Article published in *Calvin: Theologian and Reformer*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Garry J. Williams (Reformed Heritage Books, 2010)

Calvin, the Holy Spirit and Union with Christ:

The Heart of Christian Doctrine

Abraham Kuyper provided a warning to those who tackle this subject: "although Calvin may have been the most rigid among the reformers, yet not one of them has presented this *unio mystica*, this spiritual union with Christ, so incessantly, so tenderly and with such holy fire as he."[1] Any description of Calvin's thought will surely not equal the brio of the maestro!

Apart from the complexity of the materials in Calvin's work, particularly concerning how this subject relates to the Lord's supper, two other attendant difficulties arise with regard to present theological debate. On the one hand, discussions about the structure of the *Institutes*, à la Muller[2], have tended to make union with Christ a focus in the whole of his theology. On the other, by way of implication, the union is seen as the motivational force behind the double grace of justification and sanctification and the objective and subjective aspects of faith, raising anew questions as to the forensic character of justification in the Reformer's thought.[3]

One danger is simply to engage with what others say in recent publications in the ongoing debate. Calvin's writing itself becomes a pretext for academic jousting. We will try to avoid this by examining three specific biblical texts after some introductory remarks.

Centre and movement in Calvin's theology

The remarks that follow do not pretend to make a new contribution to the debate regarding the centre of Calvin's theology or to interact with what others say on the subject. They simply seek to present a model I have found useful for understanding the relation of three related *conexi* in his thought. Whereas the idea of "centre" implies something static, Calvin's thought patterns involve a movement characteristic of the development of redemptive history.

What we are suggesting is that union with Christ does in fact constitute the central focus of Calvin's theology as a whole and it does so because it is the resolution of two dialectical tensions that precede and contextualise it.[4] In its turn it issues in two

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[1] Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1900), 324-5.
[2] See Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccomodated Calvin* (Oxford: University Press, 2000), 137-9.
[3] Issues explored in Richard B. Gaffin's 'Justification and Union with Christ' in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes*, David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback, eds., (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008), chap. 11.
[4] These terms are used in a general sense and not to interact with any ongoing academic debate on the subject as, for instance, the work of Brian G. Armstrong and others discussed in Mark A.

dialectical situations that are the outcome of the central union with Christ. From the original situation to the ultimate resolution there is a movement in the story involving God and man.

Fundamental to Calvin's work is a dialectic between Creator and creature that structures the whole. As François Wendel states,

"Calvin places all his theology under the sign of what was one of the essential principles of the Reform: the absolute transcendence of God and his total 'otherness' in relation to man. No theology is Christian and in conformity with the Scriptures but in the degree to which it respects the infinite distance separating God from his creature and gives up all confusion, all 'mixing' that might tend to efface the radical distinction between the Divine and the human. Above all, God and man must again be seen in their rightful places. That is the idea that dominates the whole of Calvin's theological exposition, and underlies the majority of his controversies."[5]

Quite apart from any consideration of man's fallen nature, there is an irreducible space that constitutes an insurmountable barrier to any imagined contiguity between God and man[6]. Man is radically subordinate to God and theology can never forget the reality of this situation.[7] Creation, the covenant, redemption and eschatology, together with their specific orders, express the difference between God and all else and institutionalize the primacy of God. It is into the distance between the transcendent God in his 'otherness' and his creatures that mediation is introduced as a *sine qua non* for contact between them.

This fundamental dialectic provides the context for the necessity of mediation and Christ as Mediator, not only in the incarnation but also with a much broader perspective.[8] Mediation too involves a dialectic, implied by all that can be said about the relation between God and creation, including human beings.[9] The position and act of mediation assumed by Christ is focused in his work as it relates to God, to man and creation and also as it involves the person of Christ himself. Mediation is expressed in the reality of the incarnation and in particular the fact that the Mediator was personally not only true man, but also true God, as the Chalcedonian theology expresses it. In the person of Christ there is no 'mixing' of the divine and human natures. Both natures exist in the one person but without any fusion of the divine and human in Christ's unique person and his work. Chapter xii is central in book II of Calvin's *Institutes*, which is itself the gate to book III.[10]

Garcia's book *Life in Christ. Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin's Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 21ff.

[5] François Wendel, *Calvin. The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought,* trans. Philip Mairet (London: William Collins (Fontana Library), 1965), 151.

[6] Cf. Pierre Gisel, *Le Christ de Calvin* (Paris:Desclée, 1990).

[7] Alexandre Ganoczy, *Calvin, théologien de l'Eglise et du ministère* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1964), 75.

[8] Cf. on mediation in Calvin, Hendrik Schroten, *Christus, de Middelaar bij Calvijn* (Utrecht: P. den Boer, 1948).

[9] On the mediation of Christ see my article 'The Work of Christ' in *For A New Reformation: Celebrating the Life and Teaching of John Calvin* (Crossway), eds., Derek W. H. Thomas and John W. Tweeddale, forthcoming.

[10] Calvin argued that both natures were involved in the act of mediation. Cf. Stephen Edmondson, *Calvin's Christology* (Cambridge: University Press, 2004), chap. 1.

Christ's humanity draws God closer to us, revealing love and compassion and providing us with a concrete pledge of salvation. As Calvin says:
"Relying on this pledge, we trust that we are sons of God, for God's natural Son fashioned for himself a body from our body, flesh from our flesh, bones from our bones that he might be one with us. He took our nature upon himself to impart to us what was his, and to become both Son of God and Son of man in common with us."[11]

So here we have, in a third instance, through the "in common with us" the foundation of union with Christ, rooted in his mediation. We might say that Christ united himself to us in order to unite us to himself and that union with Christ is the outcome of mediation. Christ, as Calvin says, did not receive gifts and graces from God for himself, but for us:
"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 become ours and to dwell within us. For this reason, he is called 'our Head' (Ep 4.15) and 'the firstborn among many brethren' (Ro 8.29). We also, in turn are said to be 'engrafted into him' (Ro 11.17) and to 'put on Christ' (Ga 3.27); for all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him. It is true that we obtain this by faith. Yet since we see that not all indiscriminately embrace that communion with Christ, which is offered through the gospel, reason itself teaches us to climb higher and to examine into the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits."[12]

Union with Christ is therefore the only way by which believers can receive the goodness that flows through Christ. It is evident from this that the Christ in question here is the living Christ and that we obtain his blessings by faith, through the secret work of the Spirit. Union with Christ is therefore a living relationship of faith and trust that issues from Christ as source through the work of the Holy Spirit. Further on in book III, refuting Andreas Osiander's notion of essential grace, Calvin states:
"We are deprived of this utterly incomparable good 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."[13]

Because we are made one with Christ and joined to him there accrues to us the twofold grace expressed in a triangular relationship. Partaking in Christ has precedence over the graces of justification and sanctification that flow from him.[14] So the classic passage:
"By partaking in him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's Spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life."[15]

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[11] *Inst.* II.12.2.
[12] *Inst,* III.1.1. Cf. *Comm,* Jean 15.1
[13] *Inst,* III.11.10.
[14] Gaffin, 'Justification', 268-9.
[15] *Inst,* III.11.1. Calvin goes on to explain why he has spoken in this section about sanctification before dealing with justification.

The structure is plain: first participation in him then the consequence of union, reconciliation with God who is no longer a judge, a sort of longhand for justification, then sanctification by the indwelling Spirit. Here we have, based on union with Christ, a reality in the life of the believer that reproduces the image of mediation with its divine and human aspects in the one person of Christ. Justification in the double grace represents the divine forensic aspect of grace, that God is no longer a judge but a Father, grace outside of us and for us. Sanctification, the inner transformation, is the fruit of grace in us, renewing our human nature. As with the union of the divine and human natures in the one Jesus Christ, Christ is not riven apart or divided when we are joined with him[16], but we receive the grace of the whole Christ in justification and holiness of life. This is effected through the work of the Holy Spirit and the instrumentality of faith.[17]

Justification and sanctification are the replica of what Christ does in the mediation of the incarnation in a comparable action through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the bond that unites us to Christ effectively. François Wendel comments:

"One may justifiably wonder whether the Holy Spirit does not occupy a position, in our relations with the Christ, analogous to that of the Christ himself in his relations with the Father. In a good many passages, indeed, the Holy Spirit plays the part of an obligatory mediator between Christ and man, just as the Christ is the mediator between God and man. And in the same way that Jesus Christ is the necessary instrument of redemption, so is the Holy Spirit the no less necessary instrument by means of which this redemption reaches us, in justification and regeneration."[18]

In the application of salvation the twofold grace has a precise structure. It shows that, through the work of the Holy Spirit, faith unites believers to Christ in justification and sanctification as two different but complementary aspects of union with Christ.

The divine-human dialectic that moves from the Creator-creature distinction, through the mediation of incarnation to union with Christ in the accomplishment of redemption, progresses further from union with Christ at the centre to the application of redemption through the double grace and finally has, as its goal, the finality of redemption when God will be "all in all". Christ at this future point will deliver "the kingdom to God the Father." (1 Co 15.24, 28). In a sense, the dialectic is transcended, as also is mediatorship[19], when we "enjoy the direct vision of the Godhead". If the Kingship of the Son has no beginning and no end, at the conclusion of his redemptive work Christ "will yield to the Father his name and crown of glory and whatever he has received from the Father… for to what purpose were power and lordship given to Christ unless that by his hand the Father might govern us?"[20] This is one of the more elliptic

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[16] *Comm,* Romains 6.1. "Those who imagine that gratuitous righteousness is given to us by Christ, apart from newness of life, shamefully rend Christ asunder."

[17] Cf. J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift* (Oxford: University Press, 2008), 106-8. The graces are "distinct but inseparable. There is no temporal gap between the two graces". On the forensic aspect, Billings says (66) that Calvin insists upon "a theology of participation involving a forensic act of divine pardon. Through receiving God's forgiveness by Christ's work on the cross, believers participate in the righteousness of Christ which is beyond ourselves." Cf. Gaffin, 'Justification', 253-6.

[18] Wendel, *Calvin,* 241f.

[19] *Comm,* 1 Corinthiens 15.28.

[20] *Inst,* II.14.3. This finality has begun already under the reign of Christ, Calvin says in his commentary, *Comm,* 1 Co 15.24.

aspects of Calvin's teaching. In spite of his legendary caution, it serves to indicate that the movement begun in creation will one day reach its terminus.

This section has served to show that union with Christ is a central focus for Calvin. We have already seen to some measure that this union concerns the living risen Christ, that it is intimate and physical as well as spiritual, that it implies action on the part of the Father and the Spirit and that Christ is the source of new life through faith in the gospel, a faith that is diversely instrumental in the twofold grace. Rather than continuing along this rather well-worn path, in the following we propose a different approach.[21]

Calvin's use of biblical language

Union with Christ is presented in a rich and varied bouquet of language in the New Testament texts. "What Scripture tells us of this mystical union goes far beyond moral agreement in will and disposition, says Herman Bavinck. It expressly states that Christ lives and dwells in believers and that they exist in him. The two are united as branch and vine, as are head and member, husband and wife, cornerstone and building."[22] This complex relationship is described in a variety of ways. Since it is virtually impossible to be exhaustive, a selection must be made, and we have chosen three metaphors that are evocative for Calvin: participation, adoption and engrafting. Participation may well be considered as involving the two others and is perhaps fundamental.[23] It implies communion (*koinonia*) and fellowship in the body of Christ. Adoption is an act of God that issues in participation in Christ and his benefits, while engrafting describes the living union and the source of new life in which believers partake in Christ.

In so far as texts are concerned the choice is difficult because of the vast range of Calvin's biblical commentaries and sermons. However, two instances stand out, the commentaries on Romans and John. Calvin no doubt worked concurrently on the second edition of his *Institutes* (1539) and Romans, his first commentary (1540). The commentary on John comes later and its preface is dedicated to the Syndics of the Geneva Council in 1553. In his argument Calvin states that this commentary is the key to opening understanding of the other gospels because here it gives a living portrait of the power of Christ. Here, says Calvin, we find Christ as the pledge of God's paternal mercy toward us and the office of the mediator.[24]

Calvin comments on participation in Christ in Romans 6.1-11, on adoption in Romans 8.13-17, and on engrafting in John 15.1-11. We will refer in these passages not to Calvin's exegetical method or to his explanation as a whole but we propose to limit our remarks to aspects concerning union with Christ.

Union with Christ and Engrafting: John 15. 1-11

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[21] Cf. Christian Adjemian, 'L'union en Christ chez Calvin', in *L'actualité de Jean Calvin,* collective, (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 2008), 177-200.
[22] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2008), 251.
[23] Billings, *Calvin*, chap. 3.
[24] *Comm, Evangile selon Jean* (Aix-en-Provence: Kerygma, 1978) 10-11. In the following quotations of John and Romans we are translating freely from the French edition.

"Ever since Christ has engrafted us into his body we, who are his members, must take special care not to disfigure ourselves with any spot or blemish."[25] We are engrafted into the true vine (v.1). "We are by nature barren and dry, except in so far as we have been grafted into Christ and draw a power from him that is new." Our vital sap, that is all life and strength, comes from Christ alone[26]. The nature of man is unfruitful and destitute of good "because no man has the nature of a vine until he is grafted in Christ, which is given to the elect alone by special grace". Commenting verse 5, "without me you can do nothing", Calvin removes the "sophistic objection" that if we can do nothing without Christ we may do something meritorious with him by saying pertly that "without me" means "except from me". He goes on to say that naturally we are nothing and "begin to become vines when we are united to him to draw our strength from him".

So Calvin underlines that authentic spiritual life can only come from Christ in union with him and that this life begins with engrafting. As a result, new life in Christ means that once engrafted into him we are dependent on him for vitality. The principle is that our life is now in him, because of him. In other words, being united to Christ is life because of what he is in his life-giving power.

Calvin's interpretation of the "true vine" is striking. He opts for the translation "I am the vineyard" and those who are in him are the vines planted there. In this perspective Christ is the true vineyard in contrast with the degenerate Israel[27]. By implication, those who are planted in him are the new Israel, although Calvin does not explicitly say so. Christ is speaking primarily to his apostles, who are chosen, who will be hated by the world like the master but who are his "friends", as they are called to make known all the things Christ has heard from the Father (v.15). This means, according to Calvin, that since the wisdom of God is incomprehensible, he has limited his disclosure to things concerning the person and the office of the mediator "who places himself between God and us, having received out of the secret sanctuary of God those things which he should deliver to us". Nothing important for salvation is omitted in the work of Christ.[28] The uniqueness of Christ's mediatorial function in revelation dictates that his followers are to remain rooted in him and in his truth and love to accomplish their task. We can extrapolate that the Church is apostolic if it remains rooted in the truth, as the apostles are exhorted to do.

Christ presents himself then, according to Calvin, as the true field in which we are to remain rooted, like vines, in order to draw our life's energy from him. All other fields are barren. Christ applies this comparison, Calvin says, to three things –

- we have no power of good apart from him,
- by having root in him we are cultivated and pruned by the Father,
- unfruitful vines are burned.

Here is Calvin's résumé:

"The first author of all good is the Father who has planted us by his hand; and the beginning of life is in Christ, when we begin to take root in him. When Christ calls himself the true vineyard it is as if he had said 'I am truly the vineyard and men work in vain to find life elsewhere. In fact no good fruit can be produced other than by vines that bear fruit in me'."[29]

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[25] *Inst,* III.6.3.
[26] See also the commentaries on Rom 5.6, 7.4, 13.14.
[27] Calvin refers to Is 5.1ff, Jer 2.21, Ez 15.1ff.
[28] *Comm,* Jean, 15.15.
[29] *Comm,* Jean 15.1.

The mediatorial function of Christ is again in evidence, since the vines are in Christ because of the Father, the husbandman, who has planted them there. The fruit comes from life in Christ, when the Father does the planting and the pruning. On "Every branch that bears fruit he prunes", Calvin comments:
"The faithful need assiduous cultivation if they are not to become wayward (*bâtards*) since they cannot produce any good unless God prunes them often. It is not enough that we have been once made participants in adoption if our good Lord does not continue working grace in us."[30]

How is the cleansing accomplished? "You are already clean" means, according to Calvin, that the disciples had already experienced pruning when they were planted in Christ. They were already cleansed or pruned by his word, by his preaching. The truth (*doctrine*) of the gospel resembles the "vine dresser's knife to take away what is useless". Calvin, being Calvin, cannot avoid saying here that the word proceeding from the mouth of man has no great efficacy but "so far as Christ works in the heart by the Spirit, the word itself is the instrument of cleansing".[31]

Having root in the vine is all-important. To the question: can any vines be found in the vineyard that do not produce fruit? Calvin replies that some who are reputed to be part of the Church by external confession may not be fruitful, hence the exhortation to "abide in him". Continuance in grace through the word is absolutely necessary. Christ promises that all who have a living root in him will be fruit-bearing vines and that "the Spirit will always be efficacious in them". The elect will never dry up because vitality flowing from Christ will continue. Even if there are "many hypocrites who in outward appearance flourish and are green for a while, afterwards when they ought to yield fruit, they show a complete contrast to what the Lord expects and requires of his people."[32] So unfruitful branches, not pruned but judged by the word, are removed from Christ in judgment.[33] Calvin makes no comment on "men gathering and casting them into the fire" (v.6).

Christ abides in us through the vital sap of the Spirit that enables his words to bear fruit in his vines. So the love of God flows into the vines as they "abide in his love". The love of God referred to is not the imminent mysterious love, but God's love mediated by Christ. Commenting verse 9, Calvin says:
"Christ testifies that the Father loves him as he is the head of the Church. If, apart from the mediator, we enquire how God loves us, we are faced with a labyrinth and will find neither entrance nor exit. We ought therefore to fix our eyes on Christ in whom are found the clear testimony and pledge of the love of God. For the love of God was fully poured out on him, that from him it might flow to his members... So we contemplate in him, as in a mirror, God's paternal love for us because he is not loved apart or for himself, but in that he unites us to the Father with him."

Paradoxically, the love of God for the Son is accomplished through the Son showing his love in laying down his life (v.13). God could have saved us with a word or a simple act of will, says Calvin, but for our benefit "by not sparing his well-beloved Son, he

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[30] *Comm,* Jean 15.2. This is the background of the developments on suffering in the Christian life in *Inst,* III.6-11.
[31] *Comm,* Jean 15.3
[32] *Comm,* Jean 15.6.
[33] See *Comm,* Romains 11.16-24.

testifies in his person how much he cares for our salvation."[34] If our hearts are not softened by the inestimable sweetness of divine love, they must be harder than stone.

This is the context of "abide in my love" (v.9), which is not, according to Calvin, a feeling of love for God or others, but the continual enjoyment of that love with which Christ once loved. It implies taking care not to neglect our rooting. If we are weak, we must heed Christ's exhortation to persevere in the love he has shown, praying that he confirm us in his love. Prayer expresses faith, the means of perseverance in keeping Christ's commands. It unites "the undeserved love of Christ toward us with a good conscience and newness of life." The effect of Christ's love is that believers "answer their calling because they are led by the Spirit of adoption of free grace".

To encourage faith and perseverance with regard to the commandments, Calvin adds that as well as Christ's love, our Lord holds himself out as a pattern to imitate: "In me, Christ says, is brightly displayed the resemblance of those things that I ask of you; for you see how I persevere in my course. My Father, too, has loved me not for a short time but his love toward me is constant. The conformity of the head and the members ought to retain our attention." Thus arises the peace and joy that is "possessed by all that have been justified by faith". Calvin introduces justification at this point with regard to the commandments because obedience relates to "righteousness being freely imputed by forgiveness and therefore works that deserve to be rejected as imperfect and unholy are made acceptable to God.[35] Thus the desire to live a holy life does not exclude what Calvin calls "the chief article of doctrine", the free pardon of justification, but is founded on it.

Calvin's exposition is a *tour de force*. It is simple and direct but profound, knitting together the main aspects and benefits of union with Christ. The whole structure is not identificational-mystical, but characterized by the centrality of the mediator. The free pardon of grace and holiness are one with a faith that perseveres, received through hearing the word and made effective by the Spirit of adoption that impresses upon us the love of God in Christ. Fruitful vines in the vineyard are planted in Christ and receive sap from their rooting. Between the vines and the husbandman is the third element, the vineyard. We could no more think of human beings having a direct relation with God than we could imagine vines planted in mid-air.

Union with Christ and Participation: Romans 6.1-11

Calvin places his cards on the table in the first lines of his commentary on Romans 6. Partaking in Christ, as in John 15, means the whole Christ, not a divided Christ. It is impossible to imagine "free justice given to us apart from newness of life". In systematic terms justification and sanctification belong together and both are tributary of union with Christ.

Calvin uses participation[36] or its derivatives at least eight times in this section:

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[34] Comm, Jean 15.13.

[35] *Comm,* Jean 15. 10,11.

[36] "Participation" in French is often used by Calvin in conjunction with words such as "communication" (communion), "société" or "union". The words "likeness" or "in common with Christ" which express the same idea are also used. To simply take "participation" as fellowship, however, falls short of the intimacy of the union participation suggests. Such

- Christ cleanses us by his blood and renders God propitious to us in expiation by making us partakers of his Spirit (v.2)
- When we become partakers in the grace of Christ immediately the efficacy of his death appears (v.3)
- The death of Christ destroys the depravity of the flesh and resurrection effects the renovation of a better nature; by baptism we are admitted into participation in this grace (v.4)
- Engrafting, a secret union, makes us partakers of the life no less than of the death of Christ (v.5)
- We cannot be put to death other than by partaking in his death (v.6)
- Christians must show evidence of participation in Christ's death (v.7)
- The bearing of the cross is followed by a participation in eternal life (v.7)
- We cannot be participants in Christ except in newness of life, since he lives an incorruptible life (v.8).

All these references refer in one way or another to the death and resurrection of Christ and our identity with him in those acts. In so far as he "was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Ro 4.25), participation in Christ which includes newness of life from sin and death cannot exist without the double grace of justification and sanctification expressing that union. We are united with Christ in his death and resurrection.

As with the disposition of sanctification and justification in the structure of *Institutes* III, where he deals with newness of life before justification, Calvin is here concerned with the "outrageous madness" of thinking that free grace in justification might foster sin. "By no means"! The opposite is true, claims Calvin: "if we have died to sin through the grace of Christ, then it is false to think that what abolishes sin could give vigour to it." So the death of Christ, cleansing with his blood and the propitiation of God which effect reconciliation are never without the gift of regeneration that makes us partakers of the Spirit. Medicine that destroys disease does not nourish it. So we cannot still live in sin being dead to it, "sin" being taken by Calvin not in the sense of the guilt of sin, but its power. We are made partakers in the justice of Christ, adopted freely by grace and therefore we can no longer walk in sin. The calling to holiness is rooted in justification and adoption.

Union with Christ is not possible without the destruction of sin. What is mainly to be considered in baptism is not simply washing and purification, says Calvin, but the "putting to death of the old man" and when we become one with Christ "the efficacy of his death appears". The effect of baptism is that we may be one with him: being dead to ourselves we become new creatures." The truth of baptism is ratified by faith, through which believers put on Christ (cf. Gal 3.27). Thus the power of God is revealed in all the fruits of the resurrection of Christ.[37] So a transition is made from participation in death to participation in life: "the old man is destroyed by the death of Christ and his resurrection brings justice and makes us new creatures". This is an indissoluble link: "the death of Christ is efficacious to destroy and demolish the depravity of our flesh and the resurrection to effect the state of a new and better nature."

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language has also a sacramental tone. Cf. Marijn De Kroon, *The Honour of God and Human Salvation. Calvin's Theology According to his Institutes* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 19-20 and Wendel, *Calvin,* 259.

[37] *Comm,* Rom 6.4.

In the subsequent verses the language of "grafting" or "planting" is used. As in his interpretation of John 15, Calvin states that this does not imply an exemplary likeness but it describes "the secret union of his Spirit, by which his power flows in us so we partake in the life of Christ." It is a death similar to that of Christ because the death of our present life means spiritual renewal. That we are "grafted" indicates not something required of us but the benefit we derive from Christ because of "the grafting made by the hand of God". Not only are we nourished by Christ but moreover we "pass from our nature to his nature" and the "efficacy of his resurrection renews in us a spiritual nature". Thus we are delivered as crucified from the bondage of sin.

Verses 7 to 11 are an application of the consequences of dying with Christ. Death destroys all the actions of this past life, frees and absolves (*justifie du péché*) from them. Participation in the death of Christ brings an end to sin and the work of God already begun advances daily and is by degrees brought to its finality in a joint-participation with Christ in eternal life. Dying is done with once and for all, but living with Christ is continuous through participation in his incorruptible life. Calvin's summary is: "Christ now makes the faithful alive and by his Sprit breathes his own life into them by his secret power from heaven; as he was liberated from the power of death so he liberates all those who belong to him."[38] There is a mutual likeness between what happened to Christ and what happens to us. Calvin's commentary on verse 10 serves to show that Christ made himself a ransom for sin and died once to obtain eternal redemption through expiation for sin by his blood. Just as he reconciles us by his blood to the Father, he regenerates us at the same time by the power of his Spirit.[39]

The conclusion of Calvin's comments is pastoral, as befits the tone of verse 11: "Think of how it is in you: as once Christ died to destroy sin, so you died once that in future you cease from sinning. You must continue the mortification that has been begun until sin is once and for all abolished. As Christ was raised to an incorruptible life, so by the grace of God you are also born anew, that you may live all your life in holiness and righteousness inasmuch as the power of the Holy Spirit, by which you are renewed, is eternal and shall ever continue the same."[40]

Calvin is not a modern exegete and his interpretation of union with Christ as participation in Christ does not have the sharpness of redemptive-historical *einmalig* interpretation, although Herman Ridderbos followed Calvin in using the language of participation: "baptism incorporates us into, makes us participate in, Christ's death on Golgotha and resurrection in the garden."[41] Calvin's concern is biblical and as a humanist he also has an eye on the patristic tradition.[42] Participation in Christ for Calvin means union in terms of possession of the benefits wrought by Christ in his work of redemption. In this sense it is closer to Ridderbos' construal than it is to mystical

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[38] *Comm,* Rom 6.9.
[39] Calvin comments this passage in the *Institutes* IV.15.5-6 when he speaks of the three consolations of baptism, the third being the attestation of our union with Christ.
[40] *Comm,* Rom, 6.11.
[41] Herman Ridderbos, *Paul. An Outline of his Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 403-5.
[42] As Billings ably shows, *Calvin,* 14ff. Cf. particularly Dennis E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St Bernard* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), chap. 1; A.N.S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), chaps. 1, 2, 5.

approaches or ideas of deification. Rather than rest and repose it has a tone of struggle and conflict that characterizes chapters 6-11 of the *Institutes* book III.

As we have seen, participation in Christ implies the realization of the twofold grace in the believer's life. One cannot be in Christ unless one partakes of the righteousness and holiness implied in his death for sin and his living to righteousness. So what happened in Christ becomes true in and of the believer because through participation it is mirrored in his experience. The expressions, we "pass from our nature to his nature" and the "efficacy of his resurrection renews in us a spiritual nature" describe participation very well. Here we have, it seems, a "triangulation" involving union, justification and sanctification.[43] As Calvin says in III.16.1:

"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… 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 when he illumines by his wisdom he redeems; those whom he redeems he justifies, those whom he justifies he sanctifies… Do you wish to attain righteousness 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."

Union with Christ and Adoption: Romans 8.13-17

Union with Christ is the closest of relations involving engrafting into his body and participation in a common life in which Christ dwells in us:

"Let us know the unity we have with our Lord Jesus Christ: he wills to have a common life with us, and that what he has should be ours: nay, that he even wishes to dwell in us, not in imagination but in effect; not in earthly fashion but spiritually; and that whatever may befall, he so labours by virtue of his Holy Spirit that we are united with him more closely than are limbs with the body."[44]

The intimacy of union with Christ involves also partaking in Christ's Sonship. There is therefore a link between union with Christ and adoption. In fact, just as union with Christ is inconceivable without engrafting into and participation in Christ's life, so also adoption is a legal fiction without membership in Christ's body. By nature we are not members of God's family but children of wrath. In Christ, the Son, we are adopted into the family to become sons of God. Adoption is close to justification and similarly shows that union with Christ is forensic as well as vital. As in justification we are exonerated by God the Judge because of Christ, so in adoption we are sons of the Father because of the Son.

Romans 8 can be seen as a series of litmus tests revealing the presence of the new life in Christ that characterises believers. A consciousness of sonship is one such evidence and it is developed in these verses. As already seen, just as participation in Christ is doubly real in justification and sanctification, so also there is no sonship without the twofold grace. Commenting Romans 8.13 Calvin states:

"There is no trust in God, where there is no love of justice. I take as evident that we are justified in Christ through the grace (*miséricorde*) of God alone; but equally certain is the fact that all who are justified are called to live according to the holy calling of God. Let the faithful learn to

[43] Gaffin, 'Justification', 268-9.
[44] '9th Sermon on the Passion', *Opp.,* 46, 953 quoted by Wendel, *Calvin,* 235.

embrace Christ not only in justification (*justice*) but also in sanctification so as not to divide him by half-faith."[45]

How then is this trust obtained? Through the leading of the Spirit who makes us sons: "Those alone who are lead by the spirit are children of God, because this is the mark by which God recognises his own… children of God who are led by his Spirit are heirs to eternal life… and ought to feel assured of eternal life." Calvin calls this a special dispensation of the Spirit and states that by sanctification "the Lord favours none but his own elect, and by this he separates them from others to be numbered with his sons." (v.14)

We find in the commentary on these verses an implicit order of salvation underlying the exhortation to live in holiness of life. Election implies sonship and separation; justification and sanctification are united in the calling to live in Christ. Union with Christ is variously expressed in the different aspects of the *ordo salutis.*

The assurance of faith in this respect has to do with the special work of the Spirit which impresses upon us the paternal mercy of God in forgiving our infirmities and indwelling sins: "our confidence in this respect is made certain by the Spirit of adoption who could not inspire us with trust in prayer without sealing in us the gratuitous forgiveness God has granted us." Contrary to a spirit of bondage proceeding from the law, this is the spirit of adoption from the gospel and the priceless benefit the Son of God has brought through it. How is this benefit applied? "Christ, the heavenly teacher, not only addresses the faithful by words, but also teaches them inwardly and effectually by his Spirit."

If, under the law, the godly "were illuminated by the same Spirit of faith and had the hope of eternal life which the Spirit as the earnest sealed in their hearts", under the gospel "the Spirit is more largely and abundantly poured forth by the reign of Christ". So now through the gospel "the Spirit of adoption exhilarates our souls by witnessing to our salvation." And through this Spirit we call God Father. Once again, if the faithful under the law called God Father, says Calvin, it was not with such great confidence because the veil kept them at a distance from the holy of holies. But now, "since an entrance has been opened to us by the blood of Christ, we may rejoice fully and freely that we are children of God." "God forgives us our sin and deals kindly with us as the Father of his children."

Adoption to sonship is the special work of the Spirit, of "the Spirit himself", as verse 14 states. Calvin calls the Spirit our "guide and teacher", paralleling the work of Christ, "the heavenly teacher". Our spirit is incapable of assurance with regard to sonship but the Spirit "pours into our hearts such confidence that we venture to call God our Father" and "testifies to our heart respecting the paternal love of God". Without this assurance, says Calvin, there is no true calling on God in prayer. True faith is evidenced by supplication as exercise in prayer shows the reality of faith and trust in God's promises.

In the following verse (17), adoption to divine sonship, the special work of the Spirit, appears to be grounded in Christ. Salvation consists in having God as Father and

[45] *Comm,* Rom 8.13.

being adopted as his children, but this implies an inheritance that is held in common with the Son because of co-inheritance:
"God has adopted us as his children and has at the same time ordained an inheritance for us… a heavenly, incorruptible and eternal inheritance, such as is possessed by Christ… and the excellence of this inheritance is shown in that we partake of it in common with the only begotten Son of God…"

The present, vital and practical aspect of union with Christ are finely stated when Calvin comments on "fellow heirs with Christ provided we suffer with him in order to be also glorified with him" (v.17):
"We are fellow heirs with Christ, provided that we follow him on the same path he took in order to enter into the inheritance… God's inheritance is ours because by his grace he has adopted us to be his children. And so that we may not doubt its possession has been already conferred on Christ with whom we have be made co-owners and partners. Christ came into it by the cross and we must enter into it by the same way."[46]

This does not open the door to salvation by works. In the *Institutes* Calvin says that we should not "exempt ourselves from the condition to which Christ our Head had to submit, especially since he submitted to it for our sake, to show an example of patience in himself."[47] In these comments as in those on John 15 and Romans 6, Calvin speaks of the order by which God dispenses salvation to us and not its cause. Salvation in Christ is by free grace not by works; the way of the cross shows how God governs his people. Further on, in verses 26-27, Calvin speaks of the way of the Spirit with us: if we should find our cross too heavy to bear, the "Sprit himself takes on the weight of our burden by which we, in our weakness, are oppressed, and not only does he help and succour us but he also lifts us up, as if he carried our burden with us."[48]

In conclusion, the Holy Spirit is the bond that unites to the Son. Adoption makes believers sons of the Father in the Son. If, by this act they become co-inheritors with the Son, there is, however, an observable order. It is because of redemption accomplished by the Son that the Spirit of adoption is received. The living experience of assurance in faith, trust and prayer obtained by the witness of the Spirit, makes us one with Christ in his inheritance. This inheritance is obtained by his blood that pays the price for the ransom of sins. The sanctifying and succouring work of the Spirit unite us to Christ in whom justification and sanctification have their ground.

Conclusion

In Calvin's thought union with Christ is the gospel. The incarnation of Christ is the accomplishing focus of the work of the Trinitarian God in his acts of salvation and union with Christ is its operational focus. The Father is the author of life, of election, the one who justifies and adopts on the basis of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. In Christ we find the fountain of life, the mediator with whom we are united in his death and resurrection, issuing in newness of life. The Spirit seals the word of truth in our hearts, bears witness to Christ and is the abiding principle of communion with Christ. From day to day, the Spirit accompanies and mediates the grace of God in Christ to us.

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[46] *Comm,* Rom 8.17. Cf. *Inst,* III.8.
[47] *Inst,* III.8.1.
[48] *Comm,* Rom 8.26.

Union with Christ is also central, as we have seen, because it is articulated in harmony with the double grace flowing from the work of Christ, justification and sanctification. The two graces make the potential benefits of Christ actual in the lives of believers. We possess nothing until we are "engrafted into" Christ, until we "put on Christ" and are made "one body" with him, becoming sons of the Father through the secret work of the Spirit. So "we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits."[49] None of the benefits of the *ordo salutis* is possible outside of union with Christ.

Union with Christ is spiritual and mystical, because of Calvin's articulation of it in terms of participation, engrafting and adoption. However, it remains foreign to the mysticism or deification found in other traditions, because Christ alone is mediator between God and man and it is only in terms of his mediation that the union is construed. "Such a union is possible because Christ took on our human nature, filling it with his virtue. Union with Christ in his humanity is historical, ethical and personal, but not essential. We are not absorbed into Christ, not united to him in such a way that our human personalities are annulled even in the slightest degree."[50]

Finally, we are united to Christ not just as spirit to Spirit but also, mysteriously, in a bodily sense. As the fountain of life, the risen Christ is the source of present bodily life in the flesh. For Calvin, just as our bodies are animated by our souls, so the living Christ becomes the principle of our life, our bodies are "members of Christ":

"The spiritual union we have with Christ belongs not only to the soul, but also to the body, so much so that we are flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone (Ep 5.30). Otherwise the hope of the resurrection would be faint indeed were not our union what it is: namely complete and entire."[51]

Union with Christ is then a Spirit-forged reality by which we on earth are united to the living, risen, eternal Christ in heaven. This will be the governing perspective of Calvin's sacramental theology, developed in the *Institutes* IV, which does not lie beyond the scope of this study, but which time has not allowed us to develop:

"This is the wonderful exchange, which, out of his measureless benevolence he has made with us:
becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him;
by his descent to earth he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us;
accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power;
receiving our poverty for himself, he has transferred his wealth to us;
taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself, he has clothed us with righteousness."[52]

Paul Wells
Professeur de théologie systématique
Faculté Jean Calvin
Aix-en-Provence

[49] *Inst,* III.1.1.
[50] Joel Beeke, 'Appropriating Salvation' in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes*, David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback, eds., 272.
[51] *Comm,* 1 Corinthiens 6.19. Cf. *Inst,* IV.17.8-9.
[52] *Inst,* IV.17.2.