

Spiritual Union and Assurance

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Savoy Declaration, Article 18, 1 and 2

1. Although temporary believers and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes, and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God, and state of salvation (which hope of theirs shall perish): yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.

2. This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded on the blood and righteousness of Christ, revealed in the gospel, and also upon the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, and on the immediate witness of the Spirit, testifying our adoption, and as a fruit thereof, leaving the heart more humble and holy.¹

The stepping in point for this paper as we pursue assurance of salvation through the study of the Savoy Declaration, Article 18, is found in Section Two. Section One of Article 18 speaks of those who “truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love Him in sincerity, [and endeavor] to walk in all good conscience before Him” as being able to reach a state in which they might “be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.” Section Two goes on to teach that the certainty of salvation is not “conjectural” or “probable” but an “infallible assurance of faith founded on the blood and righteousness of Christ.” It then offers three things available to the believer in the pursuit of this assurance: the “inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made,” the “immediate [or personal] witness of the Spirit testifying to [his or her] adoption,” and, as a result of the realization that the sinner has been granted this hope solely upon the merit of Christ, a “heart more humble and holy.”² The coupling together of the “blood and righteousness of Christ” and the believer’s “adoption” will be the task of this paper. It will do so by focusing on the believer’s union with Christ.

¹ Robert E. Davis, ed. *Historic Documents of Congregationalism*. (Millers Falls, MA: Puritan Press, 2005), 47-8.

² *Historic Documents of Congregationalism*. 47-8

Adoption and Union

The scriptural reference given in the Savoy in support of the language of adoption is Romans 8:15, 16: “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” This is an appropriate text upon which the Savoy can urge the believer to consider the inner testimony of the Spirit as to their having been made heirs of the riches of Christ’s triumph.³ This witness can only be strengthened when the believer is made to see that the adoption spoken of is the result of his having been brought into union with Christ.⁴

Consider the following language from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved” (Ephesians 1:3-6). The predestinating of the Christian to receive “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” has been effected in the believer by his having been adopted “through Jesus Christ” that he might be blessed “in the Beloved.” The eternal decree that set the person aside to inherit the bounty of Christ’s triumph was enacted in the individual when, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, he was made a member of the household of God through adoption. Having been made a member, he partakes of all of the blessings of Christ for he is *in* Christ.

Perhaps an analogy will help us to better grasp this. We are all familiar with the programs through which a person in the developed world can sponsor a child in the developing world. The money is sent to an organization that, in turn, mediates the gift. The child receives much-needed help from the hand of one representing the organization and, by extension, the one who gave the gift. We assume the child is grateful. In fact, it’s

³ In my own life I am often reminded of the day after my conversion. I had volunteered to help a group of men repair something in their church building. Upon seeing them that morning, I knew that I was one of them. Every other time I had attended a church, and I had attended a number of evangelical churches including the one I had volunteered to help that morning, I knew I was not among their number. This time, however, was different. I was now a Christian.

⁴ “By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit” (1 John 4:13).

usually the case that one occasionally receives communication from the child that tells how the gift has made a difference in the child's life.

How different would it be if the person who initially gave the gift boarded a plane, traveled to the country of the child, adopted the child, and returned with him or her to his home? The child now possesses the full legal rights of the other children in the household. Furthermore, he or she has access to all that the household has to offer for it has been made available to the child by means of the child having been adopted. Additionally, he or she presumably experiences love and acceptance, as the other members of the household. The child, brought into union with the other members of the family through adoption, partakes of the abundance of the family.⁵

John Murray comments, "It is adoption into the family of God as sons and daughters of the Lord God Almighty that accords to the people of God the apex of blessing and privilege." However, "we cannot think of adoption apart from union with Christ." Murray remarks, "When Paul says that the Father chose a people in Christ before the foundation of the world that they should be holy he also adds that in love he predestinated them unto adoption through Jesus Christ . . . Hence union with Christ and adoption are complimentary aspects of this amazing grace." The complimentary nature of union and adoption Murray describes: "Union with Christ reaches its zenith in adoption and adoption has its orbit in union with Christ."⁶

Preaching the Gospel

The justifying work of Christ, the foundation of a believer's assurance, is, as the Savoy says, "revealed in the gospel." Indeed, it is the gospel, the apostolic witness of a righteousness from God made available to the unrighteous that is sufficient to meet God's standards, that needs to be preached and heard if the questioning soul is to find assurance.

⁵ Cf. Savoy Declaration, Article 12: "All those that are justified, God vouchsafes in and for His only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption, by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God, have His name put upon them, receive the Spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, are enabled to cry, Abba Father; are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by Him as by a Father: yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption; and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation." *Historic Documents of Congregationalism*. 39-40.

⁶ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1955), 170

An individual becoming persuaded of the truths of the gospel is something that can only be wrought in the individual by the Holy Spirit. John Calvin explains: “the Spirit [is] the inner teacher by whose effort the promise of salvation penetrates into our minds, a promise that would otherwise only strike the air or beat upon our ears.”⁷ That being said, we, as heralds of the gospel, are to proclaim the message trusting that God will draw to him those that are being saved. The secret work of the Spirit is carried out in accordance with the decree of God who says, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.”⁸ As a result, knowing that faith comes by hearing, we preach and so people believe.

What we preach, however, is of utmost importance in engendering enduring faith. Certainly, one aspect of the gospel that should be highlighted (and one that, by some accounts, is often not highlighted)⁹ is the believer’s union with Christ. For the doubting soul to become persuaded to the point that he can affirm with Paul that nothing in all creation “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord,”¹⁰ he must be persuaded of the things of which Paul is persuaded, not the least of which is the apostle’s conviction that through faith he had been united to the crucified and risen Lord. As James Boice states, “Apart from Christ we cannot view our state with anything but dread. United to him all is changed, and dread is turned into indescribable peace and joy.”¹¹

Metaphors for Union

The concept of union with Christ is famously difficult to conceive of let alone describe. A number of metaphors are used in scripture to communicate the nature of this union. Several follow. Jesus calls himself the vine and his followers branches. Peter

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. John T. McNeill, ed. Ford Lewis Battles, tr. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.1.4

⁸ Romans 9:15, 16

⁹ For example, Robert Letham observes, “From the middle of the seventeenth century on . . . 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.” He cites a work by William B. Evans that lays the blame, at least in the American Reformed tradition, largely at the feet of Charles Hodge and Jonathan Edwards who, by Evans’ account, created “a division between two aspects of union with Christ . . . the external element of imputation and the transformative element of the Holy Spirit . . . These two elements were detached and considered in isolation.” Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2011), 2

¹⁰ Romans 8:39

¹¹ James Boice. *Foundations of the Christian Faith*. Rev. ed. (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 393

pictures a spiritual house in which each believer is a living stone. Paul likens the relationship unto a marriage, elsewhere to a human body with Christ as head and his followers as the various members of the body. He also speaks of believers being members of a household. An additional metaphor, alluded to in the Savoy article under consideration, is that of adoption.¹²

Each of the images suggests that the believer has been integrated into Christ. This is made explicit elsewhere when repeatedly the relationship is described utilizing the preposition *in*. A few of the many instances follow: “abide *in* me,” “if anyone is *in* Christ, he is a new creation,” “you are all one *in* Christ,” “blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us *in* Christ with every spiritual blessing,” “we share *in* Christ,” and perhaps most pertinent to our discussion, “There is no condemnation to those who are *in* Christ Jesus,” or, “Christ *in* you, the hope of glory.”¹³ Given the evidence outlined above it is easy to understand why the nature of the relationship has been described as being in union with Christ.

But here we must tread carefully. Given that “man’s nature is . . . a perpetual factory of idols,”¹⁴ we must train our minds to conceive of this union aright, despite the challenges of doing so. Though we may speak of a believer being in union with Christ we are not free to speak of the believer as having become therefore identical to Christ. Even using integrated, the term employed above, is problematic as it suggests a blending, or melding, of one entity with another. There has not been, by reason of our union with Christ, a loss of distinction between the two parties in the union. Nor do the Scriptures teach that the Son of God, having united himself to us, is altered, or that we are somehow elevated beyond creature status by reason of our being in him. What the metaphors and analogies seek to communicate is the vital, substantive, covenantal, fruitful, intimate, enduring, and justifying relationship that we have with the Godhead through our union with Christ.¹⁵

¹² In order: John 15:1-8; 1 Peter 2:5; Ephesians 5:31-32; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 2:19; Galatians 4:5

¹³ In order: John 15:4; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 1:3; Hebrews 3:14; Romans 8:1; Colossians 1:27

¹⁴ *Institutes*. 1.11.8

¹⁵ Cf. Ephesians 2:18, “For through him we . . . have access in one Spirit to the Father.”

Centrality of Union

Calvin explains the necessity of union with Christ:

“[W]e must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us . . . for . . . all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him.”¹⁶

This is so for as Herman Bavinck instructs, “There is no sharing in the benefits of Christ unless we share in his person, because the benefits cannot be separated from the person . . . Christ himself and all his benefits belong to the church through the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷

However, united to Christ by faith, the believer can rest assured that the righteousness he needs, along with the other blessings that flow from Christ, are his for they are Christ’s, to whom he is now wedded.¹⁸ This is why John Murray calls union with Christ the “central truth” of soteriology, the doctrine of salvation:

“Union with Christ is the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation. All of which the people of God have been predestined in the eternal election of God, all that has been secured and procured for them in the once-for-all accomplishment of redemption, all of which they become the actual partakers in the application of redemption, and all that by God’s grace they will become in the state of consummated bliss is embraced within the compass of union and communion with Christ.”¹⁹

Union unto Justification

¹⁶ *Institutes*, 3.1.1

¹⁷ As quoted by Lane G. Tipton. “Union with Christ and Justification,” *Justified in Christ: God’s Plan for Us in Justification*. K. Scott Oliphint, ed. (Ross-shire, GB: Mentor, 2007), 25

¹⁸ A favorite passage of this writer from Martin Luther’s *Freedom of a Christian* illustrates this point: “The . . . benefit of faith is that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery . . . Christ and the soul become one flesh [Eph. 5:31-32]. And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage . . . it follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own. Let us compare these and we shall see inestimable benefits. Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ’s, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul’s.” Found in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, John Dillenberger, ed., (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), 60

¹⁹ Murray, *Redemption*. 170

The Savoy urges believers to pursue assurance “that they are in the state of grace.” It will be a source of comfort for Christians to see that their union with Christ for the purpose of justification has been present in every step of God’s redemptive plan. Beginning with an electing decree in eternity to their final and full glorification, the Christians’ salvation has as its “organizing structure,”²⁰ union with Christ. We will consider this under several headings: election, creation, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, regeneration, and glorification.

- **Election**

John Murray asserts, “The fountain of salvation itself in the eternal election of the Father is ‘in Christ.’” He goes on to cite Ephesians 1:3-4 in which Paul teaches, “he chose us in him before the foundation of the world.”

“[T]he fact is plain enough that there was no election of the Father in eternity apart from Christ. And that means that those who will be saved were not even contemplated by the Father in the ultimate counsel of his predestinating love apart from union with Christ . . . As far back as we can go in tracing salvation to its fountain we find ‘union with Christ’; it is not something tacked on; it is there from the onset.”²¹

The apostle Paul indicates that the purpose for which we were elected was “that we should be holy and blameless before him.” A few sentences later he states that, “[i]n him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace . . . according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ.” It is clear that God’s purpose, which he “set forth in Christ,” of uniting the sinner to Christ in eternity was to bring justification for that sinner. In short, the eternal decree that the sinner will be brought to eternal life was done *in* Christ. That decree holds him fast to Christ as the sinner’s salvation unfolds, first in the justifying work of Christ, then in the drawing of the sinner to Christ.

- **Creation**

In the Genesis account we read that man, as the apex of God’s creative activity, is made in the “image” of God: “So God created man in his own image/ in the image of

²⁰ Tipton, “Union.” 24

²¹ Murray, *Redemption*. 162

God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:28). Whatever the relationship is that exists between God the Creator and the rest of his creation it is qualitatively different when it comes to the relationship between God and the human for the human alone is made in his “image.” What does it mean to be made in the image of God? Significant to this discussion, man being made in the image of God means that there is correspondence between God and man. They are not identical, but there is a connection afforded by the correspondence that indicates compatibility between God and man. The correspondence was the basis for communion between them. This communion was to be expressed in shared image, shared rule, shared purpose, and shared communication. Man made in the image of God is important to note as we anticipate what unfolds in the post-creation narrative. The unique compatibility that fits man for communion with God is the emotional fuel of the tragic aftermath of man’s detestation of that privilege. However, it is the fact that he is made in the image of God that will prove to be his salvation.

With the Fall the relationship between God and man was disrupted. Sin coming between them created a barrier to the communion that man was created to have with God. The barrier remains. This breach in communion has left man unmoored from the source of all that made him distinct from the rest of creation. It is not that man has become something other than he was. Though he may at times act like a brute beast, he is not a brute beast; he is still man, one created in the image of God. But he is no longer in communion with God and thus his thoughts and actions are no longer directed toward God or informed or empowered by Him. Furthermore, man is now separated from the love that is shared among the Godhead, the overflow of which the one who bears God’s image was intended to experience.

God’s gracious plan to restore the relationship involved the sending of his Son. But who is his Son? He is many things, but for our discussion the apostle Paul indicates that Christ is the “image of God.” The writer of Hebrews states that he is the “express image of God.”²² The purpose for the correspondence between God and man due to man being made in the image of God is thus disclosed. In the very act of creating human beings, union with the one who would rescue them was anticipated by making the soon to

²² 2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3, NKJV (ESV: “the exact imprint of his nature”)

be rebels *in* the image of the one who would be sent.²³ When the one who is the express image of God takes on the rebel's existence he does so in order that the image bearer might be restored to the communion afforded him by being made in his image.²⁴ As Richard Letham observes, "Union with Christ rests on the foundation of man's nature as created, seen in the light of God's end purpose for man."²⁵

When man, by faith is brought into union with Christ, he is brought back into communion with God, a communion for which he was originally constituted having been made in the image of God. A restored relationship through union with Christ, the fountain of his uniqueness, brings into his life the life of God.

- **Incarnation**

"[F]rom the very first, God's ultimate purpose was foundational to all he did – all things were heading, under his direction, to the goal he 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."²⁶

Christ unites himself to man by taking on his nature and flesh. He is one with them. This, as we have considered, is something anticipated when man was made in the image of God. In the incarnation, the one from whom man had received his own uniqueness unites himself to his image bearer in order that he might rescue him from the dreadful consequences of his detestation of Him. Christ assumed, in complete identity and unity with man, all that is man's, with the exception of man's sin. This union makes him the perfect redeemer.

Questions 15-18 of the Heidelberg Catechism²⁷ trace out the redeeming purpose of Christ's union with humanity in his incarnation, an incarnation that has as its motivation the sinner's need for justification:

²³ Letham: "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." *Union*. 14.

²⁴ This notion is bolstered by the fact that Paul describes our sanctification as a process in which we are being transformed "from one degree of glory to another" into the image of Christ. 2 Corinthians 3:18

²⁵ Letham, *Union*. 18

²⁶ *Ibid.* 14

²⁷ *The Heidelberg Catechism*. Allen O. Miller and M. Eugene Osterhaven, trs. (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1962).

Question #15

Then, what kind of mediator and redeemer must we seek?

One who is a true and righteous man and yet more powerful than all creatures, that is, one who is at the same time true God.

Question #16

Why must he be a true and righteous man?

Because God's righteousness requires that man who has sinned should make reparation for sin, but the man who is himself a sinner cannot pay for others.

Question #17

Why must he at the same time be true God?

So that by the power of his divinity he might bear as a man the burden of God's wrath, and recover for us and restore to us righteousness and life.

Question #18

Who is this mediator who is at the same time true God and a true and perfectly righteous man?

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is freely given to us for complete redemption and righteousness.

In the incarnation Christ truly assumes human existence yet does so with the resources of his divinity to draw upon. This will prove necessary as he undergoes the judicial punishment due his rebellious image bearer.

- **Crucifixion**

The death of Jesus was an expression of God's love. In love, the Father sent his son; in love, the son laid down his life.²⁸ That being said, the death of Jesus as an expression of divine love is incomprehensible apart from the knowledge that Jesus' death was a judicial act. It is judicial because death is the penalty for lawbreaking. Richard Gaffin, Jr. notes, "As sin is the violation of God's will revealed in his law, death is sin's due, that is, its penal recompense. Death, as God's response to sin, is a response that is judicial in nature. Death, as his ultimate curse on sin, is his just punishment of sin."²⁹

Peter writes, "Christ . . . suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18). This statement illustrates the substitutionary nature of Christ's death. Paul offers similar teaching when he writes, "For

²⁸ Romans 5:8; John 15:13

²⁹ Richard Gaffin, Jr. "Justification and Eschatology," *Justified in Christ: God's Plan for Us in Justification*. 7-8

our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Such statements also direct us to the biblical dynamic of one-for-all, crucial to understand if we are to gain assurance that our needed righteousness was accomplished in Christ and imputed to us by reason of our faith-union with him.

In Paul’s letter to the Romans we read in chapter five, “⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us . . .” This clearly reflects the substitutionary nature of Christ’s death spoken of previously, and affirms it as an act of love. But there is more to consider. As Christ undergoes the penalty he does so in union with his elect. Paul continues, “¹² . . . just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned . . . ¹⁸as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness to justification and life for all men. ¹⁹*For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.*”

Here is the one-for-all dynamic. Though foreign to our individualistic sensibilities it was not foreign to those to whom Paul was writing. The Jews understood how the actions of one affect the whole (recall Achan’s sin and the subsequent judgment against Israel, Joshua 7). The gentiles of Paul’s day also would have understood how the actions of one had ramifications for all (Caesar’s victories brought glory and prosperity to Rome). Given our individualistic tendencies, however, the Western person thinks it unfair for others to suffer on account of an individual’s failings. But the one-for-the-whole is vital to our justification. For “if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.” And, to the point, the free gift given by grace “brought justification” (Romans 5:15, 16).

To further our understanding, consider an apologetic that Robert Letham references based upon this one-for-all dynamic. It is offered in response to those who think it inherently unjust and therefore unacceptable for God to punish an undeserving Christ on behalf of the ones who deserve punishment (the late Christopher Hitchens often

voiced this objection. One such example is from his debate with Douglas Wilson, “Is Christianity Good for the World?”: “Many of the teachings of Christianity are, as well as being incredible and mythical, immoral. I would principally wish to cite the concept of vicarious redemption, whereby one's own responsibilities can be flung onto a scapegoat and thereby taken away”).³⁰ Letham explains, “A substitute is, by definition, another person than the one he replaces . . . While his actions are legally accounted as those of the one he represents, the two are distinctly separate persons. The concept of union takes us a stage further . . . In this case, all that Christ did and does we do, since we are one with him . . . because of the union sustained between Christ and ourselves, his actions *are* ours.”³¹ When Christ was punished, the offending parties, the elect, were on the cross by virtue of their union with Christ. Christ bears their penalty as their substitute. He endures, in his own body, the suffering deserved by them, the criminals. Yet, by virtue of his union with us the criminals *are* being punished. The penalty was discharged by the lamb that was without blemish on behalf of the sinful ones with whom he was in union.

“Once union with Christ is brought to bear on the matter . . . it is no longer a case of God’s punishing the innocent and letting the guilty off scot-free. Because of the union established between Christ and his elect people, the wrongs done by the guilty parties have become Christ’s as well. In turn, the righteousness of the One who bears the punishment actually belongs to the other, since both are regarded as one.”³²

I am in union with Christ by the decree of election when he is nailed to the tree. Upon my believing in him, the satisfaction accomplished by Christ on the cross, my sentence of death, is imputed to my account. As the sentence, the punishment, has already been served, I no longer need to fear the wrath to come.

- **Resurrection**

“ . . . [W]ho was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Romans 4:25). With these words the apostle makes an immediate connection between our need for righteousness and Christ’s resurrection. At first it would seem that he is suggesting that our justification was not accomplished until Christ was raised, or that it

³⁰ Source as of 04/15/12, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/mayweb-only/119-12.0.html?start=1>

³¹ Letham, *Union*. 62-3, emphasis in original.

³² Letham, *Union*. 64.

was the resurrection itself that brought justification. But in just a few sentences he will state that we have “been justified by his blood” (Romans 5:9). This latter statement, alluding to Christ’s death, is consistent with the teaching of Christ and the apostles.³³

How is the resurrection connected to our justification? Considering the language of Paul above, Douglas Moo offers that, “the division of the lines may be for purely rhetorical effect, the whole formula saying no more than that Jesus’ death and resurrection are basic to the believer’s salvation,” as it is obvious that Paul would “not want to separate Christ’s death (the first line) from our justification (the second line).” But “when due allowance is made for rhetoric, we must still insist that Paul is affirming here a theological connection between Jesus’ resurrection and our justification.”³⁴ The theological connection is how the resurrection served to vindicate Christ.

Despite being attested to “by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him,” Christ had been judged worthy of death and crucified. Nevertheless, though lawless hands may have executed him, he himself was not a lawbreaker. As a result, the cross was not the last word. “God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.”³⁵ His resurrection was vindication that he was not guilty of the charges leveled against him. His resurrection declared him to not be a criminal. Quite the contrary, through the resurrection he was declared to be “the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness” (Romans 1:4). He had been vindicated.

³³ For example, Matthew 20:28; John 12:32-33, 13:4-7; Romans 3:24-26; 1 Timothy 2:6; Hebrews 9:15; 1 Peter 2:25; Cf. Isaiah 53:5

³⁴ Douglas J. Moo. *The Epistle to the Romans*. NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 289-90. Moo suggests that Romans 5:10 brings something to bear upon the issue, as well: “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.” Interesting to note is James Boice arguing strongly that this verse is mistranslated, even though it is translated in similar fashion in virtually all of the major translations. In the Greek, the preposition translated *by* in the ESV (so too RSV, NASB, NKJV; *through* NIV) is *εν* or, in English, *in*. He states, “The argument is: If God has saved us through the death of Christ (through faith in his atonement), he will certainly save us by our being ‘in his life.’” Boice suggests that this anticipates much of Paul’s teaching that unfolds in Chapter 5 (and beyond), which, he asserts, is grounded in the believer’s union with Christ. James M. Boice. *Romans, Volume 2*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992), 555.

³⁵ Acts 2:22-24.

The resurrection, however, was not just a declaration of what he had not done, i.e., that he was *not* guilty as charged; it also declared what he had done, i.e., that he had fulfilled God's will. Gaffin explains,

“As the representative sin bearer and righteous substitute (Rom. 3:25; 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:21), in his full obedience culminating in his death (Phil. 2:8), Christ's resurrection is his own justification in the sense that the resurrection itself is God's *de facto* declarative recognition, on the ground of that obedience, of his righteousness (cf. 1 Cor. 1:30).”³⁶

As a result of our union with him, Christ's vindication is ours as well. We were buried with him in his death and raised with him in his resurrection. The grave is not a fit place for him or for those who, with him, have died to sin.³⁷ His resurrection is a demonstration of his righteousness and, by reason of our union with him, “his righteousness is reckoned as [ours] or imputed to [us].”³⁸

*Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:
He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory. (1 Timothy 3:16).*

Commenting on 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul articulates the gospel, Robert Letham notes,

“Christ's death and resurrection are of first importance, and it is union with him in his death and resurrection that all the blessings of salvation are given to us. Hence, the great reality of justification is subsumed under the death and resurrection of Christ, for it is in union with him that we are justified through faith.”³⁹

- **Regeneration**

It is with regeneration that the one who had been chosen in Christ for salvation is prepared to receive all of the justifying benefits of Christ. But again, regeneration, the awakening to sin and the Savior, is *in* Christ and is, in part, a judicial act.

³⁶ Gaffin, “Justification and Eschatology.” 6

³⁷ Romans 6:5-10

³⁸ Gaffin, “Justification and Eschatology.” 6

³⁹ Letham, *Union*, 134-5

Paul writes, “even when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ” (Ephesians 2:5). If we recall the previous statement by Gaffin that “death is sin’s due, that is, its penal recompense” our being brought to life in Christ suggests that our regeneration has a judicial component about it. This connection is made more explicit when we consider Paul’s language from Colossians 2:13-14, “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”

The necessity of the new birth is stated by Jesus, “Unless one is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of Heaven.”⁴⁰ This is not just a lack of spiritual insight at work. The unregenerate person cannot understand the things of the kingdom for that one does not have the Spirit of God in him.⁴¹ But more to the point is Paul’s explanation that the new man is a “son of God” and one who has been “created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” while the old man was numbered among the “children of wrath” and was “crucified with [Christ]” on the cross.⁴²

By natural generation, we are in Adam; by divine regeneration, we are in Christ. The first Adam failed and brought us down with him making us “children of wrath.” The Second Adam triumphed and lifts us up with him making us “children of light.”⁴³

- **Glorification**

The last heading that we will consider is glorification.

Gaffin observes that the Reformers heard in Paul’s pronouncement, “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus,”⁴⁴ an “eschatological pronouncement.” They “grasped that the verdict, belonging at the end of history, had been brought forward and already pronounced on believers in history,” providing “unshakeable confidence in the face of the final judgment.”⁴⁵ Due to the death and

⁴⁰ John 3:3

⁴¹ 1 Corinthians 2:14: “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

⁴² Galatians 3:26; Ephesians 4:24; 2:3; Romans 6:6

⁴³ Ephesians 5:8

⁴⁴ Romans 8:1

⁴⁵ Gaffin, “Justification and Eschatology.” 1

resurrection of Christ, the believer's future is sure; not even death is able to separate him from the one with whom he is in union.⁴⁶

Previously, we noted the Savoy's directing of the believer to the "immediate witness of the Spirit, testifying our adoption" as proof of the infallibility of our assurance. As Paul writes, "you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." The apostle goes on to say that if we are children then we are heirs, "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." Here the final fruition of our justification comes into view. The salvation by justification that the believer has in Christ, which was established in the electing decree of God, accomplished by the obedience of the Son, and imputed to our account through faith, has had this end in mind; and it all has had as its "organizing structure," union with Christ. John Murray:

"[U]nion with Christ had its source in the election of God the Father before the foundation of the world and it has its fruition in the glorification of the sons of God. The perspective of God's people is not narrow; it is broad and it is long. It is not confined to space and time; it has the expanse of eternity. Its orbit had two foci, one the electing love of God the Father in the counsels of eternity, the other glorification with Christ in the manifestation of his glory. The former has no beginning, the latter has no end. Glorification with Christ at his coming will be but the beginning of a consummation that will encompass the ages of ages."⁴⁷

Conclusion

I started out this paper with the hope of coupling together the Savoy's doctrine of the "blood and righteousness of Christ" and the believer's adoption, so that I might demonstrate that, as the Savoy says, our assurance is not "grounded upon a fallible hope." Though the language of Article 18 of the Savoy does not include the words "union with Christ," I have agreed with John Murray that we cannot consider adoption apart from our spiritual union and, with Richard Gaffin, that we cannot consider our union with Christ apart from our justification. From eternity past to our future glorification, union with Christ has been tied to the believer's justification. This incomprehensible reality, if

⁴⁶ Romans 8:39-39

⁴⁷ Murray, *Redemption*. 164

comprehended, has the power to cause the believer to “rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.”

I close with an extended and oft quoted passage from John Calvin:

“But since Christ has been so imparted to you with all his benefits that all his things are made yours, that you are made a member of him, indeed one with him, his righteousness overwhelms your sins; his salvation wipes out your condemnation; with his worthiness he intercedes that your unworthiness may not come before God’s sight. Surely this is so: We ought not to separate Christ from ourselves or ourselves from him. Rather we ought to hold fast bravely with both hands to that fellowship by which he has bound himself to us . . . Christ is not outside us but dwells within us. 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”⁴⁸

⁴⁸ *Institutes*, 3.2.24