

The Benefit of Having a Worthy Opponent

How the Theology of Seventeenth-Century Puritans Can Be Complemented by the Nineteenth-Century German Thought Known as the Mercersburg Theology

By [Rev. Joel Kletzing](#)

CHAPTER THREE (Cont.)

The Role of Union with Christ

C. John Miller wrote in a letter in 1983 to a woman who was doubting her relationship with Christ and the genuineness of her repentance the following:

What do you need to know? First, repentance and faith are not like a sidewalk that you must travel on to get to the house of salvation. They are the door or, perhaps better, God's ways for being near Him. When you turn to Christ, you don't have a repentance apart from Christ you just have Christ. Therefore don't seek repentance or faith as such but seek Christ. When you have Christ you have repentance and faith.¹

John Owen believed that "the foundation of the imputation [involved in justification] is union."² Jesus and believers are to be regarded as one mystical person because of the Holy Spirit's presence in both.

As a result of this union, believers gain freedom from punishment through the imputation of guilt to the Messiah as well as great reward due to the imputation of His righteousness to us.³ Some respond that Owen's teaching does away with the need for repentance since righteousness is already imputed. Owen's reply is that justifying faith includes within it the principle of genuine repentance, so it is impossible to be a true believer and never be affected by shame, fear or sorrow.⁴ He is quick to point out that he does not mean anyone can be justified by repentance.⁵ It is true that Christ has fully paid the debts of the elect, but that

¹ C. John Miller, *The Heart of a Servant Leader*, ed. Barbara Miller Juliani (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004), p. 244.

² Owen, p. 190.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

does not negate the way, means or order that God has established by which believers come to partake of Christ's benefits.

Owen's writings imply that some form of union with Christ preceded any present day believer's actual expression of faith. Therefore, there is a sense in which imputation took place at the time of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. To this the Socinians (whom Owen is often refuting in his work) declared that such a doctrine of imputation accomplished at the cross would eliminate the need for faith to be exercised since justification was already accomplished at the cross. Owen responded that all are born objects of wrath and that God has appointed a means by which the elect can come to share in the inheritance previously procured for them by Christ. All who are the elect will experience application of the satisfaction of Christ through the way God has appointed.⁶ He said, "Our actual interest in the satisfaction of Christ depends on our actual insertion into his mystical body by faith, according to the appointment of God."⁷

A contemporary of Owen named Tobias Crisp held to eternal justification in the sense that if Christ's work on the cross fulfilled the demands of the covenant in behalf of the elect, that justification preceded faith. Faith is to be regarded as the evidence of what is already true.⁸ Crisp further developed his argument by stating that the elect were not only justified at the time of the cross but actually in eternity since God exists above time. However, a believer's life unfolds sequentially, so before exercising faith one can truly be found to be opposed to God in earthly experience.⁹ John Calvin wrote that when Jesus said to His Father in John 17:6, "They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word," that He is saying the elect have always belonged to God.¹⁰ Owen seemed to voice agreement when he taught that justification by faith is justification in the arena of an individual's conscience and not the true acquisition of justification before God as Christ previously procured that for us.¹¹ In his work, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, he explained that a believer can be likened to a prisoner who is detained in a foreign country whose release is procured, but who is not truly set free until the orders travel to reach the prison guard.¹² The faith that was purchased by the death of Christ along with all other benefits intended for the elect, is granted at a point in time determined by the Father's will. Satisfaction of divine justice and full payment for the sins of the elect truly took place at the cross.¹³ The covenant of grace includes not only election, but also the stipulated means by which the elect come to enjoy the benefits of salvation.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 196-197.

⁷ Ibid., p. 198.

⁸ Trueman, pp. 114-115.

⁹ Ibid., p. 115.

¹⁰ Horton, p. 137.

¹¹ Trueman, p. 115.

¹² Ibid., p. 116.

¹³ Ibid., p. 117.

Union with Christ by faith is necessary for righteousness to be imputed.¹⁴ Therefore one can conclude that union with Christ must exist on some level before justification occurs. Sanctification then flows from the work of the Holy Spirit as a result of the believer having acquired acceptance with God once justified by faith.

Another influential contemporary of Owen, Herman Witsius, believed that union with Christ means that His Spirit takes possession of an elect person and infuses new life. From this comes faith. This again implies that an elect person is in union with Christ before actual faith is expressed.¹⁵ The problem, as Thomas Halyburton pointed out is that regeneration and union with Christ the Bible says come by faith. But on the other hand, a dead soul cannot respond in faith.

Michael Horton, a present-day Reformed and orthodox theologian states that justification is the forensic basis of union with Christ and thus the source of a Christian's calling, sanctification and glorification.¹⁶ This seems to create a riddle as to which comes first – union with Christ or justification.

The Puritans spoke of three types of union with Christ: immanent union which refers to having been elected in union with Christ from all eternity (Ephesians 1:4) and which may lead one to embrace eternal justification, transient union or the union a believer is regarded to have shared with Christ at the time of His death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-11), and applicatory union which is one's present experience of union with Christ (Ephesians 2:5-6).¹⁷ Thus many Puritans could teach that justification, regeneration, adoption, sanctification, etc., all were the results of union with Christ. Thomas Goodwin claimed that "all acts of God's justifying us depend upon union with Christ, we having him, and being in him first, and then thereby having right to his righteousness." He viewed Christ's work as very personal, saying "Christ takes me, and then gives me his Spirit, faith, holiness...."¹⁸ In his work on the book of Hebrews Owen said that union with Christ is the "principle and measure of all spiritual enjoyments and expectations."¹⁹ He agrees with Goodwin that union with Christ is first before all other graces effected in a believer, including justification.²⁰

John Preston argued that union with Christ is the motive for all good works and for making war on sin.²¹ Thomas Cole defined regeneration as "implantation of the soul into Christ," and noted that while regeneration grants a new nature, a new standing is still necessary before God, so one must also be justified. Once

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 118.

¹⁵ Beeke, p. 481.

¹⁶ Horton, p. 129.

¹⁷ Beeke, p. 482.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 484.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 483.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 485.

²¹ Ibid., p. 486.

again, all aspects of salvation are a result of union with Christ.²² Stephen Charnock said that both regeneration and justification are needed and that neither depends on the other. All depend on union with Christ.²³ William Lyford declared that God's people are united to Christ before they exercise faith, but that by exercising faith they lay hold of Christ. Union with Christ is completed by exercising faith.²⁴

Owen gave perspective on the logical order of imputation in regard to union with Christ by explaining that imputation of sin took place prior to the believer realizing any union with Christ, but the imputation of righteousness is consequent to that union being formed.²⁵

The idea then that there was a real union between Christ and the believer that was established before creation, resulting in the believer's sin being imputed to Christ at the time of the crucifixion, and then being brought to fruition in the life of a believer explains how repentance can play such an essential role in salvation and yet not be a work which is expected to merit salvation. Repentance is as necessary as faith and is rooted in faith. Both faith and repentance come to fruition because the believer is in union with Christ.

Thomas Watson in his work on repentance notably quoted the eastern church fathers (such as Chrysostom, Gregory Nazianzen, Basil) who were powerful in their teaching on repentance and yet often gave the impression that repentance was the means to union with Christ. In other words, one must do many works to prepare the soul for salvation. While the western church emphasized many effects of the fall, the east majored on ignorance as the great hurdle to be overcome if one wishes to know God. A common theme that was found among early eastern church fathers was the search for wisdom which included four steps: *apatheia* or the giving up of destructive passions; *askesis* which is training in disciplines such as prayer; simplicity, ridding oneself of all that hinders a person from knowing the presence of God; and self-control, denying self and becoming less dependent on satisfactions other than God. Noting that Paul used the phrase "in Christ" more than forty times, they were eager for union with Christ, teaching that Christ does good works in the believer, we bear the sufferings of Christ, and Christ's mind of humility is to be our mind. Jesus is the enfleshment of wisdom. The Cappadocian fathers developed in their writings the fact that salvation is not simply an increase in knowledge but is faith in God. Clement, however was more works-oriented. He said that to Christ "we are to try with all our might to assimilate our souls" and that Christians should strip off all

²² Ibid., p. 487.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 488.

²⁵ Owen, p. 323.

garments of wickedness and put on the immortality of Christ so that we may become new people by regeneration.²⁶

The clarity the Puritans rendered on the relationship between repentance or the work to purge the soul and faith in Christ who works graciously within each of the elect brings a peace to the internal conflict that erupts within a believer who claims to trust in Christ but knows he must diligently apply himself to the work of repentance. Both repentance and faith are rooted in union with Christ and are contained in the salvation purchased by Christ on the cross. That union is brought to fulfillment as faith is granted to a son or daughter of God at the time of God's choosing. From that fullness of union and contained within justifying faith is repentance. Michael Horton has said that "Forensic justification through faith alone is the fountain of union with Christ in all of its renewing aspects."²⁷ It is the judicial ground of all the other benefits of salvation.

The believer's status of being in union with Christ rests on the union of the divine and human in the incarnation. The believer is made like Christ's humanity which was in complete dependence on God. The two natures were not dissolved into a single essence. Self-existent deity will never be transformed to become a property of Christ's humanity. Nor will the elect ever partake of the same essence as God or become divine. Owen's teaching that the covenant of works is eternally in effect maintains the creature/Creator distinction. There is not to be found in Owen's writings on justification any description of union with God as a human losing the essence of humanity and gaining the essence of deity. Just as Jesus in His humanity demonstrated divine characteristics but the two natures never assimilated into one essence, so it is with those who are "in Christ."

John Calvin said that believers are "one with the Son of God; not because he conveys his substance to us, but because, by the power of the Spirit, he imparts to us his life and all the blessings which he has received from the Father."²⁸ He made clear that apart from Christ there is no union with God possible. He held that "God bestows the actual knowledge of Himself upon us only in the Scriptures."²⁹ Luther said that it is the imputed righteousness of justification that "is the basis, the cause, the source of all our actual righteousness."³⁰ One cannot bypass this central doctrine.

²⁶ Information found in this paragraph is derived from class notes from "Patristic Pioneers" taught by Dr. Walter Wagner at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, 2011.

²⁷ Horton, p. 143.

²⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, trans. William Pringle (1847; rpt., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), pp. 183-184. Quoted in Horton, p. 140.

²⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in two volumes, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles vols. XX and XXI in *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 69.

³⁰ Martin Luther, *Two Kinds of Righteousness*, in *LW 31*, ed. Harold J. Grimm (rpt., 1971), p. 298. Quoted in Horton, 139.

As Michael Horton has said, “Union with Christ does not displace justification; on the contrary, it emphasizes that everything that God gives to believers – not only justification but also sanctification and glorification subsist properly ‘in him,’ not ‘in us.’”³¹

Listen to John Calvin’s description of the blessed union between Christ and His people:

We see that our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ. We should therefore take care not to derive the least portion of it anywhere else. If we seek salvation, we are taught by the very name of Jesus that it is “of him.” If we seek any other gifts of the Spirit, they will be found in his anointing. If we seek strength, it lies in his dominion; if purity, in his conception; if gentleness, it appears in his birth. For by his birth he was made like us in all respects that he might learn to feel our pain. If we seek redemption, it lies in his passion; if acquittal, in his condemnation; if remission of the curse, in his cross; if satisfaction, in his sacrifice; if purification, in his blood; if reconciliation, in his descent into hell; if mortification of the flesh, in his tomb; if newness of life, in his resurrection; ... if inheritance of the heavenly kingdom, in his entrance into heaven; if protection, if security, if abundant supply of all blessings, in his kingdom; if untroubled expectation of judgment, in the power given him to judge. In short, since rich store of every kind of good abounds in him, let us drink our fill from this fountain and from no other.³²

In later chapters Nevin’s thought will be further developed, but perhaps here the suggestion could be offered that his reaction against the Puritan system of forensic justification had more to do with the misuse of it made by those promoting an overly subjective religion in his day whose emphasis on imputation was coopted into their unchurchly approach to Christianity.

It is true that Owen fails to emphasize the role of the church as strongly as Nevin but the church in union with Christ as one mystical body is not absent from his theology. Owen focuses more on one’s personal relationship with Christ rather than the church as the objective body of Christ on earth.

If one of Nevin’s key points is that justification is a participation in the life of Christ, the Puritans could not disagree according to the quotes included in the preceding paragraphs. But neither would they allow the deemphasis of the forensic nature of imputation both of sin and righteousness. Nevin’s philosophy led him to approach Scripture with an eye to emphasize certain elements of justification above others as he also sought to combat a great danger he perceived to the church of his day. On the other hand, the Puritan’s constant

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-151.

³² *Institutes*, pp. 527-528.

reliance on and reference to Scripture lends power and authority to the points they make.

The next chapter will expand on the Puritan understanding of covenant theology and address the question of whether covenant theology is compatible with the Heidelberg Catechism which served as the confessional basis for the German Reformed Church. Nevin was openly critical of covenant theology but a loyal adherent to the Heidelberg Catechism. In exploring whether Puritan and Mercersburg theology are compatible, the writings of Jonathan Edwards will be utilized. Even though he was not a part of the seventeenth-century British movement, their thought was sufficiently carried forward into his ministry that many would regard him as Puritan.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).