurrection; if immortality, in the same; if inheritance of the Heavenly Kingdom, in his entrance into heaven; if

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protection, if security, if abundant supply of all blessings, in his Kingdom; if untroubled expectation of judgment, in the power given to him to judge (*Institutes* 2.16.19).

However, what is less known is that Calvin is here applying to the needs of believers the Christological section of the *Apostles' Creed*.<sup>76</sup> This is evident, first, from its context in *Institutes* 2.16, in which Calvin treats the central or middle articles of the *Symbolum Apostolicum*.<sup>77</sup> Second, note the heading of its last section: "Christ alone in all the clauses of the Creed" (*Institutes* 2.16.19). Third and conclusively, we turn to its content.

The Christological part of the *Apostles' Creed* begins with our Redeemer's names: "I believe ... in Jesus Christ his only begotten Son our Lord." Look out for three of these names as we revisit the famous Calvin quote:

If we seek salvation, we are taught by the very name of Jesus that it is "of him" [I Cor. 1:30] ["Jesus" = Jehovah salvation]. If we seek any other gifts of the Spirit, they will be found in his anointing ["Christ" = anointed One]. If we seek strength, it lies in his dominion ["Lord" = One who exercises dominion] ...<sup>78</sup>

The next section of the *Symbolum Apostolicum* treats our Saviour's state of humiliation: He "was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell."

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<sup>76</sup> Cf. Fred Sanders, "Our Whole Salvation and All Its Parts: Calvin on Union with Christ" ([www.scriptoriumdaily.com/whole-salvation-parts-calvin-union-christ](http://www.scriptoriumdaily.com/whole-salvation-parts-calvin-union-christ)).

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Calvin: "I have followed the order of the Apostles' Creed because it sums up in a few words the main points of our redemption, and thus may serve as a tablet for us upon which we see distinctly and point by point the things in Christ that we ought to heed" (*Institutes* 2.16.18).

<sup>78</sup> Calvin does not here bring in the phrase "his only begotten Son." Elsewhere, Calvin teaches that we are made the regenerated and adopted sons of God, through and in the natural and eternal only begotten Son of God by His incarnation and grace (e.g., *Institutes* 2.14.5-7; cf. *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 33).

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... if purity, in his conception [“conceived by the Holy Ghost”]; if gentleness, it appears in his birth. For by his birth he was made like us in all respects [Heb. 2:17] that he might learn to feel our pain [cf. Heb. 5:2] [“born of the Virgin Mary”]. If we seek redemption, it lies in his passion [“suffered”]; if acquittal, in his condemnation [“under Pontius Pilate”]; if remission of the curse, in his cross [Gal. 3:13]; if satisfaction, in his sacrifice; if purification, in his blood [“was crucified”]; if reconciliation, in his descent into hell [“he descended into hell”]; if mortification of the flesh, in his tomb [“dead, and buried”] ...<sup>79</sup>

The next few clauses of the *Apostles' Creed* present the four elements in our Lord's state of exaltation: “the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.”

... if newness of life, in his resurrection; if immortality, in the same [“the third day he rose again from the dead”]; if inheritance of the Heavenly Kingdom, in his entrance into heaven [“he ascended into heaven”]; if protection, if security, if abundant supply of all blessings, in his Kingdom [“and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty” as king]; if untroubled expectation of judgment, in the power given to him to judge [“from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead”].

Now notice how Calvin frames his powerful and beautiful “if we seek” argument with positives and negatives, as he moves from indicatives to imperatives. These are the two sentences that precede his celebrated quotation:

- Positive: “We see that our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ [Acts 4:12].”

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<sup>79</sup> Note that Calvin inverts the order of the *Apostles' Creed*, in which “dead, and buried” precedes “he descended into hell.”



## Union With Christ

- Negative: “We should therefore take care not to derive the least portion of it from anywhere else.”

This is the sentence that succeeds the 19 “if ye seek” or “if” clauses: “In short, since rich store of every kind of good abounds in him, [positively] let us drink our fill from this fountain, and [negatively] from no other” (*Institutes* 2.16.19).

In other words, in this section of his magnum opus, John Calvin is teaching the church to understand the *Apostles’ Creed* in the light of *unio cum Christo*. The biblical truth that Christ is made ours provides us with the spectacles to read aright the *Symbolum Apostolicum*.

Calvin not only masterfully relates redemption *accomplished by* Christ and redemption *applied in* Christ, but also our Saviour’s all-comprehensive fullness and utter sufficiency. Moreover, Calvin understands that union with Christ is essential to preserve the biblical and Reformation truth of Christ alone. In other (Latin) words, *solus Christus* can only be maintained through the cognate truth of *in Christo solo*.

This, also, is a magnificent commendation of Christ, that we cannot be joined to God otherwise than through him. In the first place, let us consider that our happiness consists in our cleaving to God, and that, on the other hand, there is nothing more miserable than to be alienated from him. He declares, accordingly, that we are blessed through Christ alone, inasmuch as he is the bond of our connection with God, and, on the other hand, that, apart from him, we are most miserable, because we are shut out from God. Let us, however, bear in mind, that what he ascribes to Christ belongs peculiarly to him, that no portion of this praise may be transferred to any other. Hence we must consider the contrasts to these things to be understood—that if this is Christ’s prerogative, it does not belong to others (Comm. on Col. 1:20).

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The radical exclusivity of salvation by and in Christ alone is the total exposure and death knell of all forms of man-centred theology, Roman Catholicism, works righteousness, self-help religion and moralism. Thus Calvin ends *Institutes* 2.16.19 with this explanation and warning:

Some men, not content with him [i.e., Christ] alone, are borne hither and thither from one hope to another; even if they concern themselves chiefly with him, they nevertheless stray from the right way in turning some part of their thinking in another direction. Yet such distrust cannot creep in where men have once for all truly known the abundance of his blessings.

### Unfathomable Depths

Is there any major doctrinal topic that is untouched by union with Christ or that can properly be understood apart from *unio cum Christo*? Indeed, this chapter is itself a sort of mini-theology of John Calvin arranged under the theme of union with Christ, drawn from his exegetical, doctrinal, confessional, polemical and pastoral writings.<sup>80</sup>

We have covered a lot of ground in our study of the eminent Reformer on union with Christ, including what union is and is not, its agent (the Spirit) and its means (faith). We have seen whom union joins together, for we (anthropology) are bonded to the Lord Jesus (Christology) and so to the Trinity (theology). We have reflected upon the benefits and blessings of the mystical union in the realms of salvation (soteriology), the church (ecclesiology) and the last things (eschatology). Besides these six loci of theology, we have even considered union and the *Apostles' Creed*.

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<sup>80</sup> This article does not pretend to completeness and it has not attempted to cover more practical subjects, such as the mystical union and the believer's sufferings (e.g., *Institutes* 3.8.1) and prayers (e.g., *Institutes* 3.20.19-21).

## Union With Christ

Following sacred Scripture, Calvin uses the doctrine of union with Christ to unite the Triune God and dichotomous man, the church and the sacraments, the manifold elements of salvation in the past, present and future, in both time and eternity. We receive all spiritual blessings and benefits, including both justification and sanctification, only in Jesus.

To be in Christ is to be in God, in the Spirit, in the state of salvation, in the church, in heaven after death and in the new creation after the Lord's return. To be in Christ is to be in God's family, in the covenant of grace and in the kingdom of heaven. To be in Christ is to be in the state of grace and to be headed to the state of glory.

One can make the distinction that our redemption was accomplished by Christ's finished work on earth *for* us, while our redemption is applied through His ongoing work *in* us. Even then, we were "in Christ" when he purchased our redemption. Clearly, both the accomplishment and the application of redemption are impossible without *unio cum Christo*. One can even identify special "stages" in our union with Christ: before the foundation of the world (election), at the cross (atonement), from our regeneration onwards (soteriology), upon our physical death (intermediate state), and in the new heavens and the new earth (eternal state).

Alas, we have only scratched the surface, for much more could be said on Calvin's teaching that "Christ is made ours" and the blessed reality itself is far greater than either he or we can ever say. This brings us back to points made in the opening pages of this chapter. Two of the adjectives used by Calvin to describe our union with Christ are "mysterious" and "incomprehensible." One famous phrase used in the Christian tradition and by the Genevan Reformer is the "mystical union."

Thus we conclude by quoting excerpts from Calvin's commentary on the "great mystery" of the union between "Christ and the church" in Ephesians 5:32. Our theologian speaks of the various attitudes towards it of four different parties.

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Our expositor begins with the apostle to the Gentiles, for even Paul expresses "his astonishment at the spiritual union between Christ and the church ... [since] no language can explain fully what it implies."<sup>81</sup>

Second, Calvin refers to the carnal mind-set of unbelievers:

It is to no purpose that men fret themselves to comprehend, by the judgment of the flesh, the manner and character of this union; for here the infinite power of the Divine Spirit is exerted. Those who refuse to admit anything on this subject beyond what their own capacity can reach, act an exceedingly foolish part.

Third, we read of Calvin's own reverence and awe regarding *unio cum Christo*:

For my own part, I am overwhelmed by the depth of this mystery, and am not ashamed to join Paul in acknowledging at once my ignorance and my admiration. How much more satisfactory would this be than to follow my carnal judgment, in undervaluing what Paul declares to be a deep mystery!

Fourth, Calvin turns to what ought to be the orientation and approach of all believers towards these unfathomable depths:

Reason itself teaches how we ought to act in such matters; for whatever is supernatural is clearly beyond our own comprehension. Let us therefore labour more to feel Christ living in us, than to discover the nature of that intercourse (Comm. on Eph. 5:32).

This too is crucial in enjoying the great wonder that Christ is made ours!

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<sup>81</sup> Elsewhere, in reference to Ephesians 5:32's teaching on the "communion of believers with the flesh and blood of the Lord," Calvin states that "the apostle declares it to be so great that he prefers to marvel at it rather than to explain it" (*Institutes* 4.17.9).