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# UNION WITH CHRIST

IN SCRIPTURE, HISTORY, AND THEOLOGY

Robert Letham



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P U B L I S H I N G

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For Joan

Elizabeth and Christopher

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Adam





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# Acknowledgments

Those who have read my earlier book *The Work of Christ* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993) will be aware that union with Christ is a theme in which I have had an interest for some time. In that book I devoted a chapter to it. Who could fail to be interested in something that lies right at the heart of biblical soteriology? This present volume represents the distillation of thought over a range of areas down the years. It makes it more than difficult to do full justice to all the influences that may have impinged on me in that time. It reminds us that it is extremely hazardous to posit specific influences on particular authors without tangible evidence to support such claims.

So let me confine myself to more immediate indebtedness. I am very thankful to Dr. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, and Dr. William B. Evans, Younts Professor of Bible and Religion, Erskine College, Due West, South Carolina, for reading through the draft chapters and making very useful suggestions. Neither can be charged with any errors or misconceptions in this book, which are entirely my own, nor with the views expressed in it. Dr. Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California, Escondido, California, also took a look at one draft section and saved me a lot of anguish by his comments, insofar as I determined to omit the section and return to it on another occasion.

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Above all, I give thanks to the God we worship—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the unity of their indivisible being—for granting us union with Christ, so making us partakers of the divine nature, of which, as Calvin wrote, “nothing more outstanding can be imagined.”

# Abbreviations

<i>BDAG</i>	Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker, William Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001)
<i>BQ</i>	<i>Baptist Quarterly</i>
<i>CD</i>	Karl Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i> , ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–77)
<i>CO</i>	John Calvin, <i>Opera quae supersunt omnia</i> , ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reiss, 59 vols., <i>Corpus Reformationum</i> , vols. 29–87 (Brunswick: C. A. Schwetschke and Son, 1863–1900)
<i>CTJ</i>	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
<i>EQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ESV</i>	English Standard Version
<i>Institutes</i>	John Calvin, <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> , ed. Ford Lewis Battles and John T. McNeill (1559; repr., Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960)
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>LN</i>	Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains</i> (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988)
<i>LS</i>	Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> , rev. Henry Stuart Jones, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940)
<i>NT</i>	New Testament

OS	<i>Joannis Calvini Opera Selecta</i> , ed. Petrus Barth and Guilelmus Niesel, 5 vols. (Munich: Christoph Kaiser, 1926–52)
OT	Old Testament
PG	J. P. Migne et al., eds., <i>Patrologia graeca</i> (Paris, 1857–66)
PL	J. P. Migne et al., eds., <i>Patrologia Latina</i> (Paris, 1878–90)
SBET	<i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>
SCJ	<i>Sixteenth Century Journal</i>
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
ST	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologica</i>
SW	<i>Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters</i> , ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, 7 vols. (1858; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987)
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
Wing	Donald Wing, <i>Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales and British America, and of English Books Printed in Other Countries, 1641–1700</i> (New York: Index South, 1945)
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

# Introduction

Union with Christ is right at the center of the Christian doctrine of salvation. The whole of our relationship with God can be summed up in such terms. John Calvin agreed when he wrote: “For we await salvation from him not because he appears to us afar off, but because he makes us, ingrafted into his body, participants not only in all his benefits but also in himself.”<sup>1</sup> WLC 65–90 describes our entire salvation as union and communion with Christ in grace and glory. John Murray considered that “nothing is more central or basic than union and communion with Christ,”<sup>2</sup> for it “is the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.”<sup>3</sup> In the words of Lane Tipton, “there are no benefits of the gospel apart from union with Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

The task of understanding what this means is made a lot harder by the limits of our human finitude. The literature discusses at some length the relationship between union with Christ and justification, sanctification, or some other such matter. When one asks what in fact this union consists in, however, what it actually *is*, there is a general silence. It is not difficult to see why this is so. The reality far surpasses the ability of human language to describe it. Being united to Christ involves union with the Son of God, who himself transcends our finitude. Being indwelt by the Holy Spirit entails union with the whole Trinity. This goes beyond what we can even imagine.

Yet the fact of the incarnation should be enough to alert us to the truth that we have been made by God to be compatible with him. If we cannot reach up to God to penetrate the divine mysteries, he has reached down to reveal himself truly and faithfully to us in Christ his Son. He has left a written record in Scripture. We are not left to grope in the dark in blissful ignorance.

1. *Institutes*, 3.2.24.

2. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (London: Banner of Truth, 1961), 161.

3. *Ibid.*, 170.

4. Lane G. Tipton, “Union with Christ and Justification,” in *Justified in Christ: God’s Plan for Us in Justification*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2007), 34.

From the middle of the seventeenth century on, however, this great jewel in the crown of God's grace has gone into eclipse. Today not much is said about union with Christ from the pulpit, and until recently, little was written about it. William B. Evans has charted its demise in American Reformed theology. Jonathan Edwards and Charles Hodge, two great stalwarts of the American Reformed tradition, were particularly responsible, he claims, for a division between two aspects of union with Christ that Calvin had held together: the external element of imputation and the transformative element of the work of the Holy Spirit. A tension developed between the desire to maintain the utter graciousness of our salvation, achieved by Christ, applied by the Spirit, received by us—seen particularly in justification only by faith—and, on the other hand, the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father to indwell us and change us into his image. These two elements were detached and considered in isolation.<sup>5</sup>

Questions have arisen over the relationship between justification and sanctification in Calvin as aspects of union with Christ. I do not have time to discuss this in any detail. Among neoorthodox scholars, it is held that the later Reformed scholastics, in prioritizing justification, departed from Calvin, who dealt with sanctification first in book 3 of the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*. This misses the seismic shift in Reformation and post-Reformation studies associated with Richard Muller and others. Muller has convincingly argued that Calvin, in his *Institutes*, follows the order of teaching in Paul's Letter to the Romans, which provided the basis for his ordering of topics from the 1539 edition onward, largely following Philipp Melanchthon.<sup>6</sup> In doing this, Calvin does not imply by the order of his treatment of topics in book 3 any particular set of priorities in his theology. The idea of an *ordo salutis* was not a live issue at the time Calvin wrote, and it is misleading to search for one in his writings.<sup>7</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, the Westminster Assembly (1643–49) did not discuss a rigorous logical order. It spent most of the time in theological debate related to the exegesis of biblical passages. Topics were discussed on a first-come,

5. William B. Evans, *Imputation and Impartation: Union with Christ in American Reformed Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), esp. 111–12.

6. Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 118–39.

7. As Muller notes, "The order of *loci* identified by Melanchthon in Paul's Epistle to the Romans thus established a standard for the organization of Protestant theology." *Ibid.*, 129.



first-served basis as the committees presented their respective reports to the full body. Indeed, the idea of a central organizing principle arose only in nineteenth-century German scholarship; it is anachronistic to look for it three hundred years earlier.<sup>8</sup>

Union with Christ cannot be said to control Calvin's soteriology. Still less does it determine the relative order of priority of justification and sanctification in his thought. There is plenty of evidence in the 1559 *Institutes* itself indicating that Calvin shared the views of the later Reformed that justification was foundational. He regards it as "the main hinge on which religion turns," since it is necessary as a foundation on which to establish our salvation and build piety toward God.<sup>9</sup> Yet all this should not lead us to conclude that union with Christ was anything but central and vital to his view of salvation.<sup>10</sup>

From within the ranks of English Puritanism, Rowland Stedman, one of the ministers ejected from their livings in 1662,<sup>11</sup> in an important treatise published in 1668,<sup>12</sup> argued that "in order to an interest in eternal life, and partaking of those blessings which are given forth by Christ . . . it is of absolute necessity, that we be united unto Christ." Therefore, "if we will have life from the Son, we must have the Son; *that is*, we must be made one with him. No union with Jesus, and no communication of life and salvation from Jesus." First the Lord "doth plant them [believers] into Christ, and then bless them in him, and through him."<sup>13</sup>

## The Centrality of Union with Christ in the Bible

Union with Christ is crucial to, and at the heart of, the biblical teaching about salvation. In support we can point to a range of significant passages throughout the NT, from a variety of authors.

8. Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 101–11, 245–46.

9. *Institutes*, 3.11.1.

10. *Ibid.*, 3.11.6, 11; 3.13.5; see also "Antidote to the Council of Trent," SW, 3.128; "Reply to Sadoletto," SW, 1.41–42.

11. See *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26341> (accessed September 23, 2009).

12. Rowland Stedman, *The Mystical Union of Believers with Christ, or A Treatise Wherein That Great Mystery and Privilege of the Saints Union with the Son of God Is Opened* (London: W. R. for Thomas Parkhurst, at the Golden-Bible on London-Bridge, under the gate, 1668), Wing / 335:13.

13. *Ibid.*, 18.

### *Paul*

In Ephesians 1:3–14, Paul sums up the whole of the Christian faith as entailing union with Christ. From election before the foundation of the world (vv. 3–4), to redemption by the blood of Christ (v. 7), to the earnest of the Holy Spirit, who seals us to the day of redemption (vv. 13–14), all happens *in him, in Christ*, whether it is particularly attributable to the Father, as in election and predestination (vv. 3–5), to the Son in redemption (v. 7), or to the Holy Spirit (vv. 13–14). Indeed, the renovation of the entire cosmos is to occur under the headship of Christ (v. 10).<sup>14</sup>

### *John*

In John 14:16ff., Jesus compares the relationship between his disciples and himself with his own relation to the Father. He and the Father are *in* each other, mutually indwelling in the unity of the Trinity. Moreover, he and the disciples would indwell each other, too. When the Holy Spirit was to come at Pentecost, they would know that “I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (v. 20).

Moreover, Jesus reinforces this concept in what follows. To those who love him and keep his word, “my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home with him” (v. 23). Here the whole Trinity will take up residence with those who love Jesus and keep his commandments. The Son and the Father will make their home with them, while the context points to the coming of the Spirit as the occasion when this will take place. The word *monē* does not denote a temporary visitation, as when the Spirit came on the prophets; it is a permanent dwelling.<sup>15</sup>

In John 17:21ff., Jesus prays to the Father for his church that it will display a unity before the world in some way analogous to the union the Son has with the Father in the unity of the indivisible Trinity. The Father and the Son are distinct, as is evident in this prayer in which the Son addresses the Father; yet they are one. Their oneness does not erode the distinction, nor does the distinction sever their oneness. In verse 21, he speaks of the unity of the church—“that they may be one”—and the union of the Father and the Son, and makes the latter the template of the former—“just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us.” From this, those

14. Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 80–81.

15. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to St John* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 504–5.

who were to believe in him through the testimony of the apostles would be *in* the Father and the Son.

He adds the prayer “that they may be one even as we are one, *I in them and you in me*, that they may become perfectly one” (vv. 22–23). The unity of believers for which Jesus prays is also grounded in the union the church has with Christ himself. It is clear that the Father and the Son are distinct yet one; their union is a unity-in-distinction. Hence, the unity of believers cannot offset their own particular distinctiveness. Furthermore, it is founded on the fact that the Son is *in* them. Jesus’ prayer for his church centers in the fact of his indwelling it and its consequent introduction into the life of God himself.

### ***Peter***

In 1 Peter 1:3–4, Peter’s introduction shows that he regards the gospel as, at root, focused in union with Christ. The “elect exiles of the dispersion” to whom he writes have been “born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” Their regeneration, at the start of their Christian career, occurred through Christ’s resurrection. Regeneration is itself a resurrection; Paul wrote of the pre-regenerate state as one of death in sin (Eph. 2:1), with the corollary that regeneration entails a coming to life. In this case, regeneration is sharing in Christ’s resurrection and so occurs by the power of that momentous event. It is being made alive with Christ. It does not take place in isolation for this or that person; it is inescapably corporate, in a dynamic union with Christ himself.

### **Union with Christ and Justification**

According to Paul in Romans 5:12–21, just as Adam plunged the whole race into sin and death because of their relationship of solidarity with him, so the second Adam brings life and righteousness to all who sustain a relationship of solidarity with him.

If, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. (Rom. 5:17 ESV)

Here Paul reflects on his previous statement of the one way of salvation from sin by the propitiatory death of Christ, which avails for all who believe

(Rom. 3:21ff.). Justification is received only by faith and is grounded on what Christ did once for all in his death and resurrection (4:25). Paul's point is that we are not addressed merely as discrete individuals; instead, we are placed by God in solidaristic groups or teams. Adam was head or captain of a team of which we all were members. His sin plunged the whole team into sin, ruin, death, and condemnation. What Christ did for us was also done as the head of a team of which we are part. He did it on our behalf, for us—and God reckons it to our account as a result of our being united, through faith, with him as the head of the team. Our justification is therefore grounded on union with Christ.<sup>16</sup>

### Union with Christ and Sanctification

In Romans 6:1ff., in answer to charges that his gospel encourages moral indifference, Paul insists that believers, the justified, live to Christ and do not give themselves over to sin. This is because they died with Christ to sin and rose again to new life in his resurrection. Not only did Christ die and rise again *for* them, but they died and rose *with* him. Union with Christ is the foundational basis for sanctification and the dynamic force that empowers it. As Paul says, “Do you not know that as many as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death; we were buried with him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father so we too should live in newness of life” (6:3–4).

### Union with Christ and Resurrection

Paul argues in 1 Corinthians 15 that the resurrection of Christ and the future resurrection of his church is one reality (vv. 12–19). Paul argues back and forth from one to the other. If Christ is not raised, there can be no resurrection of believers. If there is no general resurrection, Christ cannot

16. In the last two decades, there has been a huge amount of discussion in NT studies on the relationship between union with Christ and justification. Driven by the New Perspective on Paul, associated particularly with James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright but backed up by a host of others, union with Christ is said to render superfluous and mistaken the idea of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. The literature is too voluminous to cite here. This book does not deal with this issue except tangentially, although I think its argument undermines the New Perspective approach. For an outstanding assessment of this literature from the perspective of Calvin studies and classical Christology, see Mark A. Garcia, “Imputation and the Christology of Union with Christ: Calvin, Osiander and the Contemporary Quest for a Reformed Model,” *WTJ* 68 (2006): 219–51.

have been raised himself. The two stand together. In fact, Christ has been raised—and so, therefore, will we be. Christ is the firstfruits of the resurrection of believers at his return (vv. 19–23). Not only is his resurrection first in time, but as firstfruits, it is of the same kind as the full harvest. Hence, it is the guarantee not only that the full harvest will be gathered but that both his resurrection and ours are identical. From this it is clear that the resurrection of believers at the parousia is a resurrection *in Christ*. The resurrections are effectively the same (v. 35ff.). The Einstein-Bell-Podorsky theory of the identical behavior of subatomic particles separated by indefinite space is paralleled here in the resurrection. Christ's resurrection and the resurrection of the righteous, separated by indefinite time, are identical because the latter occurs in union with the former.

As Tony Lane has written, “Until we are united with Christ what he has achieved for us helps us no more than an electricity mains supply that passes our house but is not connected to it.”<sup>17</sup>

17. Anthony N. S. Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 23.



## Creation

Union with Christ rests on the basis of the creation of man to be compatible with God. This is at the heart of the message of the first chapter of Genesis, which highlights the creation of man as male and female, and his rule over the created order. So as to see how this relates to our great theme, we will look first at the overall context of the chapter. In summary, it points to God the Creator as a relational being, with man made in his image reflecting this characteristic in himself. Ultimately it points forward to the coming of Jesus Christ, who *is* the image of the invisible God.

### The Trinitarian Basis of Creation

The first chapter of Genesis portrays the creation and formation of the world, and the ordered shaping of a place for the human race to live. It presents man as head of creation, in relation to and in communion with God his Creator. The act of *creation* itself is direct and immediate (vv. 1–2), distinct from the work of formation that follows.<sup>1</sup> The result is a cosmos formless, empty, dark, and wet—unfit for human life. The rest of the chapter describes the world’s *formation* (or *distinction*) and *adornment*, God’s introducing of order, light, and dryness, making it fit for life to flourish. First, God creates light, and sets boundaries to the darkness (vv. 2–5). Second, he molds

1. Herman Bavinck, *In the Beginning: Foundations of Creation Theology*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 100ff. (subsequently published in volume 2 of Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics*). See also the discussion in *ST*, pt. 1a, Q. 66, arts. 1–4, and the entire section QQ. 66–74 in general.

the earth into shape so that it is no longer formless (vv. 6–8, 9–10). Third, God separates the waters and forms dry land, so that it is no longer entirely wet (vv. 9–10). Following this, he populates the earth, ending its emptiness (vv. 20–30), first with fish and birds, then with land animals, and finally, as the apex of the whole, with human beings made in his image. This God is not only almighty but also a master planner, artist, and architect supreme. This order is clear from the parallels between two groups of days: the first three and the second three.<sup>2</sup> In all this God shows his sovereign freedom in naming and blessing his creation, and sees it as thoroughly good. At the end comes the unfinished seventh day, when God enters his rest, which he made to share with man, his partner, whom he created in his own image. There is an implicit invitation for us to follow.<sup>3</sup>

Particularly striking is God's sovereign and variegated ordering of his creation. In particular, he forms the earth in a threefold manner. First, he issues direct fiats. He says, "Let there be light," and there is light (v. 3). So, too, he brings into being with seemingly effortless command the expanse (v. 6), the dry ground (v. 9), the stars (vv. 14–15), the birds and the fish (vv. 20–21). Each time it is enough for God to speak, and his edict is fulfilled. Second, he works. He separates the light from the darkness (v. 4), he makes the expanse and separates the waters (v. 7), he makes the two great lights, the sun and the moon (v. 16), and sets them in the expanse to give light on the earth (v. 17), he creates the great creatures of the seas and various kinds of birds (v. 21), he makes the beasts of the earth and reptiles (v. 25), and finally he creates man—male and female—in his own image (vv. 26–27). The thought is of focused, purposive action by God, of divine labor accomplishing his ends. But there is also a third way of formation, in which God uses the activity of the creatures themselves. God commands the earth to produce vegetation, plants, and trees (vv. 11–12). He commands the lights to govern the day and night (vv. 14–16). He commands the earth to bring forth land animals (v. 24). Here the creatures follow God's instructions and contribute to the eventual outcome. This God who created the universe does not work in

2. This pattern was discerned at least as long ago as the thirteenth century. See *Robert Grosseteste: On the Six Days of Creation: A Translation of the Hexaëmeron*, trans. C. F. J. Martin, *Auctores Britannici Medii Aevi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1996), 160–61 (5:1:3–5:2:1); *ST*, pt. 1, Q. 74, art. 1. See my article "In the Space of Six Days: The Days of Creation from Origen to the Westminster Assembly," *WTJ* 61 (1999): 149–74.

3. Cf. Heb. 3:7–4:11.



a monolithic way. His order is varied—it is threefold but one. His work shows diversity in its unity and unity in diversity. This God loves order and variety together.<sup>4</sup>

This reflects what the chapter records of God himself. The triadic manner of the earth's formation reflects who God its Creator is. He is a relational being. This is implicit from the very start. We notice a distinction between God who created the heavens and earth (v. 1), the Spirit of God who hovers over the face of the waters (v. 2), and the speech or word of God issuing the fiat "Let there be light" (v. 3). His speech recurs frequently throughout the chapter. While it is most unlikely that the author and original readers would have understood the Spirit of God in a personalized way, because of the heavy and insistent stress in the OT on the uniqueness of the one God, Gordon Wenham is sound when he suggests that this is a vivid image of the Spirit of God.<sup>5</sup> The later NT personalizing of the Spirit of God is a congruent development from this statement.

With the creation of man is the unique deliberation "Let us make man in our image," which expresses a plurality in God (vv. 26–27). Gerhard Von Rad says that this signifies the high point and goal to which all of God's creative activity is directed.<sup>6</sup> Since Scripture has a fullness that goes beyond the horizons of the original authors, the many church fathers who saw this as a reference to the Trinity were on the right track. While this was concealed from the original readers and from the OT saints as a whole, and was not how it was understood then, the fathers were certainly not at variance with the trajectory of the text. Rabbinical commentators were often perplexed by this passage and other similar ones referring to a plurality in God (Gen. 3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8). The NT gives us the principle that the OT contains in seed form what is more fully made known in the NT, and on that basis we may look back to the earlier writings, much as at the end of a detective mystery we reread the plot, seeing clues that we missed the first time but are now given fresh meaning by our knowledge of the whole. In terms of the *sensus plenior* (the "fuller meaning") of Scripture, these words of God attest a plurality in God, which later came to be expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity. The original readers would not

4. See Francis Watson, *Text, Church, and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 142–43.

5. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 15–17.

6. Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961).

have grasped this, but we, with the full plot disclosed, can revisit the passage and see there the clues.<sup>7</sup>

I have written elsewhere, commenting on Genesis 1:26–27, that “man exists as a duality, the one in relation to the other. . . . As for God himself . . . the context points to his own intrinsic relationality. The plural occurs on three occasions in v. 26, yet God is also singular in v. 27. God is placed in parallel with man, made in his image as male and female, who is described both in the singular and plural. Behind it all is the distinction God/Spirit of God/speech of God in vv. 1–3 . . . This relationality will in the development of biblical revelation eventually be disclosed as taking the form of a triunity.”<sup>8</sup> I refer there to kindred comments by Karl Barth.<sup>9</sup>

### Christ as Mediator of Creation

Flowing from the biblical presentation of creation as a work of the whole Trinity comes the NT assertion of the creation mediatorship of Jesus Christ. I have discussed this theme elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> It is found in John 1, where the Logos is described as existing “in the beginning,” a phrase strongly reminiscent of Genesis 1:1. This Logos, who was with God and who was God, who became flesh and lived among us, is also described as the Creator of all things (John 1:3). This follows from his being life itself; he is not merely the Author of life, as if life were something independent and autonomous, but he himself *is* life (v. 4). His creating is free, but it is also an expression of who he is.

Paul expounds a similar theme in Colossians 1:16–17, where he affirms that “all things were created in him, things in heaven and on earth, things visible and invisible; whether thrones and dominions, rulers and authorities, all things were created through him and to him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” In this Paul argues that Christ as the preexistent Son (cf. v. 13) is the Creator of the universe. “All things” is comprehensive, excluding nothing. Personal and impersonal, angelic and human, animal and plant—all owe their existence to the Son. Moreover, not only did he create them all, but he did so in such a way that he is their head.

7. Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 17–22.

8. Robert Letham, “The Man-Woman Debate: Theological Comment,” *WTJ* 52 (1990): 71.

9. *CD*, 3.1:196.

10. Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 197–209.

Creation was made *in Christ*. In turn, the cosmos has a purpose. It is held together by the Son. He sustains it at every moment and directs it toward the end he intends for it. That end is himself. All things were created and are sustained *for Christ*. The reason the universe exists is for the glory of Christ, the Son of God. The goal toward which it is heading is conformity to him. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, all things will be under the headship of Christ for eternity (Eph. 1:10).<sup>11</sup>

The author of Hebrews describes the Son in whom God's final word has been given as the One who created the ages (Heb. 1:2) and who continues to uphold all things by his powerful word, directing them to the end he has eternally intended (v. 3). As has been widely noted, the imagery is not static, as if he were carrying the world as a dead weight, but dynamic, directing it purposefully to its destined goal. There is more than a hint here that the author is identifying Christ, the Son, with the word spoken at creation (cf. Gen. 1:3).

Furthermore, in the great vision in Revelation 5, John sees that the Lamb alone is both able and worthy to open the seals and so to govern world affairs. He is sovereign over all that happens in the world and to his church. The rest of the book spells this out in terms of judgment on the world and ultimate victory for the persecuted church.<sup>12</sup>

### **Man Created in Christ, the Image of God**

As we noted, the high point of the chapter is the creation of the first Adam *in* the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27); it is the only place here in which the self-deliberation of God is recorded. It is as though the author were taking a highlighter and marking these statements as absolutely crucial to a grasp of the whole. In short, this is the focus of the chapter, the goal to which it is moving. What does it mean? In the NT, Paul says that believers are being renewed in the image of God in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). The question whether fallen man is still the image of God and, if so, in what sense this is true has been debated at great length through the years. Some statements in the Bible suggest that

11. Ibid., 198–202.

12. See, inter alia, G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

this is true of all people, regardless of their relationship to God,<sup>13</sup> whereas these Pauline passages imply that it is true only for those renewed by the Holy Spirit. Reformed theologians have understood this dilemma in terms of a dual aspect to man as the image of God, speaking of the image in the broader sense, in which all participate, and in the narrower sense, which relates only to Christian believers. This has appeared unsatisfactory in a range of ways. The resolution is to be found in terms of redemptive history. In doing so, we are retrieving what the Greek fathers had taught centuries earlier.<sup>14</sup>

The text of Genesis states that the man and his wife were created *in* the image of God. The image of God itself is identified for us in the NT. Paul points out that it is Christ who *is* the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). In discussing the resurrection of the body, he compares Adam with the risen Christ. From Adam we inherit the image of the earthly, in weakness and mortality, whereas in the risen Christ we receive the image of the heavenly, under the direction and domination of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45–49).<sup>15</sup> In Paul's thought, Christ as the second Adam *is* the image of God. Adam was created *in* Christ and then fell from that condition, but now, in grace, we are being renewed in the image of God, *in Christ the second Adam*, and thus in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. This teaching is also presented by the author of Hebrews. In the first paragraph, the letter states that the Son by whom God has spoken his final and ultimate word is "the brightness of his [God's] glory and the express image of his being" (Heb. 1:3).

Therefore, from the very first, God's ultimate purpose was foundational to all that he did—all things were heading, under his direction, to the goal he had set for them, to be headed up under the lordship of Christ. The incarnation was planned from eternity as an integral part of the whole work of salvation in Christ. This is quite different from the speculative claim that Christ would have become incarnate even if Adam had not sinned; if the incarnation and atonement were determined eternally, as the Bible testifies, so, too, was the fall of Adam.

13. See 1 Cor. 11:7; James 3:9.

14. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 281–86.

15. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *The Centrality of the Resurrection: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978).

## God and Man: Distinct yet Compatible

Because man was created in the image of God, he was made for communion with God, to rule God's creation on his behalf. This is clear from Genesis 1, where the man and his wife were given dominion over the earth, over all that God had created. Psalm 8:3–8 reflects on this truth poetically:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,  
what is man that you are mindful of him,  
and the son of man that you care for him?

Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings  
and crowned him with glory and honor.  
You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under his feet,  
all sheep and oxen,  
and also the beasts of the field,  
the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,  
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

Man is therefore a creature, made by God, not eternal or intrinsically immortal but the highest creature, to whom and for whom the world was made. As a finite creature, he has been given the great privilege of governing the earth on behalf of his Creator. At the same time, he was also connected to God, made in his image and living in communion with him. The implication of Genesis 2 is that there was regular communication between God and Adam before the fall. God gave the man and the woman verbal charge to multiply and have dominion (Gen. 1:28–30), instructed Adam to abstain from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, while being free to eat of all other trees in the garden (2:16), and brought to him the woman he had made for him (2:21–22). In rather different circumstances, after the fall, he addressed the errant pair (3:8ff.).

Therefore, on the one hand there is a *difference* between God and man. God is the Creator, man his creature. God is infinite and eternal, sovereign and all-powerful; man is weak and finite, a creature of time and space, limited to one place at one time, subject to the rule of God his Creator, derivative, not creative in the sense outlined in Genesis. The prophet Isaiah stresses this

point on many occasions, drawing attention to the uniqueness and supremacy of Yahweh the God of Judah:

Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel  
 and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:  
 “I am the first and I am the last;  
 besides me there is no god.  
 Who is like me? Let him proclaim it.  
 Let him declare and set it before me,  
 since I appointed an ancient people.  
 Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen.  
 Fear not, nor be afraid;  
 have I not told you from of old and declared it?  
 And you are my witnesses!  
 Is there a God besides me?  
 There is no Rock; I know not any.” (Isa. 44:6–8)

On the other hand, however, there is an inherent *compatibility* between God and man. Man has been created *in* the image of God. He was made for communion with his Creator. He was given responsibility for the earth, accountable directly to God. He was placed in a situation in which word-revelation was the normal manner of communication between himself and the woman, and between himself and God. He was constituted by God a covenant partner, given the freedom of the beautiful garden, granted clear-cut responsibilities in it for the glory of God, warned about the consequences of deviating from this task and misusing the creation in defiance of his God, and so honored with moral qualities and responsibility. He was made for God, and God condescended to him to be his partner in the task of world-rule. Moreover, since all this was done with the express intention of the incarnation of the Son (we will consider this topic in the next chapter), this compatibility is demonstrably at the heart of God’s intention for his creation *and for man himself*.

### **The Fall: Unity Disrupted**

Sin entered; Genesis 3 tells the sorry tale. Adam and his wife disobeyed God’s law and reaped the consequences, which are ultimately found in death. One of the immediate results of human sin was a disrupted relationship with

the created order. Adam had been placed in the garden to till the ground, to bring it into subjection.<sup>16</sup> Now that sin had entered, Adam's work, intended as a blessing, became a curse. The land was to yield thorns and thistles. Work was to become hard labor. The fruits of human toil would be paltry in comparison with what they would and could have been (Gen. 3:14–19).

Hebrews 2:5–9 reflects on the poetic account of man's place in creation found in Psalm 8. God put everything under his feet. But we do not yet see everything subject to man. He has not yet achieved this goal. It is all too evident in the world around us. The environment is in a precarious position. Unwise governmental policies, unchecked exploitation of natural resources, disruptive and destructive wars, the repression of human enterprise by totalitarian dictatorships and meddlesome bureaucracies—these have all contributed to severe problems that affect the food chain, the quality of life, and much more. The major problem is that man cannot control himself. Constant strife, unchecked self-interest, societal breakdown, and violent religious fanaticism run rampant. Since man cannot even exercise discipline over his own inclinations, how can he bring the cosmos into godly subjection?

Yet we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels in his incarnation and in the time of his lowliness from conception to the cross. He is now seated at the right hand of God, in authority over all things, fulfilling God's purpose for the human race at creation. The focus shifts in citing Psalm 8 from man in general to Jesus in particular.

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see Jesus who for a little while was made lower than the angels so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor. (Heb. 2:8b–9)<sup>17</sup>

He is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who is bringing us there to share with him in the rule over the renovated cosmos. This we will do in union with him. Where the first Adam failed, having succumbed to the tempter and

16. This was an agricultural task, although there is good evidence that it was not limited to that but was primarily a function of a priest-king. See J. V. Fesko, *Last Things First* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2007).

17. I have slightly amended the esv translation and rendered the clauses in verse 9 in terms of the progression of thought of the author. The sentence is a chiasmus, with the first and last clauses connected and the inward clauses connected.

plunged himself and the race into sin, the second Adam prevailed, resisting the devil and by his obedience bringing those in union with him to the goal mapped out for them. John Henry Newman captures the idea in his hymn “Praise to the Holiest in the Height”:

O loving wisdom of our God, when all was sin and shame,  
A second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came.

O wisest love, that flesh and blood which did in Adam fail,  
Should strive afresh against the foe, should strive and should prevail.

Union with Christ rests on the foundation of man’s nature as created, seen in the light of God’s end purpose for man. Christ as the second or last Adam achieves what the first Adam so signally failed to do. In view of this, the incarnation of Christ is crucial. It is the Archimedean point in this grand panorama. It is the theme of the next chapter.