

Union with Christ in the work of John Calvin and Andrew Murray

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May I start friends, by thanking and congratulating the organizers with the formation of this beautiful center? I truly think this is a very important and meaningful development in the DRC. For many years we knew we needed something like this. I was always somewhat embarrassed when asked by pastors and members about the possibility of retreats in the DRC – to have to answer that we do not have a facility for that kind of thing in our church. Therefore I am very glad and grateful that we can see this day.

My thanks also to the organizers for their invitation to participate in the conference. I was asked to say a couple of words on the connection between Andrew Murray and John Calvin specifically around the theme of union with Christ.

I guess the backdrop for this request is that many people for many years spread the idea that Andrew Murray was not really reformed but more of a Pietist and a Methodist (Totius). This rumor was also the reason why a great churchman like Murray was badly neglected and almost forgotten in the DRC – while he was read and appreciated by many people in many countries all over the world.

This rumor that Murray was not really reformed has to do with the fact that Reformed Theology can be understood in more than one way. There is on the one side a strong rational and scholastic understanding of Calvinism a view that had strong support in SA and also in the DRC over many years (cf Brummer's Vroom of Regsinnig). But this is not the only way Reformed theology (and also Calvin) can be understood. While the Reformed Orthodoxy was more negative about piety and pietism, Calvin revered piety and a life of dedication to Christ and spoke much about the heart and even about experience. In that sense I honestly believe that the operative theologies of Murray and Calvin had much more in common than what many people think.

The organizers suggested (partly on my advice I think) that I should focus on the theme of union with Christ. Which I think was an excellent idea!

The theme of union with Christ plays a vital role in the work (and life) of both Murray and Calvin. I am not going to say too much about union with Christ in the work of Andrew Murray. Anyone who knows a little bit about Murray knows that this theme and specifically Joh 15 was central to Murray's life and writing. He wrote several books on this theme. One of the volumes of his *Versamelde Werk* also carries this title. For him this was the key to a fruitful Christian life. Everything depended on this and everything flows out of this relationship. In his books on Joh 15 you get the feeling that Murray is connecting and covering all of Christian faith and life from what we find in this chapter.

I do not think that I need to convince you that union with Christ was an important theme in Murray's work.

It might help us if I briefly summarize the (somewhat loose) argument of Murray in his book *Abide in Christ*. He actually starts out with Math 11, Jesus' invitation "Come to Me" – which he then connects to the command in Joh 15 to "Abide in Christ". When we respond to the invitation in Math 11 for the first time, he says, our lives are filled with joy, relief and a sense

of surprise and newness. But strangely, for most people, this feeling starts to fade after a while, and many people end up with a sense of disappointment in God. "As time went on your expectations were not realized. ... And often you have wondered what the reason could be that with such a Saviour, so mighty and so loving, your experience of salvation should not have been a fuller one."

Murray's response to this is that we probably never heard the second call to also "abide in Christ" clearly. "...Observe especially", he writes, "it was not that He said ...abide with me, but abide in Me! He opened his arms, to press you to his bosom; he opened his heart, to welcome you there; He opened up all his Divine fullness of life and love and offered to take you up into his fellowship, to make you wholly one with himself."

Christian life starts with this gift of a new living relationship with Christ. Therefore he emphasizes the role of rest, being still and doing nothing as a vital part of faith and sanctification. This is how it all starts. During that time we must allow God to unite us with Christ so that his power and love can flow in us and through us to others.

After that, in the second part of the book, Murray connects important fruits of the Christian life like obedience, love, joy, power, etc to our abiding in Christ.

If we should ask how this union is sustained and nourished, Murray firstly points us to God who not only initiated this relationship but also maintains it. On our side, stillness and thoughtful attention to God's work is also important. He also emphasizes that affliction and trials can help to strengthen and deepen our union with Christ.

There is much more, but this gives you a sense of Murray's reasoning.

It might be more of a surprise to many of us to discover how central this very same theme was in Calvin's theology. It has always been there and it was acknowledged by some (one of which was our own Prof Willie Jonker) but to a large extent it was neglected and ignored by many scholars.

The past couple of decades we have seen a resurgence of interest in this theme of union with Christ in Calvin's theology. Charles Partee is probably one of the most important and outspoken exponents of this development. He goes as far as to argue that if there is a center in Calvin's theology it would be "union with Christ". He writes: "Claiming that union with Christ is the only key to unlocking all the mysteries of Calvin's thought would be egregious, but union with Christ is a master key that opens many doors that have been closed for a long time" (2008:xvi). And he claims strong support for this view from very famous theologians. Tom Torrance wrote: All Calvin's theology and preaching have to do with salvation through union with Christ in his death and resurrection. And – in a similar vein – Barth wrote: "(Union with Christ) has a comprehensive and basic significance for Calvin. Indeed, we might almost call it his conception of the essence of Christianity".

A number of other names could be added to this list, but I must add that there is a conversation on this with a variety of opinions.

There are a large number of references confirming the importance of union with Christ for Calvin – in the Institutes but even more so in Calvin's commentaries. The most crucial one might be the statement with which he begins Book III of the Institutes:

"First we 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 to us. Therefore to share with us what he has received from the Father he had to become ours and to dwell within us... for as I have said: all that He possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him" (Inst III.1.1).

Along the same lines Calvin wrote elsewhere (II.16.19) “Therefore the joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts – in short, that mystical union – are accorded by us the highest degree of importance. We do not therefore contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body – in short because he deigns to make us one with him.”

One more quotation: “For this is the design of the gospel, that Christ may become ours and that we may be ingrafted into his body” (Comm on 1 Cor 1:9).

The meaning is quite clear and radical: without union with Christ, there will be no sign of salvation in our lives. In his Commentary on Hab 2:4 he writes: “the purpose of human life is to be united to God”.

There are many more quotations like this – I could go on for a while...

But the bigger question, friends, is what does this mean and what difference does it make.

In my preparation of this paper I came across two relatively new books, more popular books, on this theme. They convinced me that we should have this conversation on what Union with Christ means and what difference it could make in our lives.

The first book is called *One with Christ* and was written by Marcus Johnson a Lutheran theologian from Chicago.

The first sentence in the book reads: “This book is the result of a shocking encounter I had, and continue to have, with John Calvin”. He then tells the story of how he discovered at some point during his studies that he had a lot to learn from Calvin. In the reading, he says, he got what he expected: good theology, strong connections to the Bible and the early church, etc. But he got more: what shocked him was the way Calvin spoke about salvation. It was the familiar concepts, he says, but “I was disrupted by Calvin’s consistent refrain about us being joined to Jesus Christ. At first he said, he thought this was just another expression, a way of speaking about salvation, but he then realized ..”That when Calvin wrote of being united to Christ, he meant that believers are personally joined to the living, incarnate, crucified, resurrected Jesus”.

The vital and legitimate theological point that Johnson makes is that modern theology, evangelical theology included, so focusses on the work of Christ that they almost ignore his Person. And that is not Orthodox Christianity. The whole discussion on God and Christ in the early Church was centered not in the first place on the work of God and Jesus, but on who God and Christ was.

The second book *Union with Christ* by Rankin Wilbourne – a pastor – is even more practical. Tim Keller recommends it as the best book for lay people on this subject.

Wilbourne was also helped by Calvin to discover the importance of this vital biblical concept. He starts his book with a chapter called “Living in the Gap” which reminded me of the way Murray starts his *Abide in Christ*. The Gap is the difference between what we confess and expect as Christians and, on the other hand, where and how we often live in reality. He writes: “In my job I have learned there are a lot of people out there who feel alone and afraid, who feel like a fraud”.

Where is the problem? Wilbourne answers: Our neglect of union with Christ explains the gap between our faith and our lives. This is when “the work of Christ for us becomes abstracted from the person of Christ within us”.

There is much more interesting stuff here, friends but I must try to conclude.

That union with Christ, or being in Christ are a vital phrases in the Bible and in the works of many important theologians is beyond dispute. The more difficult question, I think, is what this means and what difference it could make in our lives.

I would like to make a few remarks about this - my borrowed wisdom – at this point!

Firstly, we must confess with so many other theologians that this union with Christ is a mystery that we will probably never fully comprehend. Calvin wrote that the nature of this union is an inexplicable mystery “which exceeds the limits of my understanding”. Elsewhere he wrote: “For my own part, I am overwhelmed by the depth of this mystery, and I am not ashamed to join Paul in acknowledging at once my ignorance and my admiration” (Comm on Eph 5:32). We probably have to accept that we will never be able to describe it adequately.

Secondly, this does not mean that it is not real, that it is only an expression with no actual substance behind it. For Calvin the fact that we cannot phantom this mystery does not mean that is not a vital reality. One of the direct comparisons he makes more than once is with marriage – and in this regard he emphasizes a very concrete bodily union. In the same passage on Eph 5:32 he added a remarkable sentence: “let us therefore labor more to feel Christ living in us, than to discover the nature of that relationship”

Thirdly – an important clue! – is that this union is brought about by the work of the Holy Spirit. For Calvin this at least was very clear. In the beginning of Book III which is about the work of the Spirit he says that uniting us to Christ is the most important work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one who effectuates this bond and union with Christ. Elsewhere he writes: “I know only this: that through the power of the Holy Spirit the life of heaven flows down to earth ... Thus it is the Spirit who makes Christ live in us, who sustains and nourishes us, who accomplishes everything on behalf of the Head (Letter 2266 to Peter Martyr Vermigli).

Fourthly – and this is absolutely vital! – it is also clear that for Calvin at least (and I think for Murray) union with Christ is about a relationship of separate persons (Persons). There is no mystical fusion or pantheistic mixing of substances and identities. Calvin writes about Osiander: “That gentleman had conceived something bordering on Manicheism in his desire to transfuse the essence of God into men.... He says that we are one with Christ. We agree. But we deny that Christ’s essence is mixed with our own (Inst III,11,5)

Fifthly, we need to talk about some of the terms which are regularly being used now, terms like mystical, participation, theosis, deification. These words have different meanings for different people and more clarity will help us. For the moment I am still hesitant about all of them, but I will say that union with Christ should be understood in a Trinitarian way. Through Christ and by the power and love of the Holy Spirit we are united with God and that means that our communion with God the Trinity is restored. It seems to me that Calvin’s association with the Early Church Father’s concept of participation in God is even more solid than his connection to the mystics of the Middle Ages (may be with the exception of Bernard of Clairvaux)

In the sixth place: the concrete result and effect of our union with Christ seems to focus on life and power being shared, being given to us. The outcome of this union with the Person of Christ is that the Spirit allows the life of Christ to flow to us and in us. In connection with the Lord’s Supper Calvin wrote: “When I say that the flesh and blood of Christ are substantially offered and exhibited to us in the Supper, I at the same time explain the mode, namely, that the flesh of Christ become vivifying to us (Theological Treatises vs Heshus, 267).

If I think of a number of Murray's books this was maybe his vital message to the church and Christians of his time.

My last remark; a Catholic theologian Dennis Tamburello wrote a monograph where he compared Calvin's concept of "union with Christ" with St Bernard's mysticism. He finds a number of clear similarities between the two around the idea of union with Christ. But there is also an important and clear difference that Tamburello admits. Calvin is not as positive about monasteries and even about contemplation as Bernard, the main reason being that he was convinced that the Gospel requires from us to live out our union with Christ in the real world. "To Calvin, the Gospel was a transformative social power" (Tamburello, 95)

And what difference can this all make?

If we can believe that we were not only called to follow Jesus but that the Spirit of God also really engrafted, rooted, united us with Jesus and the Father, we might be able to make more of difference than what we thought was possible.

I hope this center and the conversation we have here can help us along this way.