

CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF UNION WITH CHRIST

By Andrew Young

*Pastor, Wyndham Evangelical Church,
Associate Principal (South Island), Grace Theological College*

INTRODUCTION

I have chosen to speak to you on this aspect of Calvin's theology partly out of personal interest in the subject and partly because of its prominence in Calvin's understanding of the gospel. He viewed it as having "the highest degree of importance" because through this "mystical union," he says, "Christ makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed."¹

For all of its importance this doctrine tends to be neglected in modern evangelicalism. There seems to be a greater interest in experiencing the benefits of the gospel than there is in understanding their basis in the person and work of Christ. Calvin would argue that this indifference toward theological understanding ultimately imperils – and even precludes – the experience so eagerly sought.

His exposition of the doctrine of union with Christ has much to help our generation. We can see how this is so by considering its larger framework and its basic elements.

THE LARGER FRAMEWORK OF CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF UNION WITH CHRIST

Calvin's theology is marked by such relentless coherence that its parts must always be seen within the scope of the whole. Nowhere is that clearer than in his treatment of union with Christ.

It presupposes an understanding that God created us for life in union with him.² That life was forfeited by the rebellion of our first parents, resulting not simply in condemnation and guilt but also in alienation. Such was the resultant gulf between God in his holiness and man in his corruption that it was impossible for God to bestow his favour upon us, or for us to worship him acceptably. Calvin speaks of our iniquities acting like a cloud, separating us from the fatherly love of God and "completely estranging us from the Kingdom of Heaven."³ Left to ourselves we are without God and without hope in the world (Ephesians 2:12).

That alienation, Calvin says, God undertakes to repair through a mediator. Out of sheer mercy, according to his infinite wisdom and goodness, he appoints the eternal Son, the second Person of the Godhead, to act as the representative of both God and man. His purpose in doing so is both to restore us to his favour and renew in us his image.

Calvin makes much of the fact that in constituting his Son the Mediator, God ordained that he should take upon himself our nature. Only thus, as God and man, could he meet the demands of God's

¹ *Institutes* 3.11.10

² *Institutes* 2.1.5

³ *Institutes* 2.12.1

holiness and our alienation from him.⁴ He speaks of his humanity as the “pledge of our fellowship” with the Son of God, and repeatedly affirms that it is only through our fellowship with his body and blood that we receive life.⁵ In his human nature the Mediator was anointed with the Spirit without measure, fulfilled all the requirements of the Law, offered himself a propitiatory sacrifice to God, rose from death to life, ascended into heaven, and there continues to rule over all things to the church. In all of this he acts not only as our substitute but also as our representative, “sanctifying his church” in his own sanctification (John 17:19). As such, he became the repository of all that we need for restoration to favour with God and renewal in his likeness – that is, for our justification and sanctification.

It is that makes the doctrine of union with Christ so pivotal in Calvin’s theology. For it is through our being joined with the Son of God that all that he has accomplished in his flesh becomes ours. It is not through contemplating him at a distance, or by offering mental assent to the historical events of the gospel, that we come to share in the benefits and gifts of Christ. Rather, it is by being made one with him.⁶ In a magisterial statement on this Calvin writes,

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... All that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him.⁷

This, according to Calvin, is what makes the Christian gospel so exclusive. If we can only approach God through a mediator, and if the Lord Jesus Christ is the Mediator God himself has provided, then there is no other way to the Father than through him (John 14:6). Calvin writes,

It is in him alone and in no other name that salvation is to be found. We cannot turn from him ever so slightly, for even a moment without our salvation, which rests firmly in him, gradually vanishing away. As a result, all those who do not repose in him voluntarily deprive themselves of all grace.”⁸ Again, “We see our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ (Acts 4:12). We should therefore take care to derive not the least portion of it from anywhere else...”⁹

THE BASIC ELEMENTS OF CALVIN’S DOCTRINE OF UNION WITH CHRIST

Calvin readily admits that the doctrine of union with Christ, in terms of its essential nature, is a mystery. As such it can only be comprehended through the Spirit and his Word.

⁴ “Ungrudgingly he took our nature upon himself to impart to us what he was... In this way we are assured of the inheritance of the Heavenly Kingdom; for the only Son of God to whom it wholly belongs, has adopted us as his brothers...” *Institutes* 2.12.2 “Our common nature with Christ is the pledge of our fellowship with the Son of God; and clothed with our flesh he vanquished sin and death together that the victory and triumph might be ours.” *Institutes* 2.12.3

⁵ Ronald S. Wallace states it this way: “The human nature of Jesus Christ, then, has been made the sole channel through which salvation and life and power can flow to the Church. A Christian must seek to find his true well-being in Christ and not apart from Christ. 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. In sanctifying the church the Holy Spirit neither brings to the church nor creates within the church anything that was not first in Jesus Christ, who now, seated at the right hand of God, seeks to transfer his own graces and gifts to the church that it may be preserved and adorned and equipped for its task.” *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, p. 16

⁶ “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.” *Institutes* 3.11.10

⁷ *Institutes* 3.1.1

⁸ *Institutes* 2.16.1

⁹ *Institutes* 2.16.19 In the opening section of his *Institutes* Calvin affirms that we never seriously seek after God before “we become displeased with ourselves” (1.1.1). In regard to the gospel, he writes, “Condemned, dead, and lost in ourselves, we should see righteousness, liberation, life and salvation in him...” (2.16.1)

From these we learn that our union with Christ is something spiritual and entails no “gross mixing” of him with those he represents. The bond that unites us to him is constituted by faith on our part, and the Holy Spirit on his. “Christ,” he writes, “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.”¹⁰

Because of its critical importance in the scheme of salvation, Calvin elaborates at length on the specific nature of the faith that unites us to Christ. He insists that it is not an “implicit” characteristic in humans, but a specific response to Christ as he is presented in the gospel.¹¹ Nor is it simply “assent to gospel history” but a deeply assured confidence in the goodness of God toward us personally in Christ.¹² It is a self-conscious act in which we look outside ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ, resting and relying on him alone for all that he has secured as our Mediator.

Faith, Calvin argues, is “higher” than what we commonly call “knowledge,” the cognition we gain through the senses. The realities involved in the gospel are so far above what the senses can discern that “man’s mind has to go beyond and rise above itself in order to attain it.”¹³ Similarly, the certainty required for faith is beyond what rational proof or argument can supply. There is an experiential element implicit in faith that Calvin speaks of when he writes,

Faith requires full and fixed certainty, such as men are wont to have from things experienced and proved... There is a far different feeling of full assurance that in the Scriptures is always attributed to faith. It is this which puts beyond doubt God’s goodness clearly manifested for us (Col. 2:2; 1 Thess. 1:5 cf. Heb. 6:11; 10:22). But that cannot happen without our truly feeling its sweetness and experiencing it ourselves.¹⁴

It is these aspects of faith that make the work of the Spirit so essential. Both the understanding and assurance essential to saving faith can only come through the “secret energy of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵ Indeed, Calvin goes so far as to say that faith is the “principal work of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁶ “Until our minds become intent on the Spirit,” he writes, “Christ, so to speak, lies idle because we coldly contemplate him as outside ourselves – indeed, far from us.”¹⁷ But through the Holy Spirit, Christ unites us to himself such that “we are made his members, to keep us under himself and in turn, to possess him.”¹⁸

In effecting the bond of faith between ourselves and Christ the Holy Spirit works both upon our blindness and our waywardness. Our mind, according to Calvin,

has such an inclination to vanity that it can never cleave fast to the truth of God; and it has such a dullness that it is always blind to the light of God’s truth. Accordingly, without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Word can do nothing.¹⁹

¹⁰ *Institutes*, 3.2.35

¹¹ *Institutes* 3.2.3

¹² *Institutes* 3.2.1

¹³ *Institutes*, 3.2.14 “What our mind embraces by faith is in every way infinite, and that this kind of knowledge is far more lofty than understanding... The faithful are more strengthened by the persuasion of divine truth than instructed by rational proof... From this we conclude that the knowledge of faith consists in assurance rather than in comprehension.” *Institutes* 3.2.14

¹⁴ *Institutes* 3.2.15

¹⁵ *Institutes* 3.1.1

¹⁶ *Institutes* 3.1.4

¹⁷ *Institutes* 3.1.3

¹⁸ *Institutes* 3.1.3

¹⁹ *Institutes* 3.2.33

It is not only the mind however, that needs strengthening by the Spirit. The “heart” too must be transfused with his power – indeed, the more so since “the heart’s distrust is greater than the mind’s blindness.”

It is harder for the heart to be furnished with assurance than for the mind to be endowed with thought. The Spirit, accordingly serves as a seal, to seal upon our hearts those very promises the certainty of which it has previously impressed upon our minds; and takes the place of a guarantee to confirm and establish them.²⁰

Thus constituted through faith, the Spirit and the Word, the bond between Christ and his people becomes the means of receiving all the benefits he has gained in his flesh.²¹ In him we are counted a royal priesthood consecrated to God through his own self-consecration;²² we are justified through his expiatory death and reconciled through his propitiatory self-offering; and we are sanctified, as our once-for-all sanctification in Christ is realized inseparably alongside our justification.²³ Furthermore, in him, we receive all the rich gifts that Christ bestows upon his body – according to the measure he gives to each part (Ephesians 4:7).

Such gifts become ours especially through prayer, “the primary exercise of faith.”²⁴ Having been shown that all good things are to be found in Christ and Christ alone, it remains for us, Calvin writes, to seek in him, and in prayers to ask of him, what we have learned to be in him. Otherwise, to know God as the master and bestower of all good things, who invites us to request them of him, and still not to go to him and not to ask of him – this would be of as little profit as for a man to neglect a treasure, buried hidden in the earth, after it had been pointed out to him.²⁵

It is this that makes prayer, in Calvin’s view to be so essential. “Words fail,” he says, “to explain how necessary prayer is, and in how many ways the exercise of prayer is profitable.”²⁶

CONCLUSION

Calvin’s doctrine of union with Christ provides a healthy antidote to the superficiality of much contemporary evangelicalism. It explains how it is that all that Christ is becomes ours. It lays a foundation for gospel assurance on the one hand, and a basis for Christian living on the other. Without it both faith and godliness suffer. Recapturing this doctrine in its fullness would do much to strengthen the church of Christ today.

²⁰ *Institutes* 3.2.36

²¹ “Faith enables us to put on the righteousness of Christ so that it becomes ours. Faith enables us to partake of the life made available through the death of Christ. But all this is possible only because faith actually unites us to Christ and inserts us into his body, creating the bond that enables us to receive, possess, and enjoy Christ himself – for the blessings which are his gifts cannot be received and enjoyed by us apart from communion with himself by faith.” Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, p. 21

²² *Institutes* 2.15.6

²³ Justification and sanctification, though distinct, can never be separated in experience. “They are to be seen in their indivisible unity with each other in the person of Christ in relation to whom no one could possibly experience the one without the other... Whomsoever, therefore, God receives into his favour, he presents with the Spirit of adoption, whose agency forms them anew into his image... The one act of union with Christ which enables us to lay hold of the gift of forgiveness puts us also into such a relation to the living Lord that we become involved in an inevitable process of sanctification and ultimate redemption from all evil.” *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁴ *Institutes* 3.20.1

²⁵ *Institutes* 3.20.1

²⁶ *Institutes* 3.20.2 Man is “destitute, devoid of all good things... if he seeks resources to succour him in his need, he must go outside of himself and get them elsewhere... For in Christ he offers all happiness in place of our misery, all wealth in place of our neediness; in him he opens to us the heavenly treasures that our whole faith may contemplate his beloved Son, our whole expectation depends on him, and our whole hope cleaves and rests in him.” *Institutes* 3.20.1