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Practical Theology

## **Calvin on Union & Communion with God**

For John Calvin, piety was rooted in the believer's union with Christ. Union with Christ must always be our starting point. This is possible because Christ took on our human nature and filled it with his virtue. Calvin states, "Not only does he cleave to us by an indivisible bond of fellowship, but with a wonderful communion, day by day, he grows more and more into one body with us, until he becomes completely one with us." This union is one of the gospel's greatest mysteries, but because of the fountain of Christ's perfection in our nature, the Christian may, by faith, draw whatever they need for their sanctification.

The flesh of Christ (his perfect life, and death on earth) is the source from which his people derive life and power. If Christ had died and risen but was not applying his salvation to believers for their

regeneration and sanctification, his work would not have been effectual. Piety shows that the Spirit of Christ is working in us what has already been accomplished in Christ. Christ administers his sanctification to the Church through his royal priesthood so that the Church may live piously for him.

### **Communion and participation with Christ**

The heartbeat of Calvin's practical theology and piety is communion with Christ. This involves participation in his benefits, for example, the Lord's Supper, which is inseparable from union with Christ. Understanding our communion and participation with Christ helped shape Calvin's understanding of regeneration, faith, justification, sanctification, assurance, election, and the Church. He could not speak of any doctrine apart from communion with Christ.

### **The Spirit and faith**

Communion with Christ is realized only through faith, worked in us by the Holy Spirit, Calvin teaches. It is actual communion, not because believers participate in the essence of Christ's nature, but because the Spirit of Christ unites believers so intimately to Christ that they become flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone. From God's perspective, the Spirit is the bond between Christ

and believers, whereas, from our perspective, faith is the bond. These perspectives do not clash with each other, since one of the Spirit's principal operations is to work faith in a sinner.

Only the Spirit can unite Christ in heaven with the believer on earth. Communion with Christ is always the result of the Spirit's work—a work that is astonishing and experiential although we may not understand it. The Holy Spirit is thus the link that binds the believer to Christ and the channel through which Christ is communicated to the believer.

As Calvin writes to Peter Martyr Vermigli: "We grow up together with Christ into one body, and he shares his Spirit with us, through whose hidden operation he has become ours. Believers receive this communion with Christ at the same time as their calling. But they grow from day to day more and more in this communion, in proportion to the life of Christ growing within them."

Calvin stresses that, by his Spirit, Christ empowers those who are united with Him by faith. Being "engrafted into the death of Christ, we derive from it a secret energy, as

the twig does from the root," Calvin writes. The believer "is animated by the secret power of Christ; so that Christ may be said to live and grow in him; for as the soul enlivens the body, so Christ imparts life to his members."

### **The Word and faith**

Like Luther, Calvin believed that knowledge is fundamental to faith. Such knowledge includes the Word of God as well as the proclamation of the gospel. The work of the Spirit does not supplement or supersede the revelation of Scripture, but authenticates it, Calvin teaches. "Take away the Word, and no faith will remain."

Faith unites the believer to Christ by means of the Word, enabling the believer to receive Christ. By faith, God also dwells in the believer. By faith, the believer possesses Christ and grows in Him. Though Christ remains in heaven, the believer who excels in piety learns to grasp Christ so firmly by faith that Christ dwells within his heart. By faith the pious live by what they find in Christ rather than by what they find in themselves.

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