

Union with Christ in Catholic and Reformed theology

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Third draft, 22 Feb 2003

1 Introduction

Union with Christ is, according to Murray, “the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.”¹ He continues: “. . . not only in its application but also in its once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ. Indeed the whole process of salvation has its origin in one phase of union with Christ and salvation has in view the realization of other phases of union with Christ.” This statement hints at a distinction between two aspects of union with Christ, which we will call the *subjective* and *objective* aspects. The former, which Gaffin² calls the “existential” or “experiential” union, Berkhof calls the “mystical” union,³ and is often simply called “union with Christ,” is the realization of the death and resurrection of Christ in the life of the believer, whereas the latter exists outside of us, changing our status rather than our selves. Berkhof makes this distinction explicitly: “The mystical union. . . is not the judicial ground, on the basis of which we become partakers of the riches that are in Christ.”⁴

This objective union with Christ seems to be an outworking of Luther’s idea of the alien righteousness of Christ. Luther’s exclusive emphasis on the righteousness which is outside of ourselves gave rise (it seems) to the Reformed emphasis on the objective union as union with Christ in the fundamental sense, foundational to the subjective union. In such an arrangement the *substitution* of Christ’s work for ours by virtue of the objective union threatens to render superfluous our *participation* in Christ’s work by virtue of the subjective union. This essay aims to show that Scripture will not support such a view. The objective union cannot be the basis of our subjective union with Christ, but a function of it. This move reduces the

¹Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 201.

²Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption*, 2nd ed., 50.

³Berkhof, 449.

⁴Berkhof, 452.

scope of the objective union with Christ (yielding it to the Incarnation), but restores the Biblical emphasis on our subjective union with Christ, our dying and rising with him for our salvation. And the result of this move is essentially the Catholic doctrine of salvation, which, I hope to show, is far more evangelical than is often supposed.

2 Man's condition, Christ's humiliation

In his incarnation, the Word did not become just one man among many; he became the new humanity, “the last Adam” (1 Cor 15.45). Nor was it that he took on humanity by taking it away from us; on the contrary, “he became what we are so that he might make us what he is.”⁵ Athanasius put it more strongly: “He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God.”⁶ This way of thinking about the Incarnation as salvific in itself is especially common in Eastern theology, less so in the West, and almost not at all in the Protestant tradition—to our loss.

Not that we should separate Christ's incarnation from his death and resurrection, nor did the Greek Fathers. Just as he assumed humanity to elevate man to union with God, he assumed death to loose man from the bonds of death. Thus the Incarnation and the Atonement are both integral parts of a single action: “Being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2.8). In more juridical terms, death is God's punishment on man for sin (Ezek 18.4); the cross, a human punishment for a crime, as well as a sign of the curse of God (Deut 21.23). Jesus remained sinless, but not aloof from the consequences of sin. He subjected himself to the consequences of sin in order to loose us from the consequences of sin.⁷

Anselm⁸ articulated the idea that Christ's death was a payment of infinite value for our sins, thus satisfying God's justice. To the extent that Western theology has embraced this theory, it has seen the Incarnation more as a precondition which the Son had to meet in order to justly represent us. Not that this theory is incorrect—there is no conflict between it and the idea that Christ died to free us from death. What Anselm did was explain the necessity of that death in terms of God's justice, as opposed to any idea of the rights of the devil.

On the other hand, the Protestant, especially the Reformed, understanding of the Atonement really does exclude the other theories. It sees Christ's death as the punishment of our sins, imputed to Christ by virtue of our union with him. But

⁵Irenaeus *Against Heresies*, book 5, preface.

⁶Athanasius *On the Incarnation* 54.

⁷Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* 3.5.1.

⁸Anselm *Why did God Become Man?*

if Christ's death is salvific for us precisely because he underwent it and we do not, then we can no longer speak of our participating in Christ's death. In order to recover a Biblical understanding of our dying with Christ, we must reject the notion that our sins were imputed to Christ, and ground the Atonement again in the Incarnation.

2.1 Were our sins imputed to Christ?

Sin-bearing. Do passages that describe Christ as bearing our sin (Isa 53.11, 12, also v. 4 LXX; quoted in 1 Pet 2.24 and Heb 9.28) teach imputation of sin? The Law frequently says that a person will "bear his iniquity" (e.g., Lev 5.1) to mean that he will pay the penalty for a crime he has committed. But what does it mean to bear someone else's sin? It cannot be a transfer of sin, for it would make no sense for the Law to decree that a criminal's sin will be transferred to himself. Can it then be a transfer of guilt, as is the Reformed view? In that case Christ's suffering and death would be a direct result of his sin-bearing. But when Peter quotes Isa 53, he expands it: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness" (1 Pet 2.24). We should regard the phrase "in his body" as significant, because guilt is a legal notion, whereas Peter equates Christ's sin-bearing with his physical suffering. Christ bore our sins by suffering because his suffering was given in payment for our sins. This need not entail a transfer of guilt. And the usage of this phrase in other contexts confirms this: when Joseph was asked to "bear the transgression" of his brothers (Gen 50.17), their guilt was not transferred to him, but was simply forgiven; when Ezekiel was told to "bear the punishment" of Israel (Ezek 4.4–6), their guilt was not transferred to him, but remained; when Aaron was instructed to "bear any guilt" from the holy things (Ex 28.38), their guilt was not transferred to him, but was simply purified.

The OT sacrifices. The act of laying one's hand on the forehead of an animal to be sacrificed is often said to symbolize a transfer of guilt onto the animal. Indeed, Lev 16.21–22 says as much: "Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them upon the head of the goat, and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area; and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness." But note that this goat is not sacrificed, but sent out into the wilderness. It does not die for the sins of Israel so much as carry pollution away

from the Temple.⁹ Moreover, this is the only explicit mention of a transfer of sin or guilt onto an animal. It is not clear that the imposition of hands on sacrificed animals (e.g., Lev 1.14) had the same significance. Finally, sacrificed animals are never said to be punished or objects of wrath; on the contrary, they are “a pleasing aroma to the LORD” (e.g., Lev 1.13). And in contrast to the scapegoat out in the wilderness, the blood of sin offerings was brought into the presence of God (e.g., Lev 4.6).

2 Cor 5.21. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Some interpreters argue that the first occurrence of ἁμαρτία here should be translated instead as “*a sin offering*” (so NIV margin). This was a common interpretation in the Fathers;¹⁰ but they did not, and we should not, shy away from the notion that Christ became sin. However, no one interprets this statement literally. Paul is not aiming for precision here but pith, since the context is not dogmatic teaching but a call to repentance. The Reformed understanding is that “he made him to be sin” means “he imputed sin to him”; is this warranted by Paul’s teaching elsewhere? To determine the precise meaning of his words here we ought to look to Rom 8.3–4, where Paul writes about God’s “sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh [lit.: *the flesh of sin*] and for sin [NIV: *to be a sin offering*].” This too is a difficult verse. But it is clear that Paul is referring to Christ’s incarnation, not his death, while protecting against any misunderstanding that Christ was incarnated as a sinful man. Therefore 2 Cor 5.21 ought to be interpreted in the same way: Christ was made “sin,” not the imputed guilt of sin, but the assumed “*flesh of sin*.”

Gal 3.13 can be interpreted along similar lines. Notice its parallel with 4.4–5:

Gal 3.13–14 (reordered)

Christ,
having become a curse for us,
 redeemed us from the curse of the law,
 . . . that we might receive the promised
 Spirit through faith

Gal 4.4–5

God sent forth his Son,
 born of woman, born under the law,
 to redeem those who were under the law,
 so that we might receive adoption as sons

If this parallel is correct, then we are to understand Christ’s becoming a curse (γενόμενος κατάρα), that is, his death on a cross, by analogy with his being born of a woman, born under the law (γενόμενος ἐκ γυναικός, γενόμενος ὑπὸ νόμον), that is, his incarnation. Christ’s identification with mankind in his incarnation was

⁹According to Wenham (*The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT, 228), this was the main purpose of the ceremonies of the Day of Atonement.

¹⁰E.g., Augustine *Enchiridion* 41.

completed in his becoming “sin” and a “curse,” but this was not a transfer of guilt any more than the Incarnation was a transfer of nature. On the contrary, he draws us into his death so that we may share in his resurrection.

When were sins imputed? A conceptual difficulty with imputation of our sins to Christ is the time of imputation. If our sins were imputed to Christ at the time of his death, then it would be natural to conclude that the non-imputation of our sins occurred at the same time. However, the Reformed teaching is that “God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did, in the fulness of time, die for their sins, and rise for their justification: nevertheless, they are not justified until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them.”¹¹ Berkhof likewise explains:

It is not true that, when Christ rendered full satisfaction to the Father for all His people, their guilt naturally terminated. A penal debt is not like a pecuniary debt in this respect. Even after the payment of a ransom, the removal of guilt may depend on certain conditions, and does not follow as a matter of course. The elect are not personally justified in the Scriptural sense until they accept Christ by faith and thus appropriate His merits.¹²

But note that he uses the language of debt and satisfaction, not wrath and substitution. In order to ward off the misconception created by substitution, he must avoid the idea of substitution altogether.

Whose sins were imputed? A second difficulty is the extent of the Atonement. The Reformed view is that since it accomplished redemption by virtue of our union with Christ, it was made only for the elect. For if Christ had died for all men, that is, if the sins of all men had been imputed to Christ, and if Christ had been punished for them, then no man would any longer be justly subject to punishment for his sins. Since we do know that not all men are saved (Rev 21.8), Christ must not have died for all men. This conclusion is consistent with texts that say that Christ died for his sheep (Jn 10.15; see also Mt 1.21; Eph 5.25), but Scripture says furthermore that Christ died for all men, as in 1 Jn 2.2: “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (see also 1 Tim 4.10; 2 Cor 5.14–15). Nowhere does Scripture say that Christ did not die for someone, or that Christ died *only* for the elect. Limited atonement is merely an artifact of the theory of penal substitution. Other theories of the Atonement, however, do not have

¹¹WCF 11.4.

¹²Berkhof, 520.

this problem because they do not depend on imputation of sins to Christ. Even in Anselm's satisfaction theory, the legal basis for the atonement is not imputation of our sins to Christ, but the positive value of Christ's sacrifice offered to the Father. Therefore while it is correct to say that Christ died with the ultimate intent of saving only the elect, his atoning work was performed on behalf of all men without exception, just as his incarnation identified him with all men without exception.

2.2 Christ's death becomes ours

How then are our sins forgiven, if not by imputing them Christ? We do not deny the non-imputation of sins, because the Bible clearly teaches it (Ps 32.2 = Rom 4.8; 2 Cor 5.19), but the reason our sins are not imputed is not that they were imputed to Christ instead, but because they were done away with when our old man was crucified *with* Christ. Thus Paul can say, "he who has died has been *justified* (δικαιώται; so ESV margin) from sin" (Rom 6.7). Christ's death becomes our own, just as Thomas Aquinas comments on the succeeding verse:

[B]y Baptism a man is incorporated in the Passion and death of Christ, according to Rom 6.8: "If we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall live also together with Christ." Hence it is clear that the Passion of Christ is communicated to every baptized person, so that he is healed just as if he himself had suffered and died. Now Christ's Passion. . . is a sufficient satisfaction for all the sins of all men. Consequently he who is baptized, is freed from the debt of all punishment due to him for his sins, just as if he himself had offered sufficient satisfaction for all his sins.¹³

Christ's suffering and death do not take away ours; rather, he unites our suffering and death to his, turning them into a gateway to glory. "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish. . . that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3.8–11).

Paul writes that "we suffer with [Christ] in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom 8.17). In view of this, he says, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (v. 18). Thus when Paul says later that "for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (v. 28), he does not mean (as we so often wish) that life always goes well for Christians;

¹³Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* 3.69.2.

Paul's primary meaning here is that God uses "all things," namely, suffering, "for good," that is, to bring us to glory. When we counsel those who suffer, it is good to remind them of the sovereignty of God which is exhibited in this verse. But even if we give this verse its proper, eternal perspective, we are only telling half the story if our counsel is simply that everything will turn out all right. Rom 8.28 must not be divorced from Rom 8.17. We must say with Peter, "Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed" (1 Pet 4.13). This theme of participating in Christ's sufferings appears frequently in the New Testament (Lk 9.23; Phil 3.10; Col 1.24; 2 Cor 1.5; 4.10; Heb 13.13), not just because it was written to a suffering Church, but because suffering is essential to life in union with Christ. Yet our theology prevents us from thinking this way. As long as we believe that Christ took suffering away from us and upon himself, that the infinite value of his suffering makes our suffering irrelevant, we can see our suffering as nothing more than a residual consequence of living in a fallen world.

This discrepancy between penal substitution and reality becomes more clear when we turn from suffering to death. For it is often said that Christ died so that we would not have to die, but this is patently false because Christians do in fact die.¹⁴ Rather, our death is a participation in Christ's. Berkhof rightly says: "In the mystical union with their Lord believers are made to share the experiences of Christ. Just as He entered upon His glory by the pathway of sufferings and death, they too can enter upon their eternal reward only through sanctification. Death... completes the sanctification of the souls of believers..."¹⁵ But he makes no attempt to reconcile this with the idea of substitution.

2.3 His descent into hell

The full punishment for our sins is not physical death but eternal death, called in the Bible the destruction of the soul (Mt 10.28) or the second death (Rev 20.14). If Christ was punished in our place, it follows that Christ did not die any ordinary death, but suffered in *some* sense (obviously not literally) an eternal punishment which was supervenient on the physical punishment of crucifixion. Calvin writes, commenting on the article of the Apostles' Creed, "he descended into hell": "If Christ had died only a bodily death, it would have been ineffectual. No—it was expedient at the same time for him to undergo the severity of God's vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgment. For this reason, he must also grapple hand to hand with the armies of hell and the dread of everlasting death."¹⁶

¹⁴If there is any doubt, 1 Ths 4.14 should remove it!

¹⁵Berkhof, 670.

¹⁶Calvin *Institutes* 1.16.10.

Similarly Berkhof writes, “He was subject not only to physical, but also to eternal death, though He bore this intensively and not extensively, when He agonized in the garden and when He cried out on the cross, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’”¹⁷ Both go on to define carefully what this eternal death is *not*, for example, that the Father did not ever cease to love the Son. It is unfortunate that others have not shown such restraint. In any case, they agree that Christ died in some sense beyond his physical death. Is there evidence for such a death in Scripture?

The cry of dereliction. The best candidate is Jesus’ cry from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27.46; Mk 15.34). If eternal death is identified with separation from God, and Jesus was separated from his Father, then Jesus’ cry would be consistent with an experience of eternal death, passing over the difficulties introduced by his second death preceding his first death, to say nothing of the separation of two persons of the Trinity, or Christ’s human nature from his divine nature. But there is nothing about his words which implies eternal death—clearly, since David was not experiencing eternal death when he originally penned them. Jesus need not have meant anything more by these words than David did: that he had fallen into a dire situation in which God’s help was not in sight. Moreover, by alluding to Ps 22, Jesus, like David, entrusts his life to God: “O you my help, come quickly to my aid!” (Ps 22.19).

Rom 8.3–4; Gal 3.13–14. Both of these passages, which we have seen already, might be interpreted as describing the eternal wrath of God. But both of these passages connect Christ’s punishment with his physical death (“condemned sin in the flesh” and “everyone who hangs on a tree,” respectively), without hinting at anything deeper. Moreover, both passages connect Christ’s punishment with the Law (“the righteous requirement of the law” and “the curse of the law,” respectively), which of course had no provision for eternal punishment. Even if we interpret “the law” as the divine law, these phrases are not specific enough to imply penal substitution; they could just as easily correspond to Anselm’s “debt of honor.”

The traditional doctrine places Christ’s descent into hell between his death and resurrection. “Hell” is understood not to be the place of eternal punishment and separation from God (Gehenna), but the realm of the dead in the Old Testament (Sheol or Hades). Thomas Aquinas does view the descent into Hades as a penalty,¹⁸ but a penalty undergone to free others out of that penalty rather than take their place

¹⁷Berkhof, 339.

¹⁸Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* 3.52.1.

under that penalty. Christ's humiliation descended as far as those he would save, and no further. This was the view of Augustine as well:

[T]he blood of Christ was given, as it were, as a price for us, by accepting which the devil was not enriched, but bound: that we might be loosened from his bonds, and that he might not with himself involve in the meshes of sins, and so deliver to the destruction of the second and eternal death, any one of those whom Christ, free from all debt, had redeemed by pouring out His own blood unindebtedly; but that they who belong to the grace of Christ, foreknown, and predestinated, and elected before the foundation of the world should only so far die as Christ Himself died for them, i.e. only by the death of the flesh, not of the spirit.¹⁹

Here is where the difference between the traditional view and the Reformed view is sharpest. We noted above Berkhof's correct observation that "believers are made to share the experiences of Christ"—but under the theory of penal substitution, this statement must be limited, quite arbitrarily, to Christ's physical death only. If we were to share Christ's experience of eternal death, we would be lost forever. Our union with Christ extends only so far. Scripture calls us to "go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured" (Heb 13.13), but penal substitution tells us to stand back.

3 Christ's exaltation, our salvation

"Jesus is Lord... God raised him from the dead" (Rom 10.9) is the Gospel in a nutshell, because his resurrection is the principle of our own resurrection. He died to rescue us from death, and was raised so that we might be raised with him. But insofar as we see the death of Christ as a payment for sins, we will not see his resurrection as salvific, but as a sign that his death was a sufficient payment. If we further see Christ's death as a punishment on our sins, then there is no possibility of seeing his resurrection as our own resurrection, because emerging from the infinite wrath of God is something we could not possibly share in, nor would we want to. It is not surprising, then, that modern evangelical presentations of the Gospel all too often omit the resurrection entirely.

Good Reformed theology, however, does give a place to our participation in Christ's resurrection, in our regeneration and sanctification and glorification. I will generally follow Reformed teaching here (rather, particular currents in it), where

¹⁹Augustine *On the Trinity* 13.15.19.

the tension between participation and substitution is not so vicious. Penal substitution does have a mirror image, but traditionally not in the Resurrection: Christ's whole life of obedience is said to substitute for ours. I do have some criticism of this idea, but even here Gaffin's insight that Christ's resurrection can be seen as a declaration of his righteousness provides, I believe, a point of contact between the Reformed and Catholic views.

3.1 Regeneration, justification, and the resurrection of the dead

The NT, especially in the writings of Paul, teaches that those who are in Christ will be raised with Christ. "Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ" (1 Cor 15.20–23). Col 3.3–4 says, "You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (see also 1 Ths 4.16). Paul also links our resurrection with the indwelling Spirit: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you" (Rom 8.11). Our future resurrection began with our regeneration, our rising with Christ.

Gaffin gives our incorporation into Christ's resurrection a judicial aspect by construing Christ's resurrection as his justification or vindication (1 Tim 3.16),²⁰ and sees our justification as a participation in Christ's: "The justifying aspect of being raised with Christ does not rest on the believer's subjective enlivening and transformation (also involved, to be sure, in the experience of being joined to Christ), but on the resurrection-approved righteousness of Christ which is his (and is thus reckoned his) by virtue of the vital union established."²¹ By focusing the righteousness of Christ on his resurrection instead of his active obedience (while not downplaying the latter), Gaffin gives stronger Scriptural support (e.g., Rom 4.25) to the idea of the imputed righteousness of Christ, which, as many have pointed out, is not explicitly mentioned in the NT.²²

But this statement is more notable for the way it makes justification dependent on the believer's vital union with Christ (which I understand to be what we have been calling the subjective union). Just as Thomas Aquinas said that the Passion

²⁰Gaffin, 119–122.

²¹Gaffin, 132.

²²E.g., Robert H. Gundry, "Why I didn't endorse 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ: an evangelical celebration,'" *Books & Culture*, Jan/Feb 2001, 7(1):6; Mark A. Seifrid, *Christ, our righteousness*, 174–175.

of Christ is communicated to the believer (§2.2 above), Gaffin says that the justification of Christ is communicated to the believer. He does not merely say that the righteousness of Christ is reckoned his, but that it *is* his by virtue of the vital union, and is thus reckoned his. The imputation of righteousness is not a bare imputation, because it is based on the ‘is,’ something more fundamental than imputation. How does it relate to the Catholic idea of infused righteousness?

Infused righteousness, more commonly known as sanctifying grace, has always been closely tied with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who effects our union with Christ. In Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*,²³ as in Greek theology, sanctifying grace *is* the indwelling Holy Spirit. Subsequent Scholastics distinguished between *uncreated grace* (the Holy Spirit) and *created grace* (a quality inhering in the soul);²⁴ thus Trent says that the righteousness of God is “inherent in us.”²⁵ This would naturally give a Protestant (or an Orthodox) the impression that Catholics think they will be able to be found righteous *on their own* before God. But this infused righteousness must be seen as an inseparable consequence of the indwelling Holy Spirit himself—a connection sometimes obscured in late Scholastic theology, but reiterated in modern Catholic theology.²⁶ “Created grace is at once the fruit and the bond of the indwelling, originating in the indwelling and sustained by the indwelling; it raises us into an ever-deepening actualization of the indwelling on earth and in heaven.”²⁷ So Gaffin’s statement that the righteousness of Christ is ours by virtue of our vital union with Christ would seem to resonate with Catholic theology.

Nor does Gaffin’s statement that justification “does not rest on the believer’s subjective enlivening and transformation” part company with the Catholic doctrine, *if* this refers to the fruits of the subjective union as distinct from the union itself. The Catholic idea of infused righteousness is distinct from the good works it produces, and justification does not rest on good works as if they completed something that was *lacking* in the righteousness first infused. Otherwise Catholics would not be able to say, “the effect of Baptism is to open the gates of the heavenly kingdom.”²⁸ Nevertheless, the Catholic Church does teach that works are necessary for salvation and merit eternal life, as we discuss below.

²³Peter Lombard, *Sentences* 1.17.

²⁴Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1–2.110.

²⁵Council of Trent, Decree on Justification, 7, 16.

²⁶M. de la Taille, *The Hypostatic Union and Created Actuation by Uncreated Act* (West Baden Springs, IN: West Baden College, 1952), 32–34; Karl Rahner, “Some implications of the scholastic concept of uncreated grace,” *Theological Investigations*, v. 1, 319–346. See Peter Fransen, *The New Life of Grace*, 87–106, for a nontechnical survey of this development.

²⁷Fransen, 103.

²⁸Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* 3.69.7.

3.2 Works and the final judgment

Our regeneration is the beginning of eternal life; sanctification is the bridge between the two. “Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life” (Rom 6.22).

Regeneration leads to sanctification. The larger context of Rom 8.11 (discussed above, §3.1) makes it clear that the indwelling of the Spirit means living according to the Spirit (vv. 4, 13). Gal 6.8 makes the same point more succinctly: “The one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.” Gal 5.19–21 (cf. Eph 5.5, 1 Cor 6.9–10) explains what it means to live according to the flesh: “The works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality. . . . I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” On the other hand, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace. . . . And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (vv. 22, 24). So being united with Christ and indwelt by the Spirit produces a real change in the believer’s life.

Sanctification leads to eternal life. Evangelicals often talk about the pursuit of holiness as working for rewards in heaven, or, if that sounds too selfish, a response of gratitude, or, if that doesn’t motivate, they don’t talk about it at all. But Scripture, and good Reformed theology with it, tells us, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2.12b–13). Sanctification leads to eternal life in three senses. First, our glorification will truly be a completion (as opposed to an obliteration) of our sanctification. Therefore we ought to pursue holiness in eager anticipation of the holiness of heaven.

Second, entrance into heaven is truly conditional on perseverance in sanctification. Paul writes, “He has now reconciled [you] in his body of flesh through death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard” (Col 1.22–23). Many Calvinists do not take this conditionality seriously, but some do.²⁹ Moreover, we may say that the faith in which we persevere must also work in love. Peter writes, “Make every effort to supplement (ἐπιχορηγήσατε) your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge” (2 Pet 1.5), continuing with a list of nine qualities culminating in love; a little below he then says, “if you practice these qualities you will never fall, for in this way there will be richly provided (ἐπιχορηγηθήσεται) for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (vv. 10b–11). Thus good works are necessary

²⁹Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance*; Berkhof; Schreiner and Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance*.

conditions for salvation, as some Reformed theologians do teach.³⁰

Third, eternal life is truly a reward for the works done in sanctification. In contrast to the passages cited above which speak of the resurrection of those in Christ, other passages speak of “a resurrection of both the just and the unjust” (Acts 24.15) followed by judgment. Jesus says quite simply: “An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (Jn 5.28–29). In Mt 25.31–46 (the image of the sheep and the goats) we have a fuller depiction of the final judgment, to eternal life or eternal punishment, again on the basis of works. According to Rom 2.7–8, wrath comes to “those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth, but obey unrighteousness” and eternal life to “those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality”; again, “anguish and distress for everyone who does evil. . . but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good.”

We will be judged by works, but these works correspond to the “fruit of the Spirit” in Gal 5.22; they do not come from ourselves, but from God’s presence in us. “God, when he crowns our merits, crowns nothing else but His own gifts.”³¹ Moreover, they only have value in union with Christ, or else Paul’s teaching that those who are in Christ will be raised with Christ would be falsified. We must never say that we can be found righteous before God *on our own*, even if we did not get that way on our own. Even with this important qualification, this flies in the face of the Protestant view. Indeed, it is essentially the view of the Council of Trent:

Since Christ Jesus himself, as the head of His members and as the vine of which we are the branches, continuously infuses strength into those justified, a strength which always precedes, accompanies and follows their good works and without which they could not in any way be pleasing and meritorious before God, we must believe that nothing further is wanting to those justified to prevent them from being considered, by those very works which have been done in God, to have fully satisfied the divine law according to the state of this life and to have truly merited eternal life.³²

Catholic theology sees grace and works as symbiotic: grace produces works, and works increase grace. The good works done in grace are, as it were, contained

³⁰Norman Shepherd, “The grace of justification,” unpublished manuscript (http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/norman_shepherd/the_grace_of_justification.htm).

³¹Augustine *Epistle* 194.5.19, quoted in Ott, 265.

³²Council of Trent, Decree on Justification 16.

in that grace, so that our righteousness is contained in, not eclipsed by, the righteousness of God in us. Thus it can be said that the eternal life given to those who die in grace is merited by the good works done in that grace, yet those good works do not complete anything that was lacking in that grace to begin with. “[W]hen we follow Christ. . . with all the means at our disposal, *our works become one with His works and are ennobled through grace*. That is how He has redeemed us, not indeed through our works but *in His works*; in His merits He has set us free and has redeemed us.”³³

4 Living in union with Christ

We live in between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet.’ Incorporated into Christ by baptism, nourished by Christ in the Eucharist, “we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8.23), even as “our outer nature is wasting away” (2 Cor 4.16) in suffering and death. But suffering and death are not the only old realities we must still deal with; we still deal with sin.

4.1 Forgive us our trespasses

Though we have died to sin and continually die to sin, sin is still a reality of the Christian life. But 1 Jn 1.9 tells us, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” In the context of a gracious relationship with our Father, we receive forgiveness of sins when we seek it. This would seem to contradict the idea in some strains of Protestant theology that at the time of justification all sins past, present, and future are forgiven.³⁴ The Westminster Confession resolves the tension thus:

God doth continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified; and, although they can never fall from the state of justification, yet they may, by their sins, fall under God’s fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of his countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance.³⁵

What they seem to be saying is that at justification all one’s past sins are forgiven, and one is made from a child of wrath into a child of God, a relationship in which God has promised to forgive all future sins. In the Protestant view, the emphasis is

³³Ruysbroeck, *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*, quoted in Fransen, 36 (emphases not mine).

³⁴E.g., Berkhof, 514.

³⁵WCF 11.5.

on the change in one's relationship to God: all sin in itself deserves eternal punishment, but for the children of God, only fatherly displeasure. In the Catholic view, the emphasis is on the intrinsic difference between two kinds of sin (1 Jn 5.16): mortal sin deserves eternal punishment, and venial sin does not. But this difference is not as wide as it may seem. For the Catholic distinction between sins hinges precisely on their effect on one's relationship with God (and is somewhat moot outside the context of a gracious relationship with God):

With the whole tradition of the Church, we call mortal sin the act by which man freely and consciously rejects God, his law, the covenant of love that God offers, preferring to turn in on himself or to some created and finite reality, something contrary to the divine will (*conversio ad creaturam*). This can occur in a direct and formal way, in the sins of idolatry, apostasy and atheism; or in an equivalent way, as in every act of disobedience to God's commandments in a grave matter.³⁶

On the other hand, the Protestant distinction between children of wrath and children of God cannot exclude sin which undermines that relationship. As mentioned above, even some Reformed theologians admit that apostasy, if it were possible, would cause loss of salvation. Moreover, the difference narrows further when we observe that because the Bible teaches that faith must work in love (Gal 5.6) or else it is dead (Jas 2.26), there are sins which are not apostasy *per se* but which kill faith, as is taught in the Lutheran tradition: "Mortal sins are those which result in the death of the sinner. . . .In the case of the believers those sins are called mortal which force the Holy Spirit to depart from one's heart, which destroy faith."³⁷ Many of Paul's letters contain lists of sins; after several of these he appends a warning like, "Those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal 5.21; also Eph 5.5; 1 Cor 6.10), indicating that apostasy *per se* is not the only mortal sin.

4.2 Can we be severed from Christ?

While some Calvinists acknowledge that salvation could be lost by apostasy, they maintain that, by divine decree, total and final apostasy never happens in fact. This position (which Schreiner and Caneday call the "means-of-salvation" view) has difficulty dealing with real people who appear to have fallen away (whether before our eyes or in Scripture). It exhorts believers to persevere, assuring them of success, but when they fall away, it must inform them that they were never believers in the

³⁶*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (2 Dec 1984), 17.

³⁷Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, v.1, p.568. An unsigned article published by the LCMS (<http://www.lcms.org/cic/venial.html>) mentions David's adultery and murder to illustrate mortal sin.

first place. This inconsistency is most clear in 1 Tim 1.18–20, where Paul exhorts Timothy (who was presumably regenerate), “This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience.” How then can he say in the next breath that this conscience is the same “*by rejecting which* some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander,” who were supposedly not believers in the first place? The means-of-salvation view breaks down.

As for the doctrine of perseverance of the saints itself, the Scriptural arguments are admittedly strong and we will examine them at length. The logical arguments we will deal with briefly. First, it is inferred from the doctrine of election; but this inference is unique to Calvinism and was not made by the predestinarians Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, or Luther. Second, it is inferred from limited atonement (if Christ died for a person, how can he undie for him?), but we have already rejected the stronger form of limited atonement. It is logically consistent to hold that there are non-elect whom Christ died for (but not with the ultimate intent of saving) and who are truly given the grace of justification in this life (but not to the end).

Before we examine the NT promises of salvation, let us take a step back and see how another Biblical promise functions: the promise given to Israel through Moses. “I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD” (Ex 6.8). What kind of promise is this? It is unconditional. It is spoken to all the Israelites. Yet only two of the adults who heard that promise actually entered the land (Num 14.30). The rest died in the desert, because they did not believe that God could really deliver the Canaanites into their hands. Even though the promise was spoken to all Israelites, it was given to Israel as a nation and to not every Israelite without exception. When some of the Israelites were unfaithful, they were cut off from the nation so that they would not enter the land with the nation. Does such a promise give an empty assurance? If so, then the Israelites’ reluctance to leave Egypt would have been justified. No, the promise was that God would bring Israel out of slavery in Egypt into a land flowing with milk and honey, a promise whose fulfillment was not in any way diminished by the Israelites’ unfaithfulness.

How does this apply to the Church? We note first that there must be some relevance, because the New Testament repeatedly uses the example of Israel as a warning for the Church. Paul says, “These things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor 10.11–12; see also Jude 5; Heb 3.14–19). Although not necessarily referring to the forty years in the desert, Paul also warns,

They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you (σὺ) stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off (Rom 11.20–22; cf. Jn 15.6).

The promise to the Church is not the same as the promise to Israel, but it is similar in that it is a promise of future redemption, not merely of preservation, and it is for the people collectively, not every member individually. Inside the body of Christ we have full assurance of salvation, but not if we cut ourselves out of the body and thereby out of the promise.

1 Ths 5 illustrates clearly how the promise functions. “God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 9). Before jumping to any conclusions about perseverance, we must ask first, what was the doubt? Paul wrote to the Thessalonians because they were grieving over their dead as if they had no hope (4.13–17). The doubt, then, was not “Will I believe until I die?” but “Will dead believers be saved?”. Paul's answer here is that not even death will deter God from saving them. This is why the promise continues: “. . . who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him” (v. 10).

Second, who is being addressed? Those who belong to the day (v. 8). The hope set forth in this passage is not for those who belong to the night. Is it possible for one who belongs to the day to become of the night? Paul does not say—although it would be a reasonable inference from his admonitions to stay alert (vv. 6, 8). In any case, the point of the promise is not to assure the Thessalonians that they will belong to the day until they die, but to assure them that they who belong to the day will be saved even if they die.

Jn 6 and 10. In both of these passages (6.36–40; 10.25–30) Jesus is speaking to unbelievers, explaining to them why they don't believe in him. They think they are of God, but Jesus says that he is sent by God; therefore those who are opposed to him are opposed to God (cf. 8.42–47). They think they are of God; what if Jesus made a mistake by rejecting them? That is not possible. The point of the promises is that the Son carries out the will of the Father perfectly.

Jesus will not fail. What is success? Not merely preservation, but final salvation, as Jesus says repeatedly: “I will raise it/him up on the last day” (6.39b, 40b, 44b, 54b). Failure, then, is not permission to fall away but damnation. When Jesus promises, “whoever comes to me I will never cast out (οὐ μὴ ἐκβάλω)” (6.37),

the verb “cast out” might refer to a refusal of initial faith, or a final throwing out into hell, but it can hardly mean “permit to fall away.” When Jesus promises “that I should lose nothing (ἵνα μὴ ἀπολέσω) of all that he has given me” (6.39), the verb “lose” probably does not mean “permit to fall away,” but “cause to perish,” because the alternative is “raise it up on the last day.” (The parallel image in v. 12, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost (ἵνα μὴ ἀπόληται),” also symbolizes resurrection better than preservation.) Jesus’ promise “No one will snatch them out of my hand” (10.28) immediately follows the promise “they will not perish (οὐ μὴ ἀπόλωνται).” Jesus will not fail to raise from the dead all that the Father has given him.

Who are these promises for? The recipients are sometimes characterized objectively: they are those whom the Father gives the Son (6.37), the sheep which belong to him (10.27). But they also have visible characteristics: they come to Jesus (6.37), believe in him (6.40), and follow him (10.27). The key question is: are there people who display these characteristics only for a time? Against such a possibility one might argue that anyone who displays these characteristics at any time is thereby under these promises. But earlier a two-sided version is given: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever *disobeys* (NRSV) the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (3.36). Are we to conclude that anyone who disobeys the Son at any time is under this threat? No, the threat is for the disobedient, and the promise is for the faithful. And since judgment comes at the end, at the individual level this means that he who disobeys to the end will not see life, but he who is faithful to the end will receive eternal life.

Rom 8.28–39 by contrast is clearly meant to give assurance. We discussed vv. 17–28 above (§2.2) and saw that God uses our suffering as his instrument to bring us to glory. This idea remains in the background of what follows: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. . . and those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified” (29–30). God is the one who does all these things. Those whom he predestined to glory, he will bring to glory, in spite of—no, by means of—our present suffering. There may be people who are called and justified but not predestined to glory; they are not in view here. This “golden chain” does not exist for us to compare the number of people in each link, but to show us that our suffering is not a sign that God’s purpose is failing. Those whom he predestined to glory, he will also bring to glory. Paul then resumes from verse 28, the focus shifting back to ‘us.’ Again, this is not a promise specifically of preservation, but of “all things” (v. 32), and this inheritance is given “with him,” that is, in Christ. The warnings above (v. 13) and below (11.22; 14.15) indicate that

we can also reject Christ, and with him all things, and this does not contradict the certainty of the promise of v. 32.

The rest of the passage takes up the question: can anything separate us from this love? He emphatically denies that suffering (continuing with the theme from verse 18) can, nor anything in all creation (including ourselves, we might add). What kind of separation is Paul denying? Is it that something would remove us from God's love, or that something would impede God's love for us? The reference to Ps 44 suggests the latter. This psalm says that God gave victory to our fathers, "for you delighted in them" (v. 3); but now, "For your sake we are killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered" (v. 22 = Rom 8.36). It concludes: "Rise up; come to our help! Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love" (v. 26). The psalmist is not concerned about losing God's love; he knows his people are loved by God, but does not see its effect, namely, redemption. In the same way, when we suffer, we long for our redemption (Rom 8.23), and the power of God's love should remove all doubt that that redemption will come. Does the possibility of falling away contradict this promise? No; if someone falls away, he ceases to be one of us and is no longer under the promise. Again, we see this in Ps 44. "We have not forgotten you, and we have not been false to your covenant. Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way" (vv. 17–18). The psalmist bases his complaint on his faithfulness to the covenant. Likewise, the promise of Rom 8 is for those in Christ, and someone who falls away from Christ does not contradict the promise but excludes himself from it.

4.3 Reconciliation with Christ

If it is possible to fall away from Christ, do texts like the following prove that it is impossible to return to Christ?

For it is impossible *for* those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, *and* fall away, *to be restored again to repentance*, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt (Heb 6.4–6).

Note that it is not necessarily the falling away which recrucifies Christ: the participles "crucifying once again" and "holding up to contempt," though grammatically dependent on the embedded object, qualify the verb, either "restore" or "impossible to restore," but certainly not "fall away" (ἀδύνατον γὰρ τοὺς . . . παραπεσόντας πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν εἰς μετάνοιαν ἀνασταυροῦντας . . . καὶ παραδειγματίζοντας). The

traditional interpretation³⁸ lets them qualify the nearest verb “restore”—that is, the kind of restoration the author is talking about is only that which would recrucify Christ, namely rebaptism. Since Christ was crucified only once, we can only be buried with Christ in baptism once. According to this interpretation, then, this text does not deny forgiveness by some means other than baptism.

How then are mortal sins forgiven? The same way all sins are forgiven: by repenting and trusting in the mercy of God. This normally happens in the sacrament of reconciliation, which finds its basis in Jn 20.23: “If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld” (Jn 20.23; cf. Jas 5.14–15). But what is more relevant to the present discussion is how this forgiveness differs from the initial forgiveness offered in baptism. Reconciliation with Christ is not the same as starting over in Christ, because mortal sin cuts one off from Christ but is not an exact reversal of one’s incorporation into Christ. Rather, it can be seen as an obstacle standing in the way of union with Christ. One example of this is in the idea of the seal of baptism:

Incorporated into Christ by Baptism, the person baptized is configured to Christ. Baptism seals the Christian with the indelible spiritual mark (*character*) of his belonging to Christ. No sin can erase this mark, even if sin prevents Baptism from bearing the fruits of salvation. Given once for all, Baptism cannot be repeated.³⁹

This seal, here called a configuration to Christ and a mark of belonging to Christ, elsewhere called a share in the priesthood of Christ,⁴⁰ persists even in the state of mortal sin. In this sense, then, one’s union with Christ is never terminated, and therefore it cannot be restarted in baptism, but only revived when the obstacle of mortal sin is removed in the sacrament of reconciliation.

5 Conclusion

Mortal sin is not a very happy topic to end with, being the exception to the ideal plan of salvation. I will conclude, then, with the person who is exceptional in the opposite sense—and even more controversial. Mary, in Catholic theology, causes offense to Protestants not so much because the things taught about her are extra-biblical, but because she seems to usurp the place of Christ in so many ways: she is sinless like Christ; she ascended into heaven like Christ; she reigns in heaven like Christ. But the true reason for offense is not that Catholics have too high a view

³⁸ Ambrose *On Repentance* 2.2; Chrysostom *Homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews* 9.6, 8.

³⁹ CCC 1272.

⁴⁰ CCC 1273; *Mediator Dei* 88.

of Mary (whether they do or not), but because Protestants have too low a view of our union with Christ. Mary has been sanctified to be like Christ; so will we. Mary has been resurrected⁴¹ with Christ; so will we. Mary has been seated with Christ; so will we. She is the first and best example of our union with Christ. One might say, Christ is our example. Indeed, but he is also our Redeemer—and he did not redeem us by substituting for us, but by uniting us to him. God’s design for us is to be just as Christ is, but we will never usurp his place because he will always be the Redeemer and we the redeemed. In such a framework Mary falls into place as the perfectly redeemed one, without any danger of usurping the place of the Redeemer. Thus while she is not the center of the Catholic faith—Christ is—she epitomizes the disagreement between the Catholic and Protestant views of our union with Christ.

⁴¹The dogma of the Assumption, as defined, allows for the possibility of the death of Mary, or, as the Orthodox tradition speaks of it, her “dormition.” This view seems to be gaining popularity among Catholics as well, including, reportedly, the present pope.