



# Union with CHRIST

Reframing Theology and Ministry  
for the Church

J. Todd Billings

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# Introduction

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Union with Christ is a central New Testament description of Christian identity, the life of salvation in Christ. It entails the giving of a new identity such that in Christ, forgiveness and new life are received through the Spirit. Union with Christ involves abiding in Christ the Vine. It means that through the Spirit, sinners are adopted into the household of God as co-heirs with Christ. It means that God’s Spirit is poured out to make the life and teaching of Jesus real to us. It implicates our worship, our vocation in the world, and our witness as the church. Union with Christ is theological shorthand for the gospel itself—a key image that pulls together numerous motifs in the biblical witness.<sup>1</sup> As one biblical scholar exclaims, in the course of biblical commentary, “Being ‘in Christ’ is the essence of Christian proclamation and experience. One may discuss legalism, nomism, and even justification by faith, but without treating the ‘in Christ’ motif we miss the heart of the Christian message.”<sup>2</sup>

1. In the words of John Calvin, “the sum of the gospel” is the “newness of life and free reconciliation—[which] are conferred on us by Christ,” in union with Christ as believers “possess” Christ by faith. *Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1559*, ed. J. T. McNeill and F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 3.3.1.

2. Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary 41 (Dallas: Word, 2002), 159. While I would prefer not to use the term “essence” as this quotation does, Longenecker and many other recent biblical scholars have been emphatic about the significance of the notion of union with Christ in the New Testament.

In recent decades, the theme of union with Christ has become known in popular theological circles through controversies: a number of conferences and books have explored the notion of union with Christ in Calvin and Luther and in New Testament studies, often with a concern for ongoing debates about justification.<sup>3</sup>

This book is not a contribution to those debates. Instead, it emerges from the experience of teaching and lecturing on union with Christ and seeing how the theme challenges, nurtures, and enlivens hearers.<sup>4</sup> Many have testified that this doctrine has revolutionized the way they approach the Christian life and ministry. It reframes parts of our theology that make God too small and predictable, too close, or too distant. It gives a portrait of Christian identity that displaces the ever-fascinating self, replacing it with a God-given identity received from the Father through the Spirit in Christ. It makes us reconsider old theological debates in new ways, and calls us to lives of worship, justice, and service with a new sense of gratitude. My experience of teaching and dialoguing about this topic with various conversation partners has forced me to take seriously a question that has shaped the writing of this book: what is so amazing about God's action in uniting believers to Christ?

In addressing this question, I weave together scripture, doctrinal theology, and analysis of contemporary Western Christianity in a series of thematic essays. My previous writing on the subject has been primarily in the area of historical theology. While I seek to make a responsible use of historical sources, my work here is best seen as part of a theology of retrieval: hearing the voices of the past in such a way that they are allowed to exceed and overcome the chatter of the present.<sup>5</sup> In

3. A small sampling of this literature includes the following: Mark A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and the Twofold Grace in Calvin's Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008); Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2009); Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Bruce McCormack, ed., *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006); Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier, eds., *Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004).

4. As noted in the acknowledgments above, in addition to emerging from my teaching on the subject at a seminary level, these chapters were originally based on a series of lectures given through the Templeton Award for Theological Promise and the Eugene Osterhaven Lectures at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan.

5. For an overview of theologies of retrieval as a contemporary approach to theology, see John Webster, "Theologies of Retrieval," in *Oxford Handbook of*

particular, this book seeks to highlight key present-day implications of a Reformational doctrine of union with Christ—implications that are often startling and thought-altering, as well as edifying. While this book contains fresh historical inquiries, it also builds upon and extends my earlier, more detailed historical-theological work on union with Christ.<sup>6</sup> In this way, I seek to help us hear the voices of the past in a way that illuminates scripture’s witness to the reality of our union with Christ, giving us insights for theology, life, and ministry today.

Before giving an overview of the chapters and beginning the journey in this book, it is worth pondering the book’s method in more depth. Why “retrieval”? And why, specifically, retrieval of Reformational accounts of the biblical theme of union with Christ?

### Seeing with New Eyes

All Christians approach their faith from within a particular cultural context. This fact is inescapable. Yet one of the peculiar things about culture is that it involves many assumptions that we didn’t recognize we had—until we encounter something different. For those who have traveled and seen cultures that are quite different from their own, there is one word that describes the day-by-day, if not minute-by-minute, experience: surprise! We have all sorts of assumptions about, for example, how to eat, how to interact, and how to perform certain tasks, and we take these to be “common sense.” But in cross-cultural encounters we see that not everyone does things according to our assumptions. What we thought was simply “the way things are done” is now recognized as “the way *we* do things.”

Some may be tempted to despair of discovering theological truth when they recognize the reality that truth is always perceived from a

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*Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 583–99.

6. See J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ*, Changing Paradigms in Historical and Systematic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); “John Calvin’s Soteriology: Key Issues in Interpretation and Retrieval,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 4 (October 2009): 428–47; “United to God through Christ: Calvin on the Question of Deification,” *Harvard Theological Review* 98, no. 3 (July 2005): 315–34; “John Calvin’s Theology of Union with Christ, and Its Early Retrieval,” in *Calvin’s Theology and Its Reception: Disputes, Developments, and New Possibilities*, ed. J. Todd Billings and I. John Hesselink (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012).

particular perspective shaped by many social, historical, and cultural factors. But it is better to recognize that our different perspectives provide both distinctive gifts and distinctive blind spots in our interpretation of the Bible and our articulation of theology. In terms of the distinctive gifts, for example, chapter 4 explores how the Reformed Christians in South Africa who penned the Belhar Confession have some valuable insights that come from a long struggle to overcome apartheid and its heritage. Likewise, as Philip Jenkins has explored, the Global South brings special gifts to the church at large by its engagement with themes such as poverty and healing in scripture.<sup>7</sup> Learning about the biblical interpretation and theology of different cultures can be an illuminating enterprise, for it can both reveal our blind spots and point the way toward a more faithful approach to receiving and living the gospel that scripture testifies to. Reading the Belhar Confession can both unveil our own sinful attitudes and open us in a deeper way to the Bible's message of unity, reconciliation, and justice. Reading theology from the Global South can help reveal the materialistic and gnostic tendencies in contemporary Western Christianity that make us read scripture as a story about "souls" rather than real bodies, a story about the real temptation of wealth and the real hardship of poverty. At the same time, interpretations of scripture from the Global South can open Western readers to a more holistic sense in which the gospel is "good news."

In a similar way, a theology of retrieval—reading scripture along with Christians of ages past—can have particular value. Consider three prominent virtues to this approach: First, it possesses the advantages of reading scripture along with persons of another culture, as discussed above, for there are vast differences in culture as one looks to theologians in the church's history. Second, particular biblical and theological issues are often explored in great depth during specific historical periods. For example, those interested in refining their theology of the Trinity would do well to read the Bible along with the writers in the church of the fourth century. The way that the Bible's teaching relates to the Trinity was explored in great detail by numerous authors during that century. A theologian of retrieval will explore these texts not as "history" alone but also as conversation partners, thus allowing their thinking to go beyond the ordinary ways

7. See Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

of thinking in the twenty-first century. Precisely because these thinkers can exceed the possibility of the present—challenging twenty-first-century categories—their work is worth engaging.

This leads to the third virtue of a retrieval approach: having listened receptively to the theologians of the past, we can assess whether the new exegetical and theological possibilities discovered from this engagement with the past are valid or in error. For example, in his book *Reading the Bible with the Dead*, John L. Thompson surveys the premodern biblical interpretation of difficult texts of scripture—biblical texts that appear to marginalize women, promote hatred of one’s enemies, or advocate violence.<sup>8</sup> Thompson shows that reading the Bible with premodern theologians can yield remarkable and helpful insights but that there are also claims that contemporary readers are right to reject. For example, while a prominent stream of premodern interpretation gives a sympathetic and theologically insightful account of Jephthah’s daughter (Judg. 11), others fill in the gaps of the biblical narrative with reflections that would justify Jephthah’s abusive act.<sup>9</sup> Theologians of retrieval can benefit from a historical distance that allows them to see the idolatries of another age and better discern what to accept or reject from biblical interpreters and theologians in earlier eras of history.

What new possibilities are opened up by a theological method of retrieval? Essentially, it is a possibility of seeing scripture, theology, and the world itself with “new eyes.” Passages of scripture that we have read many times before can be seen with new insight, new possibilities. This involves simultaneously critiquing our ordinary ways of seeing things and gaining new ways to understand scripture and theology.

Cross-cultural encounters provide a useful analogy for this process. I recall when I first arrived in a rural area of Uganda to learn the language and participate in community development work. When I looked around the village, there was much that was different from the West, but much seemed the same as well. There were obvious differences: the houses were made out of mud and grass; many of the households had one man with multiple wives; nearly everyone in the village was a farmer, at least for part of their occupation. Yet when I saw people interacting with each other—laughing, talking,

8. John L. Thompson, *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis That You Can’t Learn from Exegesis Alone* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

9. See *ibid.*, 33–47.

sharing, debating—it seemed just like such interactions in the West. But I was wrong.

In a sense, everything was different, even though there were similarities. I soon found that there was an underlying kinship structure that shaped the countless social interactions in the village. I discovered that an unmarried male would not speak more than a few words to an unmarried woman—unless they were about to get married. Yet some of the young, unmarried people I knew spent a great deal of time with young people of the opposite sex. How could that be? I learned that it was because they were part of the same “family” or “kin” group. They would refer to each other as “brother” and “sister,” even though they may have been, at most, distant cousins. Yet there was a great deal of closeness and flexibility allowed in these relationships since they would not consider marrying their “brother” or “sister.” There was a complex network of relationships underlying all the interactions that I was seeing on the surface. Kinship was central to the identity of the people in my village.

As I came to know members of the church in Uganda better, I began to see that my blindness to the power of kinship structures in their culture was related to another blindness: my inability to see the power and extent of kinship structures in the Bible. In one move of “seeing with new eyes,” I both encountered the cultural limitation absorbed from my individualistic Western culture and began to see the power of biblical images in new ways: sons and daughters of Israel, God of your ancestors, children of Abraham, co-heirs with Christ, “brothers and sisters” in Christ, adopted by God, a new humanity, son of God, firstborn. These were no longer archaic biblical ways of speaking but powerful ways of speaking about issues at the core of identity.

A theology of retrieval works in a way that is similar to this example. With the new eyes that a theology of retrieval makes possible, the Western cultural captivity of the gospel can be broken through in a small but significant way, as it was in my own cross-cultural encounter; in this process, the Spirit brings new life and insight through illuminating God’s word. This kind of insight is part of the feeding and nourishment that comes through receiving God’s word. It is a moment of discomfort and yet new assurance, a taste of repentance and new life—a movement of transformation into the image of Christ.

If this is indeed what a theology of retrieval makes possible, then why have I chosen to retrieve this particular biblical and theological theme from this particular historical era? In other words, why should

one think that there is much for twenty-first-century Christians to learn from a Reformational rendering of the biblical theme of union with Christ?

### Union with Christ: Retrieving a Biblical Motif from the Reformation

Just as the fourth century is an appropriate period from which to retrieve theologies of the Trinity, so also the sixteenth-century era of Reformation and counter-Reformation is an appropriate period from which to retrieve theologies of union with Christ. Central in the debates at this time was the meaning of Paul's term "justification," a term that fits within Paul's larger theology of union with Christ. Thus, the cardinal Reformational doctrine of justification by faith presupposes and advances a particular theology of union with Christ—and is countered at the Council of Trent by a contrasting Roman Catholic doctrine of union with Christ. The debates between the two sides often involved close exegesis of biblical texts, a rereading of the church fathers, and careful theological reflection on union with Christ.

But union with Christ was not just a subject of polemical debate in this period; it was also a key theme in thinking through such varied topics as divine and human agency, prayer, the Christian life, and the sacraments. For example, in Calvin's *Institutes*, some material on justification is polemical, seeking to articulate a doctrinally precise position in contrast to views that he saw as aberrant, such as that of Andreas Osiander and of the Council of Trent. But as I have explored elsewhere, Calvin's theology of justification fit within his theology of union with Christ, which he used to speak about the nature of prayer and the Christian life. His reflections on these topics—informed by the same doctrine of justification but fulfilling a different purpose—became so popular that the chapters of the *Institutes* in which he dealt with them were collected into a volume called *The Golden Book of the True Christian Life*. Calvin also used his theology of justification and union with Christ to configure his account of divine and human agency, the law, and the sacraments.<sup>10</sup>

10. See Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, chaps. 4–5. See also Billings, "John Calvin's Theology of Union with Christ," in Billings and Hesselink, *Calvin's Theology and Its Reception*.

The spread of the doctrine of union with Christ to nonpolemical realms of theology continued in the generations after the Reformation. Heidelberg theologian Caspar Olevian (1536–87), for example, made the double benefit of justification and sanctification in union with Christ central to his covenant theology.<sup>11</sup> Both Puritans in the English-speaking world and members of the Dutch “further Reformation” in the Netherlands utilized a vibrant theology of union with Christ in their works on the Christian life and pastoral theology.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, union with Christ was extremely prominent in the popular piety of many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Christians in the Reformed tradition. The Holy Fairs are an example of this. These festivals often attracted thousands of participants for around four days of preaching, singing, and—at the center—celebrating the Lord’s Supper. The theology of the Supper that was preached and practiced was one of union with Christ, a fact that is strongly attested to in the spiritual journals written by lay participants in the festivals.<sup>13</sup>

In contemporary theology, the polemical debates about justification as an aspect of union with Christ have been revived.<sup>14</sup> What has not accompanied this revival of interest, however, has been a recovery of the multifaceted implications of a Reformational account of union with Christ—particularly in areas such as the sacraments, divine and human agency, and the Christian life and ministry. This in itself is a missed opportunity, for the theme of union with Christ had a vitality that spoke to many different aspects of Christian teaching from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century.

Moreover, the need for a renewed theology of union with Christ in Western churches is made acute by at least two major factors. First, the functional or “lived” theologies of salvation in the West have

11. See R. Scott Clark, *Caspar Olevian and the Substance of the Covenant* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Heritage Books, 2008), 137–209.

12. For an excellent analysis of union with Christ in Puritan author John Owen, see Kelly Kopic, *Communion with God: The Divine and Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). On union with Christ in the Dutch further Reformation, see Arie de Reuver, *Sweet Communion: Trajectories of Spirituality from the Middle Ages through the Further Reformation*, trans. James A. De Jong (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

13. See Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 14–15, 158–68.

14. See, for example, Husbands and Treier, *Justification*; N. T. Wright, *Justification*; and John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007).

deficiencies in the precise areas where a Reformational theology of union with Christ has strengths. Sociologists have discovered that while many Americans, for example, claim to be “Christian,” their theology is often much more deistic than Christian. Salvation is seen in terms of the benefits it provides to the individual and their self-confidence rather than in terms of a restored communion with God and neighbor. Religious traditions are dealt with by “tinkering”—mixing and matching from various Christian and non-Christian sources to fill the purpose of solving one’s immediate problems.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to this, a theology of union with Christ centers Christian identity in Jesus Christ himself, and in the claim of the Triune God upon the Christian. Salvation is not self-centered but is a renewal and restoration of the self precisely through orienting the self toward God, toward the church as the body of Christ, and toward the neighbor. Individual believers discover their true identity in communion rather than in a pragmatic, individualistic approach to salvation, and tinkering is replaced by a posture of humble gratitude before God. The God encountered in union with Jesus Christ is at once more majestic and more intimate than the deistic-tending God of the West.

The second reason for the urgent need to recover a theology of union with Christ in the West emerges from the continuing power of fundamentalist-modernist divisions rooted early in the twentieth century. These divisions shape the categories of what divides a “conservative” or “evangelical” church in the West from a “liberal” or “progressive” one. But these very categories—and the church’s identity as defined by these categories—reflect a reduction of the gospel. The ecclesial left tends to identify the gospel with a certain type of ethical action. Thus, religion is fundamentally a horizontal affair—horizontal exhortation leading to horizontal action for the sake of love, justice, and so on. The ecclesial right tends to emphasize the importance of the vertical—whether one is “right with God”—but in a way that leaves unclear the precise role of a horizontal life that entails loving the neighbor, as well as the widow and the orphan. Justice is important for many evangelicals, but there is considerable uncertainty about why it is important, as later chapters will explore.

15. See Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 13–16, 103–7, 134–35; Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, with Melinda Lundquist Denton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 118–71.

A theology of union with Christ takes the dualism and polarities that still remain from the fundamentalist-modernist controversy and unites them into a cohesive, holistic account of the gospel. In a theology of union with Christ retrieved from the Reformation, justice is integral for our lives in union with Christ—for through the Spirit believers receive not only justification but also sanctification, which animates and enlivens our love of neighbor. Hence, justice cannot be seen as an optional “extra” for super-Christians. Yet on the other hand, the gospel can never be reduced to our own acts of justice. For Jesus Christ, and our union with him, is the good news: in him we receive both forgiveness and new life by the Spirit. Both gifts are received in union with Jesus Christ. They can no more be separated than Jesus Christ himself can be torn into pieces. A theology of union with Christ can bring together what modernity has polarized and separated.

In order to theologically retrieve a Reformational rendering of the biblical theme of union with Christ, this book begins in the opening chapter by exploring the remarkable implications of a common biblical image for salvation, one that is at the heart of a trinitarian theology of union with Christ: adoption. Drawing upon the sociological research of Christian Smith, the chapter begins with a portrait of how the distant God of deism is operative in the theology of many Christians in the West. In contrast to this, I explore a biblical theology of adoption as a surprising, if at times unsettling, alternative to this operative deism. In the New Testament, adoption is an analogy for speaking about the close family relationship of becoming children of God. It has a trinitarian cast, as believers are united to Christ by the Spirit, who enables them to cry out to God as “Abba! Father!” (Rom. 8:14–17). This new, adopted identity becomes for Christians both a gift and a calling—to walk by the Spirit rather than by their own power. The way the Reformed tradition adds clarity to this biblical gift and calling is by emphasizing salvation as received in the double grace of union with Christ: adoption is first of all a legal matter of justification through Christ, the one nonadopted Son of God; justification is received as a gift as believers are united to Christ. But this newly given, legally valid identity leads to the discovery of one’s new life in the household of God—a new life of sanctification in which the Spirit calls and empowers Christians to live into their adopted identity. Although the context for this adopted relationship is communion with God through being united to Christ, the repeated exhortations from scripture to live into this

new identity indicate to us that Christians are not “adopted” into a low-commitment relationship with a conveniently distant God. To the contrary, the gospel does not so much offer a low-cost “eternal life insurance” as it gives the tremendous privilege of learning to be children of the King, living into our new identity in a kingdom that is coming forth to us from the future.

Chapter 2 explores an implication of a theology of union with Christ that may strike many readers as counterintuitive. The images of union with Christ, abiding in Christ, and participation in Christ present a multifaceted and wide-ranging theology of salvation. No part of human identity goes untouched by union with Christ—one’s life is found in Christ, by the Spirit, in service to the Father. But much in modern theology and church life has obscured the negative corollary to union and communion, which scripture also addresses: in ourselves, we are dead, slaves, and can do “nothing” to produce fruit. Thus, although it is missed by many who belong to Reformational traditions as well as by their detractors, a doctrine of the bondage of the will, or what some call “total depravity,” corresponds to a doctrine of total communion in which salvation involves a multifaceted communion with God. While neither Calvin nor the early Reformational tradition used the phrase “total depravity,” they do claim that no part of human life is unaffected by sin and that sinful humans cannot perform any “saving good” apart from the Spirit’s effectual work.<sup>16</sup> This chapter argues that such a strongly stated Reformational doctrine of sin is not a purely negative statement about the human condition. Instead, the early Reformed insistence on the bondage of the will to sin reflects a theology of salvation that has an exalted place for humanity: full humanity is humanity in communion with God. If one really believes that humanity is created for communion with God, then redemption can involve nothing less than the communion enabled by God’s Spirit. This chapter retrieves the deeply biblical and christological thought of Augustine and early Reformational theologians to show how it is possible to hold together both sides of the biblical imagery—the imagery of union and communion together with that of slavery to sin. In doing so, it provides a way to affirm a dynamic theology of

16. Canons of Dort, third and fourth main points, art. 3, in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1987), 133. Cf. John Calvin, *Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defence of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice against Pighius*, ed. A. N. S. Lane, trans. G. I. Davies (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 68–69.

union with and participation in Christ, while taking very seriously the effects of the fall.

Chapter 3 builds on the previous chapter, adding a second counterintuitive implication to union with Christ: the incomprehensibility of God. As we will note in chapter 2, a theology of union with Christ speaks about oneness, union and participation in Christ, union and communion with God, empowerment and communion by the Holy Spirit. At times, scripture even uses the image of marital sexual union to describe this mystery. On the one hand, it may seem that Western Christian culture—where Christian contemporary music and praise songs are often based on romantic ballads, and young adults are encouraged to wear chastity rings and consider themselves to be “dating Jesus,” with “flowers, love notes,” and all the trimmings—has a great deal of understanding of this language of union.<sup>17</sup> However, this rendering of communion, intimacy, and union can turn God-the-lover into someone less than God: while a sense of closeness and oneness with God is desired, the God with whom this is desired often doesn’t have much “otherness.” This is not the Alpha and the Omega, not the mysterious, incomprehensible God who comes to us not only as a lover but always as a stranger as well. This chapter argues that for the language of union with God to function properly, one needs a robust apophatic (negative) theology with a strong sense of the incomprehensibility of God. Ironically, in the hands of Calvin and Bavinck, a thoroughgoing doctrine of divine incomprehensibility does not undermine the language of union and communion; rather, it makes it possible to sustain such language. For those united to Christ in close communion with God, God always remains mysterious, other—God remains God, rather than an idol carved from the technology of romance in Western culture. Calvin and Bavinck show us a path for recovering a key truth that has been obscured in the modern West: a proper construal of God’s mystery is vital in affirming the possibility of communion with God.

17. For example, one author writes, “There’s nothing weird about thinking of Jesus like your greatest romantic interest, even if you’re a guy. He wants that kind of intimacy with you so that he can win your heart with his amazing, perfect love, and make you ready for the big day when you get to live happily ever after with him. So how do you date Jesus? Here are some ways that work for me, but the sky is the limit for creativity—just like any true dating relationship. The key is to make it spontaneous, personal and a major priority. And then you’ll find that he begins showing up for dates—sometimes with flowers, love notes, and rainbows!” Julia Ferwerda, “Dating Jesus: The Single Cure for Loneliness,” <http://www.crosswalk.com/singles/11567469/>.

Chapter 4 considers the relation of justice to the gospel in Western Christianity, a relation that has long been a point of confusion and contention. On the one hand, the religious right has tended to frame justice as an optional add-on to the gospel, a form of extra credit for Christians after they are done with the central activities that relate to salvation. On the other hand, the religious left has tended to emphasize justice in a way that makes human acts of justice synonymous with the gospel itself. A theology of union with Christ provides a third way to relate the gospel to justice, thus avoiding the reductionism of both groups. In a theology of union with Christ, to withhold the calling to justice from the new identity we receive in the gospel is to tear Christ apart—to seek to reject the second dimension of union with Christ (sanctification) while holding to the first (justification). But justice is not exhaustive of the gospel either. Instead, justice is defined by its location in Christ, and the law of love fulfilled in Christ becomes the calling that Christians are to pursue in gratitude. When justice is sought through participation in Christ, the primal purpose of the law is fulfilled, which, according to Calvin, is “to unite us to our God.”<sup>18</sup> This union with God through the law is enacted in a special way in the Lord’s Supper, where believers respond to the presence of Christ with a sacrifice of praise that includes “all the duties of love”—love in the church and loving acts of justice in the world.<sup>19</sup> This chapter brings these biblical themes as developed by Calvin into critical dialogue with early Reformed thought and the Belhar Confession. In doing this, I propose a theology in which Christian identity and practice emerge from the Spirit’s work through the Lord’s Supper, where believers are brought into communion with Christ and Christ’s body and are simultaneously empowered to serve the neighbor in need.

Finally, the book concludes with a chapter that considers how a theology of union with Christ offers a corrective to a popular model for ministry that has valuable strengths but is ultimately misguided: the notion of incarnational ministry. Whether in the circles of youth ministry, urban missions, or foreign missions, references to an “incarnational” approach to ministry are widespread. Yet most forms of incarnational ministry are based on the faulty assumption that the incarnation is a model for ministry, such that Christians should

18. John Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, ed. and trans. Benjamin W. Farley (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 39.

19. *Inst.* 4.18.16.

imitate the act of the eternal Word becoming incarnate. As chapter 5 seeks to show, there is no biblical support for such a notion. Moreover, this notion obscures a central point in Christology—namely, that the incarnation is a unique, saving event rather than a set of activities that Christians are to copy. But rather than simply criticize an incarnational model for ministry, this chapter seeks to provide an alternative in terms of union with Christ. The ministry outcomes sought through “incarnational ministry” can be realized and refined through seeing that the imperative to have “the same mind” as “Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5) fits within Paul’s matrix of union with Christ. As ones united to Christ, we participate in the Spirit’s ongoing work of bearing witness to Christ and creating a new humanity in which the dividing walls between cultures are overcome in Christ. The good news of union with Christ is that Christians do not have the burden of being redeemers; instead, they belong to the Redeemer and bear witness to the living Christ. A theology of union with Christ provides strong grounds for a relational, culture-crossing ministry that is always pointing beyond itself to Jesus Christ—the sole Redeemer, the unique incarnate Word.

Approached in the ways outlined above, this book offers an exposition of a biblical and Reformational theology of union with Christ, as well as a consideration of how this theology radically contrasts with key dimensions of the operative theologies of contemporary Western Christianity. Union with Christ is an illuminating doctrine. It sheds light on our sentimental capitulation to the cultural idols that are less than God, and it shows the way toward a revitalized life in Christ. In terms of theology, it awakens us from our human-centered “dogmatic slumbers,” opening our eyes to a God who is both closer to us and more mysterious than we had ever imagined. In our Christian life and ministry, it displaces the heroic role of our own action while calling us to a life of justice and witness that is shaped and enabled by none other than Jesus Christ. This book provides a biblical and theological entryway for rediscovering the mystery of the Christian life—life in Christ.

# 1

## Salvation as Adoption in Christ

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*An Antidote to Today's Distant  
yet Convenient Deity*

### **Adopted by the Triune God: A Biblical and Countercultural Account of Salvation**

In the course of writing this chapter, my wife and I traveled to Ethiopia to adopt a lovely little girl. We know the country of Ethiopia relatively well, as we both taught in Ethiopia for five months in 2009, and I had spent nine months in Ethiopia earlier in my teaching career. We know that Ethiopia is a wonderful place with beautiful landscapes, welcoming people, and very strong coffee. But it also a country with over four million orphans, according to estimates.<sup>1</sup>

I do believe, as scripture tells us, that we should care for the orphans in the world. “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27a). Indeed, as chapter 4 in particular explores, Christians should display a special concern for and commitment to those

1. A 2006 UNICEF report put the estimate at 4.6 million, and many estimates since that time are even higher. See Indrias Getachew, “Ethiopia: Steady Increase in Street Children Orphaned by AIDS,” [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/ethiopia\\_30783.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/ethiopia_30783.html).

in need. But lest pity be our only feeling toward orphans, we should consider that on a different level, all of us are orphans. The God of the Bible has no “natural” or “begotten” children apart from Jesus the Son; all the rest of us need to be adopted. Although there are important differences between the biblical metaphor of adoption and adoption practices today (which we explore below), we should not underestimate the extraordinary power of this biblical analogy: for all of God’s people are adopted, both in Israel and in the church (Rom. 9:4; Eph. 1:5). Thus it is good news when Jesus tells us in John’s Gospel, “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you” (John 14:18). Instead, through the Spirit, we can be united to Jesus Christ, becoming daughters and sons of God through our union with the one perfect Son of God.

But what exactly is this adoption that we receive? Paul initiates us into this world of adoption in Romans 8. Although by our flesh, or our old self, we are slaves to “the law of sin,” the “Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free” (Rom. 8:2). What does this freedom look like? It is freedom to be adopted children of the Triune God. We have been given the Spirit of God, and by the Spirit “Christ is in you.” And “all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:14–17). In this way, Paul speaks about the drama of adoption that we are caught up into. We are no longer slaves; we are children with an intimate relationship with God. In fact, we don’t even pray by ourselves, but the Spirit prays in us words of intimacy—“Abba! Father!”—as those who are in Christ, or “joint heirs with Christ” (8:15, 17).

This image of adoption is key for Paul in speaking about the life of salvation in Christ, as well as the new identity that we enter into in Christ. On the one hand, the Spirit assures Christians that they already belong to God—they can cry out to God as Father, as ones united to Jesus Christ. Yet, as Paul indicates later in the same chapter, this adoption is also a future reality for which “the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19). For “not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23). We are adopted children of God, able

to pray to the Father by the Spirit, yet even this is a foretaste of the consummation of adoption for which the creation groans and waits.

But maybe this just sounds like pious God-talk. What, really, *is* so significant about adoption? To get a sense of how radical the message of adoption is, I will adapt a parable from Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard.<sup>2</sup>

Imagine a day laborer living in a great kingdom. The day laborer “never dreamed . . . that the emperor knew he existed, who then would consider himself indescribably favored just to be permitted to see the emperor once, something he would relate to his children and grandchildren as the most important event in his life.” But suppose the emperor did something unexpected: “If the emperor sent for him and told him that he wanted him for his son-in-law: what then? Quite humanly, the day laborer would be more or less puzzled, self-conscious, and embarrassed by it; he would (and this is the humanness of it) humanly find it very strange and bizarre . . . that the emperor wanted to make a fool of him, make him the laughingstock of the whole city.”<sup>3</sup>

In this parable, the day laborer working in the countryside recognizes the high and exalted place of the emperor. An occasional encounter with the emperor would be delightful—enough so that the laborer could keep his own comfortable life, keep his friends, keep his identity, yet have it embellished by the honor of the emperor. “A little favor—that would make sense to the laborer.”<sup>4</sup> But what if the emperor wants to make him his own son? The prospect of adoption in this sense is an offense. It is *too much closeness*—it is the sort of closeness that requires giving up one’s own identity. Yes, it is a high and exalted place to be the child of the emperor, the king of the land. But it is too high and exalted—wouldn’t he be a laughingstock? Wouldn’t he lose all that is precious to him if he were to ascend to be the king’s son? In the words of Kierkegaard, the day laborer says, “Such a thing is too high for me, I cannot grasp it; to be perfectly blunt, to me it is a piece of folly.”<sup>5</sup> It would be wonderful if the king would send him

2. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). In the context of *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard uses this parable to demonstrate that the opposite of sin is faith. Thus, the day laborer must have the courage of faith to accept the emperor’s offer.

3. *Ibid.*, 84.

4. *Ibid.*, 109.

5. *Ibid.*, 84.

some money or a letter to cherish as a relic. But the king is asking for so much more. The king is asking to be more than an accessory to his identity. The king wants his full identity, his entire life—wants him to be exalted, the child of the king.

And so it is with God, the King. Yet adoption by the King is *such* a radical notion, we resist it. We would rather have the occasional brush of God's presence, or a relic of his solidarity with us, so that God can be an appendage of *our* identity. But God wants more than that; he wants our lives, our adopted identity. By bringing us into the new reality of the Spirit, we can call out to God—Abba, Father—as adopted children united to Christ. Yet there are few things more countercultural than this process of adoption—losing your life for the sake of Jesus Christ, to find it in communion with the Triune God.

Although Kierkegaard was not directly commenting on Paul's metaphor of adoption, his parable provides a number of points of illumination. First, Kierkegaard doesn't use the term "adoption," but his parable—about an adult who is called to receive a new identity and inheritance—is similar to Paul's metaphor. Paul only used the metaphor of adoption when he was addressing Christians who were living under Roman law and who thus were familiar with Roman adoption practices.<sup>6</sup> In this ancient Roman context, adoption was generally not about babies and childless couples finding a way to have children. Instead, the adoptees were usually adults, and adoption was first of all a legal arrangement to provide an heir who would receive an inheritance and enter into a new household with all its privileges and responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> (Kierkegaard's day laborer feared *both* the privileges and the responsibilities of being a child of the king!) "Adoption," or *huiothesia* (the term Paul uses), is a legal or forensic term in the sense that it refers to the transfer from one family into another. In the ancient world, this legal arrangement gave an adopted son all the rights of a natural son.<sup>8</sup> It was initiated by the head of the family, the *paterfamilias*, and it was customary for this father to affectionately receive the adopted son as a part of his new family.<sup>9</sup>

In light of this ancient background, biblical scholars have made the case for Paul using the term *huiothesia* as a metaphor for salvation

6. See Trevor J. Burke, *Adopted into God's Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 60–63.

7. *Ibid.*, 66.

8. *Ibid.*, 69.

9. *Ibid.*, 71.

with certain parallels to this ancient usage.<sup>10</sup> This does not mean that Paul uses the term in exactly the same way that it was used for the Roman family, however.<sup>11</sup> For starters, God has no inherent need to make heirs, but he chooses to adopt sinners into his family as a free, divine act of love. In addition, the metaphor takes on theological content in Paul's hands. For Paul, on the most basic level, adoption is the act of being transferred "from an alien family (cf. Eph. 2:2, lit. 'sons of disobedience') into the family of God."<sup>12</sup>

For Paul, the adoption metaphor is deeply trinitarian, for it is initiated by the Father, mediated by the Spirit, and grounded in the person and work of Jesus Christ. For example, in Galatians 4:4–7 Paul grounds the adoption of sons and daughters in the sonship of Jesus Christ, who is sent by the Father, which is testified to in believers by the Spirit. "God sent his Son . . . so that we might receive adoption as children," Paul says. "And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God." In this way, salvation as adoption is both christocentric—for adoption occurs only in Christ, as a subordinate sharing in his sonship—and trinitarian. The adopted child of God encounters a loving Father through the Spirit's crying, "Abba! Father!" which all occurs in Christ—and so the adopted one is an "heir" of God, united to the Son.

While the metaphor of adoption begins as a legal act, it does not end there: it ends with membership in the household of God (Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19), with a calling to act into the reality of this new identity. God's legal act of adopting into the family of God results in a new identity, in an eschatologically conditioned way. Thus, when we are given an identity in Christ, we are called to live into it. For example, the doxological opening of Ephesians 1 says that God "destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ" (v. 5). As the blessings of being in Christ are unfolded in the following verses, Paul returns to the language of adoption and inheritance—that "in Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the

10. For an overview of the literature on this point, see *ibid.*, 46–71.

11. On areas of disanalogy between its ancient usage in the family and Paul's theological usage, see Ernest Best, *Ephesians*, International Critical Commentary Series (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1998), 125. Richard Longenecker emphasizes the way in which the immediate theological context for each usage of the term "adoption" is decisive for its meaning. See Longenecker, *Galatians* (Dallas: Word, 2002), 172.

12. See Burke, *Adopted into God's Family*, 27.

purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, *might live for the praise of his glory*" (1:11–12, emphasis added). This new identity of one belonging to a new family in Christ is sealed by the Spirit in the verses that follow: "In him you also . . . were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory" (1:13–14). The adopted identity in Christ, sealed by the Spirit, leads to living "for the praise of his glory" (1:12), but also provides the ground for numerous ethical exhortations in Ephesians: the call to unity (4:13); to prayer (6:18); to speaking and living the truth in Christ (4:15, 21, 25; 6:14); to living in "love" rather than in anger, malice, and bitterness (4:21–5:1).<sup>13</sup> All of these exhortations are to reflect the behavior of those who have been conferred a new adopted identity in Christ and who seek to live into this inheritance received as children of God in Christ.

In contrast to some theologians who have associated adoption only with justification, Paul's overall usage of the adoption metaphor describes both the legal dimension of being transferred into God's family and the transformative dimension of growing in God's family. By associating adoption only with justification, theologians have sometimes tended to emphasize the legal at the expense of the transformative side of adoption. Trevor Burke has criticized certain Reformed scholastic thinkers, in particular, for making adoption a subset or benefit of justification without recognizing its distinct meaning.<sup>14</sup> While Burke makes a good point, I suspect some of the reason for the confusion comes from the following: Theologians have often spoken about the act of *becoming adopted* as a forensic act, which is a valid point (as Burke agrees). But the forensic sense of becoming adopted does not exhaust the meaning of Paul's metaphor, because the result of that act is that one is adopted to be a son or daughter of God, placed in the security of God's family, and given a new identity to live into in an eschatologically conditioned way. Some theologians have thus been too quick to assume that the meaning of "adoption" is exhausted by the act of *becoming* adopted. Significantly for this chapter, however, this is not a mistake that John Calvin makes. Calvin uses the image

13. See Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 2002), 19.

14. Burke, *Adopted into God's Family*, 23–26.

of adoption as a way to describe the double grace of justification *and* sanctification received in union with Christ. Calvin understood that as an image for salvation, the act of becoming adopted is a legal, forensic action, but it has another dimension as well: as an image for the way Christians are to act as children of the Father who promises “to nourish us throughout the course of our life.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the Spirit gives new life, displayed in love of God and neighbor, which “shows that the Spirit of adoption has been given to us (cf. Romans 8:15).”<sup>16</sup>

In giving this exposition of Paul's metaphor of adoption for salvation, I am not claiming that it is the only or the most significant soteriological term for Paul's theology of union with Christ. But it is a metaphor that is important yet often neglected. In particular, it highlights the radical character of life in Christ as a change in identity, as being conferred a new identity in Christ as children of God—filled with the Spirit, united to Christ, and given access to the Father in God's household. Like the day laborer in Kierkegaard's parable, it is a biblical metaphor that shows us an astonishing state of affairs: the high King, the Lord of the universe, desires for us to be his adopted children. Thus, while God is holy and transcendent, he is not at a convenient distance. God's gracious, loving call is, in fact, a threat to our autonomy, our deep and pervasive strategies to keep hold of our lives rather than losing them for the sake of Jesus Christ.

### God at a Convenient Distance: Today's Cultural Deism as a Contrast to Salvation as Adoption

Recently, a series of studies confirmed just how countercultural this notion of salvation as adoption is. The results of these studies are compiled in two books, *Soul Searching* and *Souls in Transition*.<sup>17</sup> These

15. *Inst.* 4.17.1. In this section, Calvin goes on to explain that the Lord's Supper is a key source of nourishment provided for God's children.

16. *Inst.* 3.14.18. This example from Calvin, in particular, applies Paul's image of adoption to sanctification. For more on Calvin's theology of adoption in terms of the double grace, see J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ*, Changing Paradigms in Historical and Systematic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 105–16.

17. Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, with Melinda Lundquist Denton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, with Patricia Snell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

are the most comprehensive studies of the religious beliefs of American teens and young adults ever conducted. While all sorts of religious groups were surveyed, both statistical analysis and in-depth interviews revealed that a common theology was functional for the vast majority of American teens, regardless of their religious tradition. It is what we might call an “American theology” or a “cultural theology” that can be summed up by the phrase “moralistic therapeutic deism” (MTD) and the following creed:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.<sup>18</sup>

What emerges from this functional creed? Tragically, it is not a biblical notion of salvation as adoption. Rather, to begin with the D of MTD, the God we encounter here is a deistic God. This God created and ordered the world but now stands back at a distance, except when there is a crisis. While some who were surveyed may believe that God gave us his Son and adopted us by his Spirit, these beliefs are not mentioned: they are crowded out, made unimportant in relation to the other convictions expressed in the MTD creed. Why? Because on a deeper level, they think we have no need for a mediator—our sin has not alienated us from God. Instead of forgiveness and communion with God, the purpose of religion is therapeutic (the T of MTD): religion should help us be happy and feel good about ourselves. How does it do this? By helping us make decisions, because God wants people to be good, nice, and fair (thus the M: moralistic). Note that there is no particular need for a holy God to bestow grace upon sinners since people are basically good already and will go to heaven if they play by the rules. We are not orphans; there is no need for a new identity in Christ. Such is the assumption of MTD.

18. Smith, *Soul Searching*, 162–63.

In a major follow-up study to *Soul Searching*, *Souls in Transition* examined the beliefs of eighteen- to twenty-three-year-olds, labeled “emerging adults.” To a certain extent, we still see the characteristics of MTD. Most emerging adults assume that they are the master of their life, their identity, their religion. “They as individuals can determine what is right, worthy, and important. So they themselves can pick and choose from religion to take or leave what they want.”<sup>19</sup> No religious tradition per se is needed for this process. At most, one may need to pick and choose the good verses from the Bible, leaving behind “the crazy parts,” as one emerging adult expressed to me.

But *Souls in Transition* also reveals a breakdown of MTD, what amounts to a crisis for many emerging adults. In moving from the teenage years to young adulthood, emerging adults begin to sense that they are not free and self-made after all, that they may even be slaves, as the apostle Paul suggested (Rom. 6–7).

Emerging adults are determined to be free. But they do not know what is worth doing with their freedom. They work very hard to stand on their own two feet. But they do not really know where they ought to go and why, once they are standing. They lack larger visions of what is true and real and good. . . . Many know that there must be something more, and they want it. Many are uncomfortable with their inability to make truth statements and moral claims without killing them with the death of a thousand qualifications. But they do not know what to do about that, given the crisis of truth and values that has destabilized their culture. And so they simply carry on as best they can, as sovereign, autonomous, empowered individuals who lack a reliable basis for any particular conviction or direction by which to guide their lives.<sup>20</sup>

This paragraph describes a crisis of identity. Emerging adults want to believe things, to *be* someone other than just another conformist who capitulates to every social trend. But ironically, emerging adults are often paralyzed from making deep faith commitments because of a social conformity deeper than any particular commitment to God, Jesus Christ, or the Holy Spirit: conformity to the idea that religion depends upon the individual, that it should “remain a personal matter, something an individual may or may not choose to get into because

19. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 286–87.

20. *Ibid.*, 294.

it is meaningful to him or her.”<sup>21</sup> Yet Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), and he calls his disciples to take up their cross and follow him, to lose their lives for his sake. But this contradicts the deeply held American ideology that strives not only to tolerate all different religious beliefs but also to “keep options open, not to get too committed, to push dealing with religious matters off to some future date.”<sup>22</sup> Emerging adults want God to be more than a butler, a convenient yet distant deity. Yet, in conformity to the ideologies that reduce faith to a matter of personal preference and fulfillment, their faith has been sectorized off, compartmentalized. Faith has been reduced to a necklace one wears as part of a self-made identity rather than a whole new set of clothes one wears—“put[ting] on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 13:14)—as a new identity found in him.

Emerging adults, in this way, are simply conforming to broader trends in modern Western culture. Paralyzed in a state of indecision, we are enticed by our culture to settle for gods that are actually less than God (what the Bible refers to as “idols”). Our culture tells us to satisfy our longings with money or hookup sex or even our own heroic efforts to “save the world,” when only God can satisfy. By conforming to our culture in these ways, we settle for a God who is a lifeguard saving us from occasional mishaps, appearing only when it is convenient. But that is not the living God—Father, Son, and Spirit—the one in whom we should find our new adopted identity. Because we are paralyzed from losing our lives for the sake of Jesus Christ, we end up with idols instead. We can easily say, “yes, we’re children of God, and God is happy with us,” but we don’t think we need a new identity given by God. In doing this, not only do we deny the adoption Paul speaks about, but we also settle for idols rather than the living God.

Against our common cultural assumption, we as sinners, according to scripture, are not bright-eyed, good-natured children of God. Indeed, the only “natural” child of God, as noted earlier, is Jesus Christ. All the rest of us need to be adopted. As Paul says in Galatians, apart from Christ we are slaves—thus we need *adoption* to be children in God’s household. “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might

21. *Ibid.*, 286.

22. *Ibid.*, 287.

receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God" (Gal. 4:4–6).

We display our sinful rather than adopted identity through the idols we construct in place of the living God. We feel weak, so we project our need for power onto God. We want solidarity against our enemies, so we construct a God who is always on our side. This human tendency to project idols onto God is widely recognized, even among atheistic philosophers such as Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx. But it is also recognized among theologians such as John Calvin, who writes, "They do not therefore apprehend God as he offers himself, but imagine him as they have fashioned him in their own presumption. When this gulf opens, in whatever direction they move their feet, they cannot but plunge headlong into ruin. Indeed, whatever they afterward attempt by way of worship or service of God, they cannot bring as tribute to him, for they are worshiping not God but a figment and a dream of their own heart."<sup>23</sup> Some may think that Calvin, with his critique of idolatry, is being a killjoy by replacing the nearness and familiarity of the idol with a distant deity. But the opposite is the case. One of Calvin's key objections to idolatry is that it makes God too distant, not too close. "For we know that we are accustomed to imagine God absent, except when we have some sensible experience of his presence."<sup>24</sup> Yet God is not absent, even when our idols are absent. Although Calvin believes that we do need physical, sensible signs of God's presence—provided through the sacraments—these are signs whereby God "offers himself" to unite us to Jesus Christ rather than idols that we construct for our own purposes.

In adoption, God comes closer to us than MTD allows. In adoption, our central cultural ideal of being a self-made person is put on the cross. But in adoption, we also enter into the playful, joyous world of *living as children of a gracious Father, as persons united to Christ and empowered by the Spirit*. In the final two sections of this chapter, I want to explore different dimensions of this transformation from slaves who are under the illusion of being autonomous, "self-made persons" to children of God who are united to Jesus Christ.

23. *Inst.* 1.4.1.

24. Comm. on Gen. 8:1, CTS. See Heiko A. Oberman, "The Pursuit of Happiness: Calvin between Humanism and Reformation," in *Humanity and Divinity in Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. John O'Malley (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 278n80.

## Learning to Be Children of God: Receiving the Double Grace in Union with Christ

The life of salvation is not the dull task of trying to be “a good Christian,” maintaining cultural conformity with those around us so that we receive “eternal life insurance” for the afterlife. No. The new life of salvation is a journey of nonconformity, a process of learning how to become daughters and sons of the Triune God.

Ironically, even though this is a countercultural process, we don't learn to be children of God by trying really hard or by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps as individuals. Instead, we enter into a reality created by God's own word where we find our lives not in our own efforts or moral discipline but in Jesus Christ. John Calvin, drawing on the writings of Paul and John, with their emphasis on union with Christ and abiding in Christ, has a helpful exposition of this new identity. Calvin says that this reality of salvation as adoption is that by the Spirit we receive a double grace in union with Christ in his death and resurrection. “Christ was given to us by God's generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us in faith. By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.”<sup>25</sup> As Calvin makes clear, in union with Christ we receive two distinct yet inseparable gifts: justification, in which we are declared righteous before God as ones who are clothed with Jesus Christ, and sanctification, the gift of a new life, a new creation, which manifests itself in Spirit-empowered gratitude.

In Calvin's account, this double grace of union with Christ moves us from our hardened, self-sufficient slavery to a way of being that is centered in Jesus Christ and freed for eager service to God in the world. The first gift of union with Christ is forensic, which means that it is God's change in decision toward us, like a judge in a courtroom. In defining justification in the *Institutes*, Calvin first describes this legal, courtroom context for the term and then writes, “We explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness.”<sup>26</sup>

25. *Inst.* 3.11.1.

26. *Inst.* 3.11.2.

Christ's righteousness is imputed onto us: righteousness is credited to our case before God because of Jesus Christ. This may seem to be an impersonal notion, but it occurs amidst our union and closeness with Christ. Calvin says, "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."<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, although adoption should not be the only rubric under which justification is considered,<sup>28</sup> consider how the language of adoption can help to illuminate the role of justification. For any adoption to be valid, in the ancient world as well as our own, the adoptive parents must have *legal rights* to the child. The child cannot just start acting like the child of the new parents. That new relationship is secure only when it has a legal basis. When "forensic" pardon is received in Christ, sinners are acquitted of their guilt and are legally adopted as children. The legal dimension is indispensable—and it is what provides the context for sanctification as a transformative process by the Spirit. Those who are legally pardoned and received into God's family are freed from the "severe requirements" of the

27. *Inst.* 3.11.10.

28. On an exegetical level, this is a fairly obvious point, as the terms "justification" and "adoption" are not identical for Paul. But there is a more subtle issue here as well. One important feature of justification, which advocates of the New Perspective on Paul have pointed out, is the ecclesial level—that justification refers to the (horizontal) process of becoming a member of God's covenant people. That is a true and significant insight. At times, certain authors in the New Perspective on Paul have downplayed the vertical dimension of justification that involves God's forgiveness and acquittal of the sinner. With my emphasis on adoption, some might think that I seek to construe justification in purely ecclesial terms, as entry into the covenant people. But that is not the case. (To make this clear, later in this paragraph I refer to God's forensic act in the following terms: "When 'forensic' pardon is received in Christ, sinners are acquitted of their guilt and are legally adopted as children.") Thus, while inclusion into God's family is an important aspect of justification, Paul's thought requires us to speak of the acquittal of sinners as well. For a brief account of the New Perspective on Paul and its criticisms, specifically in relation to N. T. Wright, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Wrighting the Wrongs of the Reformation? The State of the Union with Christ in St. Paul and Protestant Soteriology," in *Jesus, Paul, and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright*, ed. Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011). Vanhoozer seeks to show how the recovery of Paul's metaphor of adoption could be a way to move forward in the discussion between Wright and his recent detractors.

law (of which they fall short) so that they can act like children who “hear themselves called with fatherly gentleness by God,” Calvin says, and “will cheerfully and with great eagerness answer and follow his leading.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, Paul’s notion of “justification by faith” fits with adoption, for being “engrafted into Christ through faith” makes one “a son [or daughter] of God, an heir of heaven, a partaker in righteousness,” according to Calvin.<sup>30</sup> We do not become children of God by striving to please God. We become children of God through embracing Jesus Christ as our righteousness, through putting faith in Jesus Christ, who lived, died, and rose again for our sake. We add nothing to this righteousness of Jesus Christ, which is received as a gift as we lose our old self and find ourselves anew “in Christ” as God’s adopted children.

In Calvin’s day, many Christians saw their salvation as the product of their own works, similar to MTD today, in which the only righteousness we have before God is through our own works. In contrast, Calvin wants to be crystal clear that our salvation is “not through works,” though it is also “not without works,” which display the love of God and neighbor in our lives. For “in our sharing in Christ, which justifies us, sanctification is just as much included as righteousness,” Calvin says.<sup>31</sup> For him, in salvation we receive not only forgiveness (justification) but also new life (sanctification) as a gift. Thus, sanctification is not simply “our response,” initiated by our asking “what would Jesus do?” Sanctification, like justification, is a gift that we receive in union with Christ.

Hence, the formal relationship between justification and sanctification is crucial: they are distinct yet inseparable. There is no temporal gap between these two gifts. It is impossible to receive one without the other. Indeed, since both are contained in Christ, “these two which we perceive in him together and conjointly are inseparable.”<sup>32</sup> To try to acquire God’s pardon without entering into the new life given in Christ would be to tear Christ into two—or “rend Christ asunder,” in Calvin’s words.<sup>33</sup> Put in terms of adoption, to separate justification from sanctification would be to accept the legal status of being God’s child but to refuse to move to God’s house, to call God Father,

29. *Inst.* 3.19.5.

30. *Inst.* 3.15.6.

31. *Inst.* 3.16.1.

32. *Inst.* 3.11.6.

33. *Inst.* 3.11.6.

and to *act* as an adopted child. In terms of Kierkegaard's parable, it may sound attractive to be legally adopted by the king but to stay in your own home at a distance from the palace, yet to do so would be denying this new relationship of being the king's son or daughter. We need not only adoption into God's family and forgiveness of sins; we need also to learn how to grow into our new identity as adopted children of the Triune God.

There are many concrete ways that God shapes us into our new adoptive identity—through worship, hearing and reading God's word, receiving the sacraments, prayer and fellowship, and service toward those in need. For the sake of space, I will limit my focus to two areas that Calvin expounds: prayer and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. For Calvin, both of these help us enter into our new identity as God's children by the Spirit's power. And they both have the shape of the double grace received in union with Christ.

In prayer, Calvin says, the first thing one must do is realize that we are "destitute and devoid of all good things," so one must "go outside" of oneself to look to God. Specifically, we must "recognize that whatever we need and whatever we lack is in God, and in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom the Father willed all the fullness of his bounty to abide so that we may all draw from it as from an overflowing spring."<sup>34</sup> This focus on Christ, this hunger for him, is at the root of prayer. Why look to Christ? Because "Christ is the pledge and guarantee of our adoption," Calvin says.<sup>35</sup> In a related way, Jesus Christ is the high priest, one who is praying on our behalf in the holy of holies, at the right hand of the Father. We do not know how to pray on our own. Yet because we belong to Jesus Christ, God's Son, we can enter prayer as God's children—praying "in the name of Jesus," adding our petitions to those of Jesus Christ. This life of prayer in union with Christ is possible only through the Spirit. Indeed, Calvin says, we do not simply exercise our own effort to be adopted children in prayer, for the Spirit is "witness to us of the same adoption, through whom with free and full voice we may cry, 'Abba, Father.' Therefore whenever any hesitation shall hinder us, let us remember to ask him to correct our fearfulness, and set before us that Spirit that he may guide us to pray boldly."<sup>36</sup> Left to ourselves, we would fearfully

34. *Inst.* 3.20.1.

35. *Inst.* 3.20.37.

36. *Inst.* 3.20.37.

resist pouring out our hearts to the King of the land. But the Spirit, the agent of adoption, enables us to do so, revealing a Father who is “gently summoning us to unburden our cares into his bosom.”<sup>37</sup> Occurring in the context of the double grace of union with Christ, our praying is in light of the indicative—that we *have been* united to Christ (as Paul says in Rom. 6), receiving free, justifying pardon and new life as gifts. Knowing that our righteousness and new life is in Jesus Christ, our consciences are calmed, and we can freely call on God as a gentle Father by the Spirit. And in the process of doing so, we obey God, who asks us to abide in Christ and to act as sons and daughters of the almighty King.

The language of adoption is also central for how Calvin talks about receiving God’s word spoken, and also our focus here—God’s word made visible through the signs of the bread and cup in the Lord’s Supper. From his first sentence on the Lord’s Supper in his key work, *The Institutes*, adoption is central for Calvin. “God has received us, once for all, into his family, to hold us not only as servants but as sons.”<sup>38</sup> As adopted children, we not only obey or serve God; we are first of all *recipients* of the Father’s abundant generosity. “To fulfill the duties of a most excellent Father concerned for his offspring,” Calvin says, “he undertakes also to nourish us throughout the course of our life. And not content with this alone, he has willed, by giving his pledge, to assure us of this continuing liberality.”<sup>39</sup> Out of extravagant love for the adopted children who have entered the King’s house, God provides a “spiritual banquet, wherein Christ attests himself to be the life-giving bread, upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality,” for “Christ is the only food of our soul, and therefore our Heavenly Father invites us to Christ.”<sup>40</sup>

Why is it crucial to rest in the righteousness of Christ our priest in prayer, and to feed upon Christ in word and in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper? Because to become adopted children, we do not simply copy the Son, asking “what would Jesus do?” We are actually incorporated into the Son’s own life—that is what union with Christ is. In union with Christ, we receive forgiveness, which enables adoption and new life as adopted children, by the Spirit’s power. You can’t become an adopted child of God by trying really hard to be one—by

37. *Inst.* 3.20.5.

38. *Inst.* 4.17.1.

39. *Inst.* 4.17.1.

40. *Inst.* 4.17.1.

exercising spiritual disciplines, by giving to those in need, or by loving your neighbor. All of these actions should be fruits of your union with Christ—the fruit of Christ's work *for* you (justification) and Christ's work *in* you (sanctification). The good news is that in Jesus Christ, we receive forgiveness and new life. We did not manufacture this news. The news is not about our own efforts to imitate Christ or to do what Jesus would do. First and foremost, the good news of the gospel is the gift of actually being united to Jesus Christ—a gift received from God in a way that activates us to live into this new life, coming to us as part of God's new creation.

### What Does It Mean to Be “Progressive?” The Convergence of Identity and the Future in Salvation as Adoption

Our identity as adopted children in union with Christ is our true identity, our real identity. Moreover, it is a part of the new creation of God. Yet this new identity has already been received. Within a few verses in Romans 8, Paul points to both sides: “You have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (8:15–16). As the Spirit assures us, the identity of being children of God has already been received, for “we *are* children of God.” Yet it is also a reality that belongs to the future and is experienced now as a foretaste of God's future; the full reality of adoption is not yet: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:22–23). We have received this new identity, but we also “wait for adoption.” In fact, we “groan inwardly” while we wait. Those in Christ have received the “first fruits of the Spirit” but are still waiting for a consummation of this identity in Christ.

We have been adopted, but our new identity is coming to us from the future—an identity that is the Spirit's new creation. But what does this mean, really? If we receive the invitation from the king of the land to be adopted children, why should we leave our comfortable homes and take the journey of entering into this new identity? Isn't that risky? Moreover, doesn't that violate who I am?

Beneath the paralysis that keeps many in our culture from giving over their identity to Jesus Christ lies a question about the future: who

owns the future? We live in a context where many people and ideas claim to be “progressive.” Think about it for a moment: the essential point of claiming to be progressive is that one owns the future, that the future is progressing toward the position I hold. So, for example, Barack Obama claims to be progressive, bringing in the way of the future; but likewise, the conservative Tea Party movement could call itself progressive, claiming that the way of the future is not in big government programs. Musicians, actors, and others in popular culture claim to be progressive, bringing in the new to outdo the old. In politics and popular culture, various positions claim to be progressive, which is another way of saying, “I own the future on this issue.”

Yet in view of changing cultures and times, one could begin to have serious doubts about whether we have any sense at all of what it means to be progressive. My generation, Generation X, was told that the future belongs to us. Younger generations are told the same thing. But of course, that’s not really true since every generation has a generation following it. Things that seemed progressive to my generation are likely to seem retrograde to the next. At various points in recent history, practices like eugenics and racial segregation were championed as progressive. The fact that they no longer seem progressive to us just shows how much the future is out of our grasp.

However, the question of who owns the future is one that scripture specifically addresses. Revelation 1:8 reads, “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” Then in the final chapter of Revelation, Jesus Christ himself says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (22:13). This statement means not just that Jesus was at the beginning and the end, but that Jesus Christ “is the origin and goal of all history.”<sup>41</sup> Jesus is the Lord of history throughout, even to its end, which is our future.

41. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 27. On the phrase “Alpha and Omega,” which God attributes to himself in Revelation 1 and Christ attributes to himself in Revelation 22, Mitchell G. Reddish notes that “all of history is under the control of God, not just its beginning and ending. In later rabbinic writings the first and last letters of the alphabet were used to denote something in its entirety. Abraham was said to have kept the law from *alef* to *tav* (the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet), meaning that he obeyed the entire law. In a similar way, to describe God as the Alpha and the Omega is not a restriction of God to only the beginning and the end but is a declaration of the totality of God’s power and control. God is ‘the Almighty,’ and as such all ‘salvation and glory and power belong to our God’ (Rev. 19:1). Nothing is outside the purview

Thus, although we cannot state with great confidence a public policy that will be truly progressive in ten or fifty years, we can state with great confidence something about the future: it is heading toward Jesus Christ, as Lord of all. In terms of adoption, this means that living into our adoption is living into God's future, God's kingdom—a future that Jesus himself owns, even when it looks ambiguous and uncertain to us. Moreover, as we live into this new identity, we need not worry that we are losing our true identity. For Jesus Christ is the perfect image of God, and the image of God in us is being restored as we grow into our adopted identity.

Calvin says it this way: In the original creation, humans were created good—they were “united” with God.<sup>42</sup> In the fall, humans were alienated from God and other creatures. But we still have a trace of the image of God in us, which he calls a “participation in God.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, when the Spirit comes to us in redemption, uniting us to Jesus Christ, we do not lose our true identity; rather, it is restored. Since we were not created to be autonomous, self-made people but were created to be in communion with God, when the Spirit leads us back into communion with God in Christ, we do not lose our true selves. We regain them.<sup>44</sup>

Our new self in Christ, which comes forth from the future, is our true self. We won't find it by introspection but will find it by looking to Jesus Christ, the one we receive in the gospel. When this happens, those in Christ will be “very much more themselves than they were before,” according to C. S. Lewis.<sup>45</sup> “To enter heaven is to become more human than you ever succeeded in being on earth,” he says.<sup>46</sup> Why? Because to be fully human is not to be autonomous but to be in communion with God, as we will explore further in the next chapter.

Let me end with a clarification about how this new identity is lived out in our pluralistic world. Am I saying that we should receive the

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of God. The claim that God is the one ‘who is and who was and who is to come’ is a restatement of the same idea.” Reddish, “Alpha and Omega,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 1:161.

42. *Inst.* 2.1.5.

43. *Inst.* 1.2.1.

44. Calvin's development of these themes will be explored in more detail in chap. 2 below.

45. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 161.

46. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 127–28.

good news in a way that proclaims Jesus Christ as the savior of the world, the one hope, the one true light, thus the one in whom we find our identity? Yes, I am. We should live into this new life in Christ with boldness, losing our lives for his sake. And we should bear witness to Jesus Christ to those around us.

But isn't that arrogant and presumptuous? On that point, we must remember a key biblical truth: Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, but that does not mean that *we* are the way, the truth, and the life. Whenever we bear witness to Jesus Christ we are on firm ground. Jesus Christ, as Alpha and Omega, is the owner of the future. No truth will come along in ten or a hundred years that "surpasses" him. That is who Jesus Christ is, according to the New Testament. But this is different than saying "I know all the truth" or "I own all the truth." No, the Christian confession is that I am owned *by* the one who is truth, so I bear witness to him.<sup>47</sup> We are called to bear witness to Jesus Christ in a way that reflects his own life of servanthood, of love of neighbor, of love of enemy.<sup>48</sup> Yet we must be clear about the source of this new, adopted identity that we have received: Jesus Christ himself. As the one who owns the future, he deserves our childlike trust as we live into our new, adopted identity—an identity that will last longer than our fashions, our political views, even our own good works. For by the Spirit, we can receive forgiveness and new life as we participate in Jesus Christ himself, enabling us to call God "Abba, Father" for eternity.

47. For a development of this distinction, see "The Crucified One Is Lord: Confessing the Uniqueness of Christ in a Pluralistic Society," in *The Church Speaks: Papers of the Commission on Theology, Reformed Church in America, 1985–2000*, ed. James I. Cook (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 129–53. In addition, chap. 3 below provides an adaptation of this theme through the thought of Franciscus Junius, who gives an eschatologically conditioned account of how all true human knowledge of God derives from Jesus Christ. Developing Junius's insight, we could say that, first and foremost, Jesus Christ is the one who truly knows God, and Christians participate in his knowledge in their union with him by the Spirit.

48. I explore these themes further in the following chapters.