

# Calvin and Union with Christ: The Heart of Faith and of Church Unity

Lecture given at the Presbyterian Seminary in Seoul, Korea, 2010

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.” 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, 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.

A theme which has been less developed than the soteriological ones is that of union with Christ and the correlate of union in the Church. We will link the two with reference to Calvin’s commentary on John 15.

## **Union with Christ is both spiritual and corporal**

“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.”

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 and 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.”

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. 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.”

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, an inner transformation is the fruit of grace in us, renewing our human nature. As in 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, 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.

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.”

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

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.

Union with Christ is partaking is the spiritual union of the Trinity and therefore must have a corporate expression. Union with Christ and union with Christ in his body are inseparable.

### **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.” This complex relationship is described in a variety of metaphors. Most important is Calvin's use of the metaphors of participation, adoption and engrafting. We have chosen one metaphor that is particularly evocative for Calvin, that of engrafting. It implies communion (*koinonia*) and fellowship in the body of 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 we have 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.

Calvin comments on engrafting in John 15.1-11. We will refer in this passage not to Calvin's exegetical method or to his explanation as a whole but we will limit ourselves to aspects concerning union with Christ and its implications for the Church.

### **A body engrafted into Christ: John 15. 1-11**

"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." 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. 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 spiritual life can only come from Christ in union with him and that 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. 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. 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 vine it is as if he had said ‘I am truly the vine 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’.”

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.”

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”.

Having root in the vine is all-important. To the question: can any be found in the vineyard that do not produce fruit? Calvin replies that those who are reputed to be part of the Church by external confession may do so, 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.” So unfruitful branches, not pruned but judged by the word, are removed from Christ in judgment. 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 a pledge of God’s love for us in 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 testifies in his person how much he cares for our salvation.” 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. 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.

## **Conclusion**

In Calvin union with Christ is the heart of 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 to 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.

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.” None of the benefits of the *ordo salutis* are 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.”

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 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.”

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 is true above all of the Church as the body of Christ. What Calvin tells us in John 15 is that a condition of producing fruit is that we abide in him *together* by the power of his Spirit. As we look at the Church as a united body we are encouraged to see in the raising to spiritual life a sign of the resurrection to eternal life in union with Christ.

