

# THE DEBATE OVER THE *ORDO SALUTIS* IN AMERICAN REFORMED THEOLOGY

by  
Timothy Miller<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Some of the newest contenders for orthodoxy in Christian theology have come from a distinct approach called the New Perspective on Paul (NPP). Coming beside the NPP—though not agreeing in entirety—is the development of the Federal Vision (FV). Believing they have found emphases in Scripture that have been long neglected, these groups have sought to redefine Paul’s theology of salvation. Specifically, they have brought into question the relationship among union with Christ, justification, and sanctification. The Reformed community has adequately risen to the challenge and defended orthodox, confessional Christianity.<sup>2</sup> However, while the responses have successfully warded off the attack from those outside, they have also incited a civil war from within. This war concerns what is the *proper* Reformed *ordo salutis*.<sup>3</sup>

While neither school, as a school, has publicly or formally expressed the disagreement, Westminster Seminary California (WSC) and Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia (WTS) have been the hubs of the discussion. In some of the debate tension has been high. While not calling him a Lutheran or semi-pelagian, Lane Tipton did affirm that Michael Horton’s book committed the writer to a structurally Lutheran conception of justification that has the potential effect of producing a semi-pelagian soteriology.<sup>4</sup> On the other side, some have

---

<sup>1</sup>Timothy Miller is Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies at Maranatha Baptist Bible College in Watertown, WI.

<sup>2</sup>This paper will not deal with NPP or FV directly. There are many resources available that defend orthodoxy from these modern attacks. See R. Scott Clark, ed., *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2007); Lane G. Tipton, “Union With Christ and Justification,” in *Justified in Christ: God’s Plan for Us in Justification*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Great Britain: Mentor, 2007); Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *By Faith, Not by Sight* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006).

<sup>3</sup>Edwards notes that the current debate is derived from the responses to NPP and FV: “Though there is a much longer history, the context for the current debate reaches back most immediately to the various critiques on Paul and the Federal Vision.” See Rob Edwards, “A Guide to Recent Discussions on Justification and Sanctification,” par. 2, article posted 20 August 2011 at <http://historiasalutis.com/2011/08/20/a-guide-to-recent-discussions-on-justification-and-sanctification> (accessed 30 May 2013).

<sup>4</sup>“Union with Christ: An Interview with Lane G. Tipton,” *Reformed Forum*,

sought to tie WTS's perception of the *ordo salutis* to Norman Shepherd and the development of the FV.<sup>5</sup> The descriptions expressed, though potentially misleading and pejorative at times, show the deep and abiding concern present in the orthodox Reformed community for a truly biblical and Pauline soteriology. Indeed, Godfrey and VanDrunen have argued that in the current debate, "The very character and identity of the Christian life are at stake."<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of this essay is (1) to define the members of the debate, (2) to give a brief summary of the historic Lutheran *ordo* and the present WSC *ordo*, (3) to defend WTS's perception of the *ordo* as both theologically convincing (Calvin) and exegetically satisfying (Paul's eschatology), and finally (4) to note why this debate matters to both those within and outside the strictly Reformed context.<sup>7</sup>

### WHO IS DEBATING?

In order to discuss the two dominant expressions of the *ordo* in contemporary American Reformed theology, the parties must be defined. The taxonomy is not simple. The attempt by Evans to classify the two camps as the *Biblical-Theological Trajectory* and the *Repristinationalist Wing* is problematic.<sup>8</sup> Two troubling elements emerge. First, those he places in the Repristinationalist wing do not object to biblical theology as the name could suggest.<sup>9</sup> Second, the nomenclature of repristinationalists is too ambiguous to be helpful.

Can the taxonomy be expressed across institutional lines? It appears that neither WSC nor WTS has expressed a position *as an institution*. Nevertheless, there seem to be a few reasons to align the controversy across institutional lines. First, the central hub from which the controversy has begun and flourished has involved these two centers of learning. Evans, Garcia, Tipton, and Gaffin—all connected to WTS—have

---

podcast audio, 28 October 2011, <http://reformedforum.org/ctc200> (accessed 23 March 2012).

<sup>5</sup>While not equating the two, Horton ties the two together. See Michael S. Horton, "Historical Claims Concerning Union with Christ," article posted 7 January 2012 at <http://www.whitehorseinn.org/blog/2012/01/07/historical-claims-concerning-union-with-christ> (accessed 30 May 2013).

<sup>6</sup>W. Robert Godfrey and David VanDrunen, "Response to Mark Garcia's Review of Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry," *Ordained Servant Online*, December 2007, [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=80](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=80) (accessed 30 May 2013).

<sup>7</sup>It is important to note that while the two schools debating this issue are covenantal in theology, the doctrines at stake in this discussion clearly pertain to dispensational theology as well. The concluding section of this essay will seek to show why *all believers* should be tuned into this debate.

<sup>8</sup>William B. Evans, "Déjà Vu All Over Again? The Contemporary Reformed Soteriological Controversy in Historical Perspective," *Westminster Theological Journal* 72 (Spring 2010): 135–51.

<sup>9</sup>John V. Fesko, "Methodology, Myth, and Misperception: a Response to William B. Evans," *Westminster Theological Journal* 72 (Fall 2010): 394–95.

published material from one side of the debate.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Clark, Fesko, Horton, VanDrunen, and Godfrey, who espouse the alternative perspective, are all faculty at WSC. Second, both institutions have published significant works detailing their distinctive view.<sup>11</sup> While it is recognized that these theologians do not constitute the entirety of their respective educational institutions, the harmony being expressed from the representatives of these schools does seem to facilitate distinguishing the groups along institutional lines.<sup>12</sup>

Because of the accusations that some from WSC have been advocating a Lutheran soteriology, it is necessary to develop the Lutheran understanding of the relation among union, justification, and sanctification before turning to the perspectives of WSC and WTS.

### LUTHERAN *ORDO*

The commonality between Reformed and Lutheran conceptions of soteriology is often expressed as the thread tying together the Reformation. Indeed, as Lillback notes, “The common elements of Luther and Calvin in their teaching on justification are substantial. Each rejects merit in favor of divine grace. Both see the centrality of Christ’s death in satisfying the justice of God. Both argue strongly for the ‘exclusive particle’—by faith alone.”<sup>13</sup> Adding that both Calvin and Luther stressed union with Christ, one gets the proper conception that their soteriology is harmonious at many levels.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Gaffin is an emeritus professor, and Tipton is a current professor. Evans mentions in the preface to his book *Imputation and Impartation* that Gaffin and Ferguson were his motivation for studying and writing on union with Christ (William B. Evans, *Imputation and Impartation: Union with Christ in American Reformed Theology* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009], xiii). Finally, Garcia notes that Gaffin’s “influence on my thinking is reason enough to dedicate this project to him” (Mark A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin’s Theology* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2008], xx).

<sup>11</sup>WSC’s book explicitly mentions that it is written by the faculty (Clark, *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry*). WTS’s book is written by all past or present faculty with the singular exception of J. Stafford Carson, who received a Master’s degree from WTS (Oliphint, *Justified In Christ: God’s Plan for Us in Justification*).

<sup>12</sup>The taxonomy does not assume that all faculty, staff, and students at a particular institution hold to the view being attributed to that institution. In other words, one could be at WTS and hold the position being espoused of WSC (and *vice-versa*).

<sup>13</sup>Peter A. Lillback, “Calvin’s Development of the Doctrine of Forensic Justification: Calvin and the Early Lutherans on the Relationship of Justification and Renewal,” in *Justified In Christ: God’s Plan for Us in Justification*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Great Britain: Mentor, 2007), 51.

<sup>14</sup>Luther notes, “What Christ possesses belongs to the believing soul; and what the soul possesses belongs to Christ. Thus Christ possesses all good things and holiness; these now belong to the soul. The soul possesses lots of vice and sin; these now belong to Christ. Here we have a happy exchange and struggle. Christ is God and human being, who has never sinned and who’s holiness is unconquerable, eternal and almighty. So he makes the sin of the living soul his own through its wedding ring, which is faith,

Nevertheless, the details of Calvin's and Luther's theologies betray a disagreement concerning the place of justification and sanctification.<sup>15</sup> The post-reformational Lutheran theologians widened the gap in their quest to express in an ordered and logical manner the exact nature of the order of salvation. In other words, the Lutheran post-reformational theologians struggled to reconcile union with Christ with the strict ordering they sought in the *ordo salutis*.<sup>16</sup>

The result of this apparent incompatibility between an ordered *ordo* and the union motif was an abandonment of the central place of union. Evans notes that, of the possible solutions to the problem, "Lutheran orthodoxy was to give up the use of union with Christ as the overarching and unifying category of salvation. Here, spiritual union with Christ was disengaged from any positive relationship to justification and treated as a subsidiary moment in the *ordo salutis*."<sup>17</sup> Having abandoned union with Christ as the central soteriological concept and placed it as a solitary step within the *ordo*, the post-reformational Lutherans were able to neatly, logically, and systematically organize their *ordo*.

As Lutheran theology developed, the divide between Reformed and Lutheran conceptions of union increased. Justification—rather than union—became the central, controlling doctrine. Thus, the Lutheran theologian John T. Mueller could write that justification "puts the believer into possession of all the merits or blessings secured by Christ's perfect obedience."<sup>18</sup> No longer—as in Calvin—does union with Christ provide the hub from which all soteriological blessings flow; rather justification usurps its place, and all benefits—including union and sanctification—flow from justification. Geerhardus Vos, a contemporary of Mueller, summarized the differences between the Reformed and Lutheran soteriological systems in the following way:

Whereas the Lutheran tends to view faith one-sidedly—only in its connection with justification—for the Reformed Christian it is saving faith in all the magnitude of the word. According to the Lutheran, the Holy Spirit first generates faith in the sinner who temporarily still remains outside of union with Christ; then justification follows faith and only then, in turn does the mystical union with the Mediator take place. Everything depends on this justification.... The covenantal [i.e., Reformed] outlook is the reverse. One is first united to Christ, the Mediator of the covenant, by a

---

and acts as if he had done it himself, so that sin could be swallowed up in him" (quoted in Alister E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader* [Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995], 229). This is striking as he seems to be aligning both justification and sanctification through union with Christ. Though Luther does not express the doctrine as clearly as Calvin, it does appear that Calvin held union with Christ as a central soteriological category. See Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 54–55.

<sup>15</sup>Pointing out this distinction is one of the central purposes of Lillback's excellent article "Calvin's Development of Forensic Justification."

<sup>16</sup>Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 54–55.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>*Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), 319.

mystical union, which finds its conscious recognition in faith. By this union with Christ all that is in Christ is simultaneously given. Faith embraces all this too; it not only grasps the instantaneous justification, but lays hold of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King, as his rich and full Messiah.<sup>19</sup>

According to Vos the Reformed and Lutheran conceptions of justification and union were significantly distinct: For Lutherans justification is the logical cause of union, but for the Reformed union is the logical cause of justification.

In sum, Luther and Calvin had significant agreement concerning the relation between union, justification, and sanctification. Nevertheless, the agreement was not absolute. The post-reformational theologians, seeking to express a logical and systematic *ordo*, further distanced the two traditions. They did so by subverting the primacy of union for the primacy of justification. Having done so, they could neatly place union as a fruit of the all-encompassing justification. The result of this shift was that sanctification became a fruit of justification.<sup>20</sup>

### WSC ORDO

Turning now to more Calvinistic Reformed expositions of the *ordo*, the situation is more complex. Rather than having one unified understanding of the place of union, justification, and sanctification in the *ordo*, there are two significantly different understandings of how these three soteric elements relate. William Evans, in his doctoral thesis on distinctions in the doctrine of union within American Reformed theology, traces the divergence of Reformed thought on this topic back to the Calvinistic post-reformation theologians. Just as the Lutherans struggled to reconcile the organic nature of union with the systematization of the *ordo*, so the post-reformational Reformed theologians struggled with the same.<sup>21</sup>

Two problematic solutions surfaced quickly. As already seen, the Lutherans took the track of supplanting union with justification as the central soteric reality. Evans explains the development of the other

---

<sup>19</sup>Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2001), 256.

<sup>20</sup>Notably, Lillback has argued that Luther sought to include regeneration in his conception of justification. If so, the post-reformational theologians cannot be blamed for following their fountainhead in placing sanctification as the fruit of justification. The post-reformational theologians were merely resolving an inherent tension in Luther's soteriology. They did so by giving primacy to justification over all other soteric benefits—the only avenue they could have taken to preserve the dominant place of justification in Luther's soteriology (Lillback, "Calvin's Development," 53, 71–80).

<sup>21</sup>"The difficulty posed by this inherent incompatibility between the organicism of spiritual union with Christ and the discrete sequentialism of the *ordo salutis* played a significant role in the subsequent development of Protestant theology—both Reformed and Lutheran" (Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 54).

track:

The other solution (adopted in general by Reformed orthodoxy) was to maintain the formal umbrella function of union with Christ while, at the same time, revising it along lines compatible with the *ordo salutis* structure.

Crucial here was an increasing tendency to speak of *unio* in at least two different senses—on the one hand there was a legal or federal union, on the other a spiritual or vital union. In essence, the Reformed conception of union with Christ was bifurcated along the line of division between the forensic or legal benefits of salvation (i.e., justification) and the transforming benefits (i.e., sanctification). The price paid for this, of course, was that the principle binding justification and sanctification together, so crucial to Calvin, became purely formal. In reality, when the Reformed orthodox spoke of a “federal union” with Christ, they were in actuality speaking of the doctrine of justification as conditioned by the Reformed *ordo salutis*. Likewise, when they referred to a “spiritual union,” what was really being described was sanctification.<sup>22</sup>

Evans connects this approach with the rise of Federal Theology,<sup>23</sup> emphasizing that it is a distinct move away from Calvin’s doctrine. The place of Calvin within the debate will be a focal point later in this paper. For now, it is important to express clearly the major tenets of WSC’s position on union, justification, and sanctification. Does WSC’s position match one of these two trajectories?

WSC, consciously following the heritage of Old Princeton, has articulated the *ordo* in the same language as many of the post-reformation Reformed theologians.<sup>24</sup> This position includes three major concepts. First, the doctrine of justification expressed by the major reformers—especially Luther and Calvin—is substantially harmonious, implying the existence of a pan-protestant or pan-confessional doctrine of justification.<sup>25</sup> Second, forensic justification is the primary soteric benefit from which all other benefits—including union and sanctification—flow. Third, union with Christ can be divisible into “legal” and “vital” elements.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 55.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>In light of being called repristinators, Fesko maintains that WSC is seeking to maintain the tradition of Old Princeton. He then asks whether WTS is intentionally abandoning these roots. See Fesko, “Methodology, Myth, and Misperception,” 398–99.

<sup>25</sup>Garcia defines pan-confessionalism as “an effort to offer a theological response to problems or proposals from the perspective of what two or more confessional traditions hold in common, accenting areas of agreement and minimizing (and sometimes denying) areas of disagreement” (Mark A. Garcia, “Review Article: No Reformed Theology of Justification?” *Ordained Servant Online*, 2007, [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=66](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=66) [accessed 30 May 2013]).

<sup>26</sup>Evans, “Déjà Vu All Over Again?” 146.

### Pan-Protestant Justification

Professors of WSC have openly expressed the pan-protestant understanding of justification. For instance Robert Godfrey states, “Luther and Reformed theologians are agreed about justification and about faith alone. The contention that the Reformed somehow have a distinctive doctrine of justification is simply false and can be articulated and defended only by those who do not understand either Lutheran or Reformed theologies.”<sup>27</sup> As Garcia documents, the pan-protestant doctrine appears to be a “dominant thread that runs straight through *CJPM*.”<sup>28</sup> *CJPM* (*Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry*) is the 465-page treatise defining WSC’s understanding of justification. WSC does not seem to find this accusation problematic. In fact, Fesko clearly admits the fact: “Representatives of WSC do believe there is a pan-Protestant doctrine of justification. Though there are many doctrines that divide Lutherans and the Reformed, the doctrine of justification is not one of them.”<sup>29</sup>

### Primacy of Justification

The existence of a pan-protestant doctrine of justification in WSC’s soteriology explains the second element of WSC’s belief on the *ordo*, namely, that justification is the primary category from which other soteriotic benefits proceed. Michael Horton expresses this point in *The Christian Faith*:

I am suggesting that we view all the items in the Pauline *ordo* as constituting one train, running on the same track, with justification as the engine that pulls adoption, new birth, sanctification, and glorification in tow. “Those whom he justified he also glorified” (Ro 8:30). This means that we never leave the forensic domain even when we are addressing other topics in the *ordo* besides justification proper.<sup>30</sup>

Horton pictures justification as both logically prior to and causally related to the other soteriotic benefits.

In an earlier work, Horton argues against what could be a misrepresentation of his train analogy: “This does not mean that justification functions as a central dogma from which the entire system may be logically deduced. Nevertheless, it is the forensic basis of union with Christ and is therefore the source of our calling, sanctification, and

---

<sup>27</sup>W. Robert Godfrey, “Faith Formed by Love or Faith Alone? The Instrument of Justification,” in *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California*, ed. R. Scott Clark (Phillipsburg: NJ: P & R, 2007), 268.

<sup>28</sup>Garcia, “Review Article: No Reformed Theology of Justification?”

<sup>29</sup>Fesko, “Methodology, Myth, and Misperception,” 401.

<sup>30</sup>Michael S. Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 708.

glorification.”<sup>31</sup> While he seeks to avoid making justification a “central” position from which all soteristic benefits can be logically deduced, his argument that “forensic” justification is the *source* of the other soteristic benefits (including union) implies that it is the hub from which all other benefits logically derive—a historically Lutheran concept.

Constantine Campbell, in his exhaustive study of union with Christ in Pauline literature, argues that Horton does not want to displace union with Christ as a motif for explaining all of the soteristic benefits of salvation. Instead, he wants to recognize a distinction between the way one understands the benefits to be supplied and the actual outworking of the benefits of salvation in the history of an individual’s salvation.<sup>32</sup> In other words, Horton is comfortable noting that all soteristic benefits come through union with Christ; however, he also believes that within the unfolding drama of human history, justification is the source of the other soteristic benefits.

Lest one believe that Horton is the only professor from WSC expressing a quasi-Lutheran concept of justification in the individual believer’s history of salvation, Garcia has documented the pervasive theme of the priority of justification over sanctification in *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry*: “The Reformation [doctrine] has always taught that sanctification is a fruit of justifying faith” (VanDrunen, 50); “Before the Reformation we were said to be justified to the extent we were sanctified. In the Reformation that pattern was reversed: sanctification was made the result of justification” (R. Scott Clark, 21); “Justification is the...launchpad for sanctification” (Hywel R. Jones, 296).<sup>33</sup> In defending the seminary faculty’s book, Godfrey and VanDrunen summarized their position, “A sound biblical and Reformed understanding of union with Christ must include and support the idea that justification is prior to sanctification in the *ordo salutis* in a very important sense.”<sup>34</sup>

### Legal and Renovative Union

The third distinctive of WSC on the *ordo* derives from both previous points. If the Lutheran conception of the priority of justification over sanctification is the position of all reformational theology, then it follows that there would be a division of union into two types—forensic and renovative. Once union lost the place of being the overarching soteristic reality, there was a loss of how to meaningfully keep justification and sanctification as *distinct-yet-inseparable* realities. With the loss of union as the uniting key in the *ordo*, R. Scott Clark seems to make the

---

<sup>31</sup>Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 129.

<sup>32</sup>Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 56–57.

<sup>33</sup>Garcia, “Review Article: No Reformed Theology of Justification?”

<sup>34</sup>Godfrey and VanDrunen, “Response to Mark Garcia.”

division *within union* in order to accomplish this goal. He says, “There is no question whether we need both a legal and a vital union with Christ, but these must be distinguished. By virtue of legal union with Christ our federal head and substitute, his obedience is credited to believers. This union is distinct (not separate) from that union that increases [i.e., that renovates].”<sup>35</sup> Fesko clarifies Clark’s comments by noting that “No one, at least to my knowledge, in the history of the Reformed church has argued for two separate unions. Rather, the *case has always been made* that we have one union with Christ that has different dimensions or aspects.”<sup>36</sup>

Fesko’s comment brings us to the central debate between WSC and WTS professors: What does an investigation of theological history say? Will one find that “the case has *always been made*” for a union with divisions? Will one find that Calvin and Luther essentially agreed on justification as the pan-protestant doctrine declares? Will one find that the church has always held to a causal relationship between justification and repentance? In order to answer these questions, we must turn to WTS’s perspective. It will be argued that there is precedence for another historic view, eclipsed in post-reformational theology, but recently revived.

### WTS *ORDO*

As with WSC, WTS’s position can be explained along three central tenets. First, WTS maintains that there is a distinct Reformed doctrine of justification over against a Lutheran conception. Second, justification and sanctification are distinct-yet-inseparable realities brought fruitfully into relationship by the overarching soteric reality of union with Christ. Third, the *ordo salutis* must not be understood outside of its relationship to the *historia salutis*. The first two points will be expressed through a historical survey of Calvin’s doctrine. The final point will establish the previous two points through an exegetical treatment of Paul’s works.

#### Distinct Reformed and Lutheran Doctrine of *Ordo*

Over against WSC, WTS maintains that there is no pan-protestant doctrine of justification. Rather, they maintain that Luther and Calvin had meaningful differences, which were not expressly brought to light due to the nature of their commonality against the Roman Catholic Church. While the testimony of Mueller, Pieper, and Vos to the distinction between Reformed and Lutheran conceptions of justification could be repeated here,<sup>37</sup> it may be more beneficial to clearly express

---

<sup>35</sup>R. Scott Clark, “Do This and Live: Christ’s Active Obedience as the Ground of Justification,” in *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California*, ed. R. Scott Clark (Phillipsburg: NJ: P & R, 2007), 262.

<sup>36</sup>Fesko, “Methodology, Myth, and Misperception,” 401 (emphasis added).

<sup>37</sup>See “Lutheran *Ordo*” above. Also, see Tipton, “Union With Christ and Justification,” 42–45.

Calvin's view.

Many at WSC have claimed that Calvin's doctrine is *not* distinct from the post-reformational Reformed and Lutheran doctrine of union.<sup>38</sup> In other words, the post-reformational theologians merely expressed to a fuller degree what was seminally in Calvin. This is a central and pivotal disagreement in this debate. If it is established that Calvin did hold union as the overarching principle by which all the blessings of salvation—including justification—flow, then WTS appears to be expressing a (*the?*) classic Reformed position. If it is established that Calvin did not teach union as the organizing principle of salvation, then WTS appears to be expressing a fully modern (i.e., Gaffin) conception of the *ordo*.<sup>39</sup>

That Calvin held a distinctive understanding of the relationship between union, justification, and sanctification is born out in book III of the *Institutes*. Calvin titles this section “The mode of obtaining the grace of Christ. The benefits it confers, and the effects resulting from it.” Before discussing any benefits of salvation (justification, sanctification, adoption, etc.) he states,

We must now see in what way we become possessed of the blessings which God has bestowed on his only-begotten Son, not for private use, but to enrich the poor and needy. And the first thing to be attended to is, that *so long as we are without Christ and separated from him, nothing which he suffered and did for the salvation of the human race is of the least benefit to us.* To communicate to us the blessings which he received from the Father, he must *become ours and dwell in us*.<sup>40</sup>

Calvin places union with Christ as the prerequisite for receiving any soteric benefits. This is shown not only by the words of the quote, but by the placement of the quote. Calvin does not discuss justification first. Rather, as a prerequisite *before* discussing justification, sanctification, or any other benefit, Calvin mentions the primary reality that grounds them all. He notes, with great emphasis, that without union, none of the benefits of salvation can be obtained.

How does one obtain this union? Calvin seamlessly turns from the reality of union to the process by which one becomes united. His

---

<sup>38</sup>Godfrey and VanDrunen, “Response to Mark Garcia”; Fesko, “Methodology, Myth, and Misperception,” 394; John V. Fesko, “A Tale of Two Calvins: A Review Article,” *Ordained Servant Online*, March 2009, [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=139](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=139) (accessed 30 May 2013).

<sup>39</sup>This does appear to be the position of Fesko: “It appears that there is a distinctive school of thought associated with Gaffin’s doctrine of union with Christ, particularly regarding its logical priority and the rejection of any logical or theological priority of justification to sanctification” (“A Tale of Two Calvins”). Gaffin’s response to the article indicates that his position is merely a replication of what he finds in Calvin (“A Response to John Fesko’s Review,” *Ordained Servant Online*, March 2009, [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=140](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=140) [accessed 30 May 2013]).

<sup>40</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.1.1, trans. Henry Beveridge, 2 vols. (reprint ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 463 (emphasis added).

contention is that union occurs through the Spirit by faith: “We obtain this by faith, yet since we see that all do not indiscriminately embrace the offer of Christ which is made by the gospel, the very nature of the case teaches us to ascend higher, and inquire into the secret efficacy of the Spirit, to which it is owing that we enjoy Christ and all his blessings.”<sup>41</sup> Union must come by faith, but faith is ultimately derived not from man but from the Spirit. Gaffin argues that for Calvin, union “does not exist apart from or prior to faith but is given with, in fact, in inseparable from, faith.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, if all soteric benefits come by way of union with Christ, it appears that Calvin’s *ordo salutis* can be simply stated as *Spirit-wrought faith-union with the person and work of Jesus Christ*.

Is union the central theme of Calvin? Many have argued that justification is more central to Calvin. This latter position is usually based on Calvin’s statement that justification is the “hinge on which salvation turns.”<sup>43</sup> The result of justification being Calvin’s central soteric reality would give credence to the view that there is continuity between Calvin and later post-reformation theology. However, the “hinge” quote must be understood in relation to the context of the entirety of Calvin’s work—especially the overall message of book III. Once understood, it is clear that justification may be the hinge, but union is the doorpost that grounds the hinge. Both concepts are central but for different reasons. Gaffin summarizes:

These comments do not, as some allege, “de-center” justification in Calvin. For him, justification is central, as central as the union with Christ to which it is inseparably tethered. To ask, whether in Calvin or in Scripture, which of the two in the application of salvation, union or justification, is “central” (or “more central,” “more important”) is an unhappy non-starter. It strikes me as somewhat like debating whether in its accomplishment Christ’s death or his resurrection is central (more central). They are equally central (“of first importance,” 1 Cor 15:3–4), but they are that as the latter is the consequence of the former, not the reverse.<sup>44</sup>

Both union with Christ and justification are major concepts in Calvin. Nevertheless, justification is grounded in the reality of union. For Calvin, therefore, there is a priority of union over justification. This leads to a distinct *ordo* from the consensus of pan-protestant

---

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Based upon Calvin’s point and his exposition of Scripture, Gaffin has argued that the doctrine of regeneration, as developed in post-reformational thought, may be unnecessary. See Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “Calvin’s Soteriology: The Structure of the Application of Redemption in Book Three of the Institutes,” *Ordained Servant Online*, November 2009, [http://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=174](http://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=174) (accessed 30 May 2013); Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg: NJ: P & R, 1987), 142.

<sup>43</sup>Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.11.1.

<sup>44</sup>Gaffin, “A Response to John Fesko’s Review.”

proclamations.<sup>45</sup> How this priority affects the relationship between justification and sanctification is the second distinction of WTS's view of the *ordo*.

### **Justification and Sanctification as Distinct-Yet-Inseparable Realities**

Tipton summarizes Calvin's emphasis on union: "Union with Christ therefore organizes the core of Calvin's soteriology and supplies the nuclear theological structure for the application of redemption to the believer."<sup>46</sup> If union is central, how do the other soteric benefits relate? Calvin answers by pointing to the result of union—the two-fold grace of God:

The whole may be thus summed up: Christ given to us by the kindness of God is apprehended and possessed by faith, by means of which we obtain in particular a twofold benefit; first, being reconciled by the righteousness of Christ, God becomes, instead of a judge, an indulgent Father; and, secondly, being sanctified by his Spirit, we aspire to integrity and purity of life.<sup>47</sup>

Two things stand out in this quote. First, these blessings are received only by grasping Christ. For Calvin, salvation is bound to the personal union between the believer and the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>48</sup> Second, Calvin notes that faith-wrought union with Christ produces a double benefit: justification and sanctification. These are not divisible, but are given in one transaction as man is brought into union with Christ. In other words, there is only one grace: *sanctification and justification*, distinct-yet-inseparable blessings, received simultaneously through Spirit-wrought faith-union with Christ.

The inseparability of justification and sanctification is emphasized by Calvin: "As Christ cannot be divided into parts, so the two things, justification and sanctification, which we perceive to be united together in him, are inseparable."<sup>49</sup> Because both justification and sanctification

<sup>45</sup>Evans notes that one of the motivating factors for his dissertation was seeking the reason Federal theologians such as Hodge, Cunningham, Dabney, and Berkhof critiqued Calvin's conception of soteriology. See Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, and "Of Trajectories, Repristinations, and the Meaningful Engagement of Texts: A Reply to J. V. Fesko," *Westminster Theological Journal* 72 (Fall 2010): 406.

<sup>46</sup>Tipton, "Union With Christ and Justification," 39.

<sup>47</sup>Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.11.1.

<sup>48</sup>Gaffin notes the problem in modern conceptions of the *ordo*: "A prevailing tendency down to the present has been to be preoccupied with the various benefits of Christ's work... so that while Christ himself is certainly there, the danger is that he fades, more or less, into the background, and where to put union with Christ...in the *ordo salutis* remains somewhat of a conundrum" (Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 [Fall 2003]: 173).

<sup>49</sup>Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.11.6.

are results of union with Christ, they are not capable of being torn apart. Calvin uses a powerful image to establish his point: if Christ could be torn in two pieces (one part the sanctification He offers and another the justification), only then could we divide the two fruits from each other. This, however, is impossible, since Christ is an undivided unity, which supplies the two-fold grace as a result of union with Him. Calvin makes the same point in his commentary on Romans: "All who are justified are called by the Lord to live worthy of their vocation. Let believers, therefore, learn to embrace Him, not only for justification, but also for sanctification, as He has been given to us for both these purposes, that they may not rend Him asunder by their own mutilated faith."<sup>50</sup> In this passage, Calvin accents both the distinction ("both these purposes") and the inseparability (both come *together* with union).

Perhaps Calvin makes himself clearest in a long exposition from the *Institutes*. Here, in response to those who argue that salvation without works leads to antinomianism, he repeats his central thought that justification and sanctification are distinct-yet-inseparable realities tied to the person of Christ, whom mankind receives by way of Spirit-wrought faith-union:

But as the question relates only to justification and sanctification, to them let us confine ourselves. Though we distinguish between them, they are *both inseparably comprehended in Christ*. Would you then obtain justification in Christ? You must previously possess Christ. But you cannot possess him without being made a partaker of his sanctification: for Christ cannot be divided. Since the Lord, therefore, *does not grant us the enjoyment of these blessings without bestowing himself, he bestows both at once but never the one without the other*. Thus it appears how true it is that we are justified not without, and yet not by works, since in the participation of Christ, by which we are justified, is contained not less sanctification than justification.<sup>51</sup>

That Calvin does not consider justification to be the cause of sanctification should be clear from the previous quotes. How can two distinct-yet-inseparable realities coming simultaneously from union with Christ be causally related to one another? However there is a way in which Calvin is comfortable speaking about sanctification following from justification. In order to understand Calvin on this point, it is necessary to make a crucial distinction. In sanctification there are two elements: definitive and progressive. Part of the current debate between WTS and WSC focuses on the existence of this distinction. While it is true that John Murray popularized the terminology, he did not create the concept.<sup>52</sup> A proper reading of Romans 6 forces the distinction.

---

<sup>50</sup>John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross MacKenzie, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 107.

<sup>51</sup>*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.16.1 (emphasis added).

<sup>52</sup>John Murray, "Definitive Sanctification," *Calvin Theological Journal* 2 (April 1967): 5–21.

Further, Calvin maintains the two elements of sanctification when he notes, “being sanctified by his Spirit, we aspire to integrity and purity of life.”<sup>53</sup> “Being sanctified” denotes a past activity, while “aspiring to the integrity and purity of life” denotes a present and continual aspect.<sup>54</sup>

Having noted the distinction in sanctification, it can be shown that Calvin did not object to *progressive* sanctification following justification.<sup>55</sup> Craig Carpenter observes this pattern in the Genevan: “It appears that Calvin’s *ordo salutis* does not require the logical or temporal priority of a forensic act to a renovative act. Although he does speak of one’s progressive sanctification following in time one’s justification, the legal and the transformative blessings of salvation are given together in the Spirit’s act of uniting the sinner to Christ.”<sup>56</sup> WTS, likewise, has never denied a priority of justification to *progressive* sanctification.<sup>57</sup>

One more line of evidence points in the direction that Calvin did not sense a priority of justification over sanctification; namely, Calvin’s *ordo docendi* (i.e., his order of teaching). Rather than presenting his material in the order static within federal orthodoxy, Calvin subverted the order, highlighting union with Christ by faith before justification (3.1). Further, his next step is not justification but sanctification (3.3–10). After establishing sanctification as an outworking of faith-union, he treats justification as an outworking of that same union (3.11–18). Gaffin emphasizes the peculiarity of this order: “All told, [Calvin] treats sanctification, at length, before justification. Such an approach contrasts conspicuously with subsequent Reformed and Lutheran theology, where justification always (without exception?) precedes sanctification.”<sup>58</sup> Because Calvin grounds justification and sanctification in union, he can reverse the order of discussion without fear of subsuming justification into sanctification.<sup>59</sup>

In summary, WTS follows Calvin who argues that the central salvific reality from which all other soteriologic benefits flow is union with Christ. But a question needs to be asked at this point: Even if the above

<sup>53</sup>*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.11.1.

<sup>54</sup>Gaffin, “Calvin’s Soteriology.”

<sup>55</sup>See Fesko’s “A Tale of Two Calvins” for a compilation of such texts that prioritize justification to progressive sanctification.

<sup>56</sup>Craig B. Carpenter, “A Question of Union with Christ? Calvin and Trent on Justification,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 64 (Fall 2002): 381.

<sup>57</sup>Gaffin says, “Justification is the *absolutely indispensable precondition* of progressive sanctification” (“A Response to John Fesko’s Review”). See also Gaffin, “Calvin’s Soteriology.”

<sup>58</sup>Gaffin, “Calvin’s Soteriology,” 176.

<sup>59</sup>The purpose of the order was probably to dispel the charge that a proper Reformed theology takes sanctification lightly. It, as much as justification, is required in the life of one united to Christ. Calvin, because he saw faith-union as simultaneously granting the dual blessing of sanctification and justification, could reverse the order of discussion.

historical exegesis is correct, does it matter? Fesko complains that Evans—and by implication all of WTS—centers too much on Calvin: “Evans identifies Calvin as the key Reformed theologian, not merely for Geneva, not merely for Switzerland, not merely for the sixteenth century, but virtually for the entire Reformed tradition.”<sup>60</sup> He then adds, “Does or should one man define the soteriology of an entire tradition?”<sup>61</sup>

Fesko’s concern is quite valid even if it is an unfair characterization of Evans and WTS.<sup>62</sup> But WTS has not sought to ground their doctrine in historical exegesis; rather they have done so in biblical exegesis.<sup>63</sup> Ironically, Fesko calls the WTS position the “Gaffin school,” because he believes the perspective derives from Gaffin’s *exegetical* work.<sup>64</sup> Gaffin, for his part, has claimed that his understanding of the place of union with Christ did not derive from Calvin, but from biblical exegesis.<sup>65</sup> Only after coming to his exegetical conclusions did Gaffin discover that Calvin taught the Pauline doctrine.<sup>66</sup> All of this indicates that it is unfair to characterize WTS as individualizing Calvin.<sup>67</sup> Instead, WTS has recognized the deep Pauline structure of union and has sought to bring it to light. Having recognized that one of the primal and most significant reformers in the tradition also held this view, WTS has sought to express continuity between their current expression of the *ordo* and that of reformed predecessors. The next section of this essay will express some of the exegetical basis for WTS’s perspective.

### **The *Ordo Salutis* and the *Historia Salutis***

In his taxonomy concerning the present debate, Evans described the WTS perspective as the Biblical-Theological Trajectory.<sup>68</sup> Stressing the unity of divine revelation, biblical theology desires to do justice to the

---

<sup>60</sup>Fesko, “Methodology, Myth, and Misperception,” 391.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 392.

<sup>62</sup>See Evans, “Of Trajectories,” 404–6.

<sup>63</sup>See especially the exegetical treatment in these sources: Tipton, “Union With Christ and Justification”; Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*; Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*.

<sup>64</sup>Fesko, “Methodology, Myth, and Misperception,” 394–95.

<sup>65</sup>It should also be noted that Gaffin sees himself in a line of theologians who have been seeking to express biblical theology. Vos, Murray, Ridderbos, and others are the influences behind Gaffin’s exegesis. See Gaffin, “Biblical Theology.”

<sup>66</sup>Gaffin, “A Response to John Fesko’s Review.”

<sup>67</sup>It should be noted, however, that Calvin is nevertheless important to the development of a distinct Reformed theology. Evans notes, “While subsequent Reformed thought departed from Calvin at numerous points, these departures were themselves set within a terminological framework which derives largely from Calvin” (*Imputation and Impartation*, 7, n. 40).

<sup>68</sup>“Déjà Vu All Over Again?” 138.

historical unfolding of redemption. The desire to read Scripture as an unfolding plan has always been evident in the church, but has become more focused since the time of Geerhardus Vos and Herman Ridderbos.<sup>69</sup> Vos particularly focused on the eschatological element in Paul's theology. Rather than seeing eschatology as only a future reality, Vos argued that eschatology has already begun and presently serves as crucial in soteriology. Stressing Christ as the second Adam, Vos recognized that the resurrection of Christ was central to Paul's theology of justification.<sup>70</sup> Vos's successors—especially Gaffin, Garcia, Tipton, and Evans—have sought to develop the exegetical insights offered by Vos and the biblical-theological method.<sup>71</sup>

The connection between biblical theology and the present debate can be seen from the fact that both Vos and Ridderbos, pioneers in writing books with a distinctly historical-theological perspective, came to the same conclusion independently: "The center of Paul's teaching is not found in the doctrine of justification by faith or in any other aspect of the *ordo salutis*. Rather, his primary interest is seen to be in the *historia salutis* as that history has reached its eschatological realization in the death and especially resurrection of Christ."<sup>72</sup> Essentially, this meant that any explanation of the *ordo* that did not take the *historia* seriously failed to understand Paul's theology. The development of this thought led to the centrality of union with Christ as the believer's *soteric replication* of Christ's *historia salutis*. In other words, the work of Vos and Ridderbos showed that Christians share the *rewards* of Christ only when they share the *history* of Christ through union.

A reminder at this point might be necessary. Though some might believe the biblical-theological approach to Scripture is novel, WTS maintains that it is not new. Rather, they see in Calvin and some of the Westminster Divines the beliefs that are the fruit of the biblical-theological method. Returning to Calvin for a moment, the Genevan said, "So long as we are without Christ and separated from him, nothing which he suffered and did for the salvation of the human race is of the least benefit to us. To communicate to us the blessings which he received from the Father, he must become ours and dwell in us."<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup>Fesko recently responded to Evans's article by arguing that Vos was influenced by Old Princeton (especially the Hodges) and consequently believed in an *ordo salutis* similar to the one held by WSC. Ignoring whether Fesko is correct in his assessment, the important contribution of Vos was his exegetical method and not the consistency with which he adhered to that method. See J. V. Fesko, "Vos and Berkhof on Union with Christ and Justification," *Calvin Theological Journal* 47 (April 2012): 50–71.

<sup>70</sup>Geerhardus Vos, *Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1979), 147–71.

<sup>71</sup>In Gaffin's foundational study on the Pauline theology of resurrection, he notes, "It is fair to say that this study is primarily an attempt to develop and put in a somewhat broader setting the brief, but exceedingly rich and provocative sketch that Vos has given of Paul's resurrection theology" (Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*, 16).

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>73</sup>Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.1.1.

Calvin appears to be arguing that union with Christ actually unites man to the historic reality of Christ's death and resurrection. Further, he recognizes the role of the Father in giving the spiritual blessings to Christ—gifts subsequently communicated to mankind through union. In other words, the theology of Calvin is historical theology in action.

Calvin's understanding of the relationship between the *historia salutis* and the *ordo salutis* appears to have been lost on the post-reformation theologians. Evans traces the origin of the departure from Calvin to the post-Calvin theologians. They were faced with an apparent problem, namely, how can Calvin's view that imputation is *forensic* be fruitfully combined with Calvin's equally emphasized view that imputation is *personal*—coming through union with Christ?<sup>74</sup> Unfortunately, Calvin never resolved this "problem." In fact, he never indicates that there is a problem!<sup>75</sup> Taking Calvin to say that union *simply is* forensic justification without the need for imputation was not an option, since that was an error for which Calvin criticized Osiander.<sup>76</sup> Evans notes that there were two other possible avenues explored to answer the dilemma. The first found the answer in the forensic-declarative act of resurrection primitively experienced by Christ and shared with His own through union. The second found the answer in making a distinction (not separation) between union that leads to forensic justification and union that leads to personal transformation.<sup>77</sup>

Put in the context of the current debate, WSC has taken the latter model and WTS has taken the forensic-declarative resurrection model.<sup>78</sup> The primary motivation for WTS to seek a different model than WSC is not to reconcile the problem in Calvin (though this is a fruit of such a model).<sup>79</sup> Rather, it is based on the Pauline eschatology as expressed through the exegesis of Vos, Murray, Gaffin, Tipton, and others. The following is a concise treatment of their exegetical work divided into four main points.

First, *the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus includes within it His*

<sup>74</sup>Evans, "Déjà Vu All Over Again?" 136.

<sup>75</sup>Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 39.

<sup>76</sup>Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.11.5–12.

<sup>77</sup>Evans, "Déjà Vu All Over Again?" 136.

<sup>78</sup>Some might argue that simply positing a forensic-declarative act through union does not solve the mystery. Garcia has attempted to further explain the difficulty by way of an analogy. He compares the union of believers to Christ with the incarnation of Christ. In both cases, there are two distinct-yet-inseparable elements, and in both there is attribution from one element to the other. Garcia's model has some helpful elements, but he recognizes that there are some unequal elements to his analogy. See Mark A. Garcia, "Imputation and the Christology of Union with Christ: Calvin, Osiander, and the Contemporary Quest for a Reformed Model," *Westminster Theological Journal* 68 (Fall 2006): 219–51. Evans also seeks a workable analogy by arguing for a model that is neither mediate nor immediate (*Imputation and Impartation*, 35).

<sup>79</sup>If Calvin assumed his readership would understand union in biblical historical categories, one can argue that there is no problem.

*adoption, justification, and sanctification.* To many, it sounds strange that Jesus needs to partake of adoption, sanctification, and justification. However, this is clearly implied in the fact that Jesus *truly* took upon Him the condemnation of the elect. Beginning with justification, it will be shown that Paul considered Jesus' resurrection as the point at which Jesus partook of the soteric blessings, which Jesus subsequently shares with those united to Him.

The justification of Christ in the resurrection was one of the formative declarations of Vos: "Christ's resurrection was the *de facto* declaration of God in regard to his being just. His quickening bears in itself the testimony of his justification."<sup>80</sup> Vos's declaration can be established in 1 Timothy 3:16, which is quoted here according to its poetic form in order to capture Paul's eschatological intentions:

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. (ESV)

The form of the poem—a chiasmic a/b b/a a/b—gives an indication of its overall message. There is a constant contrast between the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus. The key line for the present purpose says, "Jesus was manifested in the flesh, vindicated (justified) by the Spirit."<sup>81</sup> While this line has sometimes been understood in reference to the humanity and divinity of Christ, the eschatological tenor of the verse indicates it refers to the resurrection of Christ.<sup>82</sup> In other words, Jesus' transfer from the one realm (fleshly) to the other (heavenly) took place by the justifying work of the Spirit in resurrection.

The preceding exegetical point is reinforced by Romans 1:3–4, which contrasts "being made according to the flesh" with "being declared [appointed] to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection of the dead." Here the Holy Spirit is again the agent of bringing Christ into the exalted state through the resurrection by a declarative act. In sum, because Jesus was truly condemned in His death He must be truly justified in His resurrection.

The adoption of Jesus follows from the previous treatment of Romans 1:3–4. In the judicial act of resurrection Jesus was appointed to be the Son of God. While most translations render the participle ὀρισθέντος as "declare," the uniform meaning of the term in the NT is

<sup>80</sup>Pauline Eschatology, 151.

<sup>81</sup>Tipton notes that the verb ἐδικαιώθη "carries the forensic, declarative, and demonstrative sense of open acquittal or vindication" ("Union With Christ and Justification," 30).

<sup>82</sup>"The verse as a whole contrasts the earthly and the heavenly orders" (Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*, 120).

“appoint.”<sup>83</sup> Therefore, Jesus was appointed by means of the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit to be the Son of God. Gaffin summarizes the covenantal character of this act: “[Romans 1:3–4] suggests that the resurrection is a judicially constitutive declaration of sonship.... The resurrection of Jesus is his *adoption*.”<sup>84</sup> This same theme can be seen in Acts 13:33, where the resurrection is indicated as the fulfillment to Psalm 2:7: “Thou art my son, this day have I begotten you.” Perhaps one of the clearest connections between resurrection and adoption is found in Romans 8:23b: “We wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” Vos’s comments on this verse are incisive: “Here it can be plainly observed how the one thought passes over into the other: ‘adoption’ is by parentage a forensic concept: yet it fulfills itself in the bodily transforming change of the resurrection.”<sup>85</sup>

The sanctification of Jesus is, perhaps, the most difficult of the three soteric benefits to express in relation to Jesus. This is because the differentiation between definitive and progressive sanctification—expressed by Paul in Romans 6—has not been widely understood.<sup>86</sup> Jesus in His resurrection does not take part in progressive sanctification, as though He has some element to improve. Rather, He receives definitive sanctification in His resurrection. Turning to the language of Romans 6, Jesus is said to have “died to sin” and now “lives for God” (v. 10). To die to sin, one must first be alive to sin. While this is not indicating that Jesus partook of sin, it does indicate that Jesus has been transferred from a fleshly reality (where sin was truly alive) to an exalted reality (where sin no longer reigned). Because of the close connection between death and sin, v. 9 can be taken to indicate that Jesus, prior to His resurrection, lived under the dominion of sin.<sup>87</sup> But with the resurrection, Jesus was brought out of the old order and placed in the realm of definitive sanctification, where victory over sin is final and complete.

A second exegetical point, which at first pass appears unrelated, is that *believers are united with Christ into His life history—His death, burial, and resurrection*. Romans 6:1–11 is the most picturesque representation of this truth. Here Paul answers his own question concerning whether a believer should continue in sin (v. 1). He does not respond by appealing to the debt they owe; rather he asks how someone who has *died* to sin can still *live* in it (vv. 2–11). He answers not with an

---

<sup>83</sup>Gaffin notes, however, that the declarative remains an important element in the appointment (*ibid.*, 117).

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>85</sup>*Pauline Eschatology*, 152.

<sup>86</sup>Definitive sanctification is defined by Murray as a “decisive and irreversible breach with the world and with its defilement and power. And on the positive side,...the person begotten of God does righteousness, loves and knows God, loves those who are begotten of God, and keeps the commandments of God” (“Definitive Sanctification,” 12).

<sup>87</sup>Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*, 125.

emotional plea, but with a soteric reality. Believers cannot continue in sin because they have shared in the experience of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection (vv. 4–5). Ridderbos clarifies this concept: “[Romans 6] denotes the participation of believers in the redemptive event at Golgotha and in the garden of the resurrection... Here the church is directly involved in the redemptive-historical event: when Christ dies, they died, and his death was their own.”<sup>88</sup> It is not simply that believers *know about* the death and resurrection of Christ; instead they have *soterically experienced* the death and resurrection of Christ.

Pauline literature gives other examples of Paul's soteric inclusion of believers in the life history of Jesus Christ. In 2 Corinthians 5:14 Paul says “we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died.” In what way have all died but by being soterically included in the life-history of Jesus Christ? Colossians 3:1–4 includes soteric implication as well: “You have been raised with Christ” (v. 1), “For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (v. 3), and “Christ who is your life” (v. 4). Speaking more personally, Paul testifies in Galatians 2:20a, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” His point is not that Jesus has stolen Paul's identity; rather, he is saying that Christ has given him a true and lasting identity through the soteric implication of Christ's actions as Paul's own through faith.

Third, and building off the previous point, *the redeemed share with Christ all of His soteric benefits in union with His person and work*. It is through union with Christ and His life history that the soteric blessings are granted to believers. Herman Bavinck lucidly expresses this pivotal truth: “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 and all his benefits belong to the church through the Holy Spirit.”<sup>89</sup>

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is one of the clearest expressions of this truth. In chapter 2 Paul speaks corporately about how God “made us alive together with Christ... and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (vv. 5–6). In the eschatological raising, Paul is not using the future tense; rather he is speaking of a present reality. How can one be presently raised into the heavenly places in Christ (notice not only *with* Christ)? Ephesians 2:1–10 provides the answer. In that chapter, Paul, speaking about the power of God, notes that the Father “raised him [Jesus] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.” Two things are obvious from the structure of these passages. First, Paul is expressing that the believer is sharing with Christ—even now—in the benefits Christ offers. One of these is being seated in the heavenly places.

---

<sup>88</sup>Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 207.

<sup>89</sup>*Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 399–400.

Second, the life history of Jesus (His death-resurrection-seated in the heavenly realm) is soterically replicated in the life of the believer (our death-resurrection-seated in the heavenly realm).<sup>90</sup> These two points combine to indicate that it is through sharing with the person of Christ (and by implication His work) that believers have all the soteric blessings.

While there are extended passages where Paul makes it clear that the benefits of salvation only come through union with Christ,<sup>91</sup> perhaps the most persistent expressions go unnoticed. In Pauline literature there is a pervasive theme of *in Christ* language. Too often, these statements are not recognized for their comprehensiveness or significance. Lane Tipton has summarized some of the key “in Christ” passages in Pauline literature:

Believers are elected and predestined in Christ (Eph 1:4, 5), die and rise with and in Christ (Eph 2:4–6; Col 2:11–13; 3:1–4), are called in Christ (1 Cor 1:9; 2 Tim 1:9), regenerated in Christ (Eph 2:5; Col 2:13), justified in Christ (Rom 8:1; Gal 2:17; 1 Cor 1:30), sanctified in Christ (1 Cor 6:11; Rom 6:5ff.), persevere in Christ (Rom 6:4; 1 Cor 4–9; Phil 1:6), die in Christ (Rev 14:13; 1 Thess 4:17), and will be raised and glorified in Christ (1 Cor 15:22; Rom 8:30).<sup>92</sup>

Each of these passages expresses the centrality of union with Christ for *all soteric benefits*. Paul’s comprehensive point is simple—without Christ man does not share in any spiritual benefits.

Romans 4:25 serves to bring together the exegetical points already mentioned: “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.” The dependence of the *ordo salutis* on the *historia salutis* is evident. How can an event in the life history of Jesus serve as the believer’s justification? The only answer is to combine the first two exegetical points to produce the third: if (1) the resurrection served as Jesus’ justification *and* (2) believers are united with Christ in His life-history, then (3) believers receive justification through union with the person of Christ.<sup>93</sup>

These considerations lead to the final exegetical point: *because Christ contains in Himself all the soteric benefits, union with Him provides all benefits simultaneously, distinctly, and inseparably*. Put differently, because Jesus contains the benefits of salvation exclusively,

<sup>90</sup>Tipton, “Union With Christ and Justification,” 26–27.

<sup>91</sup>Notice especially Paul’s discourse on the two Adams in Romans 5. For an expression of the necessity for union from this passage, see Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*, 36; Tipton, “Union With Christ and Justification,” 37.

<sup>92</sup>Tipton, “Union With Christ and Justification,” 25.

<sup>93</sup>Tipton makes the same point: “Paul simply combines in Romans 4:25 the twin notions of Jesus’ resurrection as His justification and Jesus’ resurrection as a solidaric event that includes believers in its compass. And the result is that Jesus rises not only for His own justification (1 Tim 3:16) but for the justification of believers as well” (*ibid.*, 37).

simultaneously, inseparably, and distinctly, and because believer's share in those benefits only as they are united with Christ, then believers receive *all* soteric blessings simultaneously, distinctly, and inseparably. This was Calvin's point when he noted that Christ could not be torn asunder. What is resident in Christ is given *fully with Him*.

First Corinthians 1:30 reinforces the point: "It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption." Three key elements emerge from this text. First, Christ has "become for us" these soteric blessings. The clear implication is that without Christ these blessings are not attributed to believers. Second, the work of union is clearly a sovereign work. It is not because of something believers have done; rather it is "because of him," the Father, that we are united with Christ. Third, and following from the previous points, the work of union places believers in immediate possession of Jesus' distinct-yet-inseparable soteric blessings. This third point is confirmed by the fact that the blessings are spoken of as both a unity and diversity. It is comprehensively "wisdom" but is also, in its diversity, "righteousness, holiness, and redemption." Garcia expresses how this verse shows the inseparability and distinctness of Christ's soteric blessings granted through union:

In his movement from the comprehensive reality of union with Christ as the result of God's saving action to the specific blessings listed (σοφία, δικαιοσύνη, ἁγιασμός, and ἀπολύτρωσις), the Apostle clearly understands each of these benefits to be related to the ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ in an *aspectival* and *derivative* manner: each of the saving graces is an aspect of the union with Christ, and is also derivative of that union. The graces are distinguished and yet they are inseparable insofar as they are not independent realities but aspects of one reality: union with the resurrected Christ.<sup>94</sup>

## SUMMARY

WTS over against WSC has argued that Calvin had a distinct doctrine of justification that was lost in later post-reformation theology. Speaking anachronistically, Calvin appears to center the *ordo* on union, while later theologians made justification primary. WTS maintains that this is the true Reformed doctrine. They have further sought to revive this doctrine by way of fresh exegesis. Following the pivotal insights of biblical theologians such as Vos, Ridderbos, and Gaffin, WTS has sought to ground the primacy of union in Pauline eschatology.<sup>95</sup> Jesus, being the representative for all that are included in Him (Rom 5), shares with believers the blessings of justification (Rom 4:25) and sanctification (Rom 6) simultaneously, distinctly, and inseparably (1 Cor 1:30) through Spirit-wrought faith-union (1 Cor 15:45).

<sup>94</sup>Garcia, "Imputation and the Christology of Union with Christ," 228.

<sup>95</sup>Gaffin notes that the traditional *ordo* lacks the essential eschatological element central to Paul's preaching (*Resurrection and Redemption*, 138).

The lines have been clearly drawn. If the above exegesis of both Paul and Calvin is correct, WTS stands on the higher ground. First, they can show that Calvin had a distinctive view of justification that was later eclipsed by federal theology. Therefore, the pan-confessional thesis masks over significant differences in the soteriological systems. Second—and more importantly—they can show that Paul's theology centers on the soteric benefits gained only through union with Christ. Perhaps Gaffin asked for this debate over forty years ago when he wrote in his doctoral thesis,

Nothing distinguishes the traditional *ordo salutis* more than its insistence that the justification, adoption, and sanctification which occur at the inception of the application of redemption are separate acts. If our interpretation is correct, Paul views them not as distinct acts but as distinct aspects of a single act.... If the other acts [i.e., justification, sanctification] are in some sense prior, is not union improperly subordinated and its biblical significance severely attenuated, to say the least?... Paul stakes everything in...union with the resurrected Christ. The first and, in the final analysis, the only question for the Pauline *ordo* concerns the point at which and the conditions under which incorporation with the life-giving Spirit takes place.<sup>96</sup>

WTS has been developing these views for over forty years, but they have only come to the forefront recently because of the NPP. One might ask, then, is this really important? Does it matter what place union with Christ is given in the *ordo*? The final section of the essay will argue—as Gaffin does in the quote above—that understanding the place of union is crucial to the church.

## SIGNIFICANCE

Three insights will show the importance of a proper understanding of union with Christ in the *ordo*. First, a proper understanding of union provides the most comprehensive and definitive answer to the Roman Catholic charge that Protestant theology encourages immoral living. Since the Reformation it has been claimed by the RCC that Protestant theologies on justification by grace without works undermine the moral imperatives of NT theology. In other words, the Protestant doctrine of justification appears to make sanctification unnecessary. Because many—particularly in the Lutheran tradition—extracted sanctification from justification, the complaint was quite valid. If the basis of sanctification is the recognition of debt owed or the believer's free response to the grace offered him, these works might not follow.<sup>97</sup> Calvin took a different path. He noted the centrality of good works in salvation without attributing to them any justifying merit: "Thus it appears how true it is that we are justified not without, and yet not by works, since in the

---

<sup>96</sup>Ibid.

<sup>97</sup>For a good treatment of this view, see Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*, 76–78.

participation of Christ, by which we are justified, is contained not less sanctification than justification.”<sup>98</sup> In other words, sanctification is given at the same point as justification and both through union with Christ. Therefore, works necessarily follow from the saved life. And this is not because they play a role in justification (as in the RCC system), but because one cannot be justified without at the same time being sanctified, since both soteric realities are given distinctly and inseparably in union with Christ.

Second, and following closely the first point, WTS’s perspective on union alone provides the needed corrective for Roman Catholic theology. One of the foundational truths of the Reformation stated that justification is not renovative. If justification were renovative, then the RCC’s position—that works are involved in justification—would be established. Lutheran theology was problematic here, for they held conflicting thoughts. Namely, they held that justification was not renovative, yet they also held that sanctification was a *result* of justification. Tipton notes the problem: “What the RCC has coming through the front door, Lutherans allow through the back door; that is, a renovative justification.”<sup>99</sup>

Thus Lutheranism offered a more biblical, yet less than fully biblical answer to the problem. It is more biblical in that Lutherans—like the Reformed—argued that justification was by faith alone without works. It was less biblical in that, structurally, their theology attributed renovative dimensions to justification. Reformed theology—as expressed through Calvin—provided the needed corrective. Accenting the difference between Lutheran and Reformed doctrines of justification, Calvin’s conception of union as the comprehensive reality that brings both renovative and justifying aspects of salvation together provides the only consistent answer to Roman Catholic theology. Only through union can a distinctness *and* inseparability be maintained between justification and sanctification.

Put in terms of the current debate, WSC has sought to express a more Lutheran conception of the *ordo*. As they have done so, they have placed themselves under the critique just mentioned. Garcia shows how they have done so:

The problem here is not merely historical but the inevitable neglect of the theological benefit of Reformed theology on this point. Put most concisely, appreciating the biblical truth that sanctification does not result from justification, but is an aspect, like justification, of our union with Christ, alone safeguards the doctrine of justification against the Roman Catholic error. If we argue, with [WSC], that justification is the cause of sanctification, then we attribute to *justification* a generative, transformational quality (in that sanctification is generated or produced by justification) and thus, ironically in view of the driving concern in [WSC], *compromise the purely forensic character of justification*, its nature as a

---

<sup>98</sup>*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.16.1.

<sup>99</sup>Tipton, *Union with Christ*, 200.

declarative act rather than the beginning of a work. This is the liability of the Lutheran model, but it is a liability that is entirely avoided in the Reformed model according to which justification and sanctification come to us as distinct, inseparable, simultaneous benefits of union with Christ, rather than one coming from the other (cf. WLC 69). *CJPM* urges a model which could have been pulled directly from the Formula of Concord. The Reformed model, however, best reflects the Apostle Paul's own as it is expressed, for instance, in 1 Corinthians 1:30.<sup>100</sup>

Summarizing the preceding points, union with Christ as the overarching soteriological reality provides the necessary means to avoid both legalism (by conflating justification and sanctification) and antinomianism (by separating justification and sanctification).<sup>101</sup> In other words, union allows justification to remain both distinct and inseparable as simultaneously given with Christ.

The final point of significance in this debate is the centrality of Christ. Undoubtedly WSC desires Christ to remain central in their soteriological system. Nevertheless, the place they give in the *ordo* for union structurally subsumes Christ under His benefits. Gaffin notes the problem: "A prevailing tendency down to the present has been to be preoccupied with the various benefits of Christ's work, and their interrelations...so that while Christ himself is certainly there, the danger is that he fades, more or less, into the background, and where to put union with Christ...in the *ordo salutis* remains something of a conundrum."<sup>102</sup> Can justification be spoken of before union with Christ? If so, Christ and sharing with Him is not decisively *central* to justification.<sup>103</sup>

But if the exegetical treatment above is correct, there are *no benefits* without Christ. He is the center of salvation; for it is in Him that we have all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places (Eph 1:3). As Gaffin argues, Christ is not only decisive for His past work but also for His present work: "Christ is not only active in redemption accomplished but also in redemption applied; the one just as much as the other is his work."<sup>104</sup> In other words, *all* of the benefits of salvation—past, present, and future—are obtained through our union with Christ. Only a robust theology of the priority of union in the *ordo* does justice to the central place of Jesus and His work in salvation.

<sup>100</sup>Garcia, "Review Article: No Reformed Theology of Justification?"

<sup>101</sup>Evans, "Déjà Vu All Over Again?" 141.

<sup>102</sup>Gaffin, "Biblical Theology," 173. Michael Horton shows the difficulty of placing union in the *ordo* by noting that "union with Christ is not a point in the *ordo salutis*, but it is a behind-the-scenes organizing principle" (Michael S. Horton, *Union with Christ: A Response*, MP3, vol. 207, Christ the Center [Philadelphia, PA, 2011]), <http://reformedforum.org/ctc207/> (accessed 23 March 2012).

<sup>103</sup>Evans argues that the move towards federal theology abstracted the salvation from its source so that the unity of salvation "was no longer to be found in Christology (as in Calvin), but in the eternal decrees of God" ("Déjà Vu All Over Again?" 136).

<sup>104</sup>"Biblical Theology," 171.

## CONCLUSION

While one might bemoan the existence of the New Perspective on Paul, there is one central benefit from the Reformed responses. Namely, battling heretical beliefs has the benefit of clarifying orthodox theology. In this case, the debate concerning the NPP has served to bring to light differing perspectives on the Reformed *ordo*. As Evans has argued, the debate over the *ordo* is not new,<sup>105</sup> but it does represent an awakening to the importance of the topic. Over forty years ago Gaffin—following the exegetical work of Vos and Ridderbos—argued that American Reformed theology needed to re-evaluate the role of union in the *ordo*.<sup>106</sup> Finally, the call is being heard.

That union with Christ provides all soteric benefits distinctly, inseparably, and simultaneously may be controversial in Reformed circles today, however it is historically verified in the writings of Calvin. But most importantly, the position is derived from an exegetical treatment of the writings of Paul. One can only hope that the future of the debate would turn from historical surveys to exegetical treatments; from arguing whether Calvin held union as the primary soteric reality, to whether Gaffin's work—following Vos and Ridderbos—is exegetically sound.<sup>107</sup> It is the author's assessment that the present debate will not move forward until a serious consideration of Gaffin's work has been completed. It is also the author's assessment that such a work will exalt the centrality of Jesus Christ by confirming that all soteric benefits are applied through union with Christ distinctly, inseparably, and simultaneously.

---

<sup>105</sup>Evans, "Déjà Vu All Over Again?"

<sup>106</sup>Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*.

<sup>107</sup>Nearly all of the argumentation from WSC has been historical in nature. While the history of Reformed theology is important, *sola scriptura* has always been held as a central Reformed doctrine.