Union with Christ and Sanctification

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I. Models of Union with Christ in Relation to Sanctification

A. Models and Problems

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1. The Lutheran model
   a. This model is a product of the Reformation, whereby the distinction safeguarded the forensic element from the transformative element. In other words, the RCC desired to merge sanctification and justification, but this model disjoints the two.
   b. Problems:
      1) A major problem with this model is that it fails to show a necessary connection between sanctification and justification. Is it possible to be justified and yet not be sanctified? Some accused such a model of antinomianism.
      2) A second problem concerns the nature of Jesus’ relation to believers. If justification precedes union, then Christ’s work as attributed to us in Christ appears unnecessary for justification. In other words, the question arises, can we be justified before being united to Christ? If so, sharing in the life of the incarnate Christ appears unnecessary to being justified.
   c. This is the model held by Lutheran theologians.

2. The Justification Model
   a. In the interest of maintaining the (1) priority of justification and the (2) separation of justification and sanctification, this position holds that both sanctification and

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2 I add etc. below because other questions within the ordo salutis do not primarily interest us here.
justification are fruits of union; however, justification precedes union within the fruits of union.

b. Problems

1) Again, a separation between justification and sanctification allows for the question of the necessity of sanctification. However, this position advanced beyond the Lutheran, for it shows that sanctification is a fruit of union.

2) This model does not have room for definite sanctification, which appears to be taught in Scripture (see below).

c. This position is defended by those holding “Escondido Theology,” which is the Reformed theology flowing from Westminster Theological Seminary in California (chief proponents are R. Scott Clark, J. V. Fesko, and Michael Horton).³

3. The Two Union Model

a. In order to maintain a biblical emphasis on union and also highlight the disjunctive nature of sanctification and justification, a model of two forms of union was developed.

b. Problems

1) Like the Lutheran/Justification model above, this position faces the question of antinomianism. If Justification is separate and has priority over sanctification, can one be justified without being sanctified?

2) Scripture does not appear to bifurcate union into two separable categories.

c. Some would argue that the justification model and the two union models are the same (e.g., see Evans). Nevertheless, I think there are differences, and so I have separated them here.

4. The Union model⁴

a. This model is based on Calvin,⁵ who argued that the believer ontologically shares in the incarnate person of Christ. Such a union is ultimately mysterious, yet it is what makes justification and sanctification possible for the believer.

b. The proposed problem with this model is the lack of distinction between justification and sanctification—a distinction which has historically been a bulwark against RCC soteriology.

c. This is the position defended by William Evans, Lane Tipton, and Richard Gaffin (mostly connected to Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia).

II. Defense and Explication of the Union Priority Model

A. Calvin on this model:

1. “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.”

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³ I am not suggesting that each of these men hold to the same position on all elements in the discussion. Rather, I am trying to draw broad distinctions.

⁴ This is not a monolithic model. There are significant distinctions between proponents on this list; nevertheless, the classifications are appropriate for our purposes.

⁵ I would argue it is based on Calvin—others would disagree. See the detailed analysis in Miller, “The Debate over the Ordo Salutis in American Reformed Theology.”
2. “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 ye 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.”

3. Calvin maintains the two elements of sanctification when he notes, “being sanctified by his Spirit, we aspire to integrity and purity of life.”

B. Scripture supporting a union model:

1. We will seek to argue for this position by means of four points which build off one another.

2. First, the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus includes within it His adoption, justification, and sanctification.
   a. Because Jesus truly took on flesh, He truly needed to experience sanctification and adoption. And because Jesus took on sin (2 Cor 5:21), He truly needed a declaration of justification.
   b. Justification: I Tim 3:16
   c. Adoption: Romans 1:3-4
   d. Sanctification: Romans 6:10

3. Second, believers are united with Christ into His life history—His death, burial, and resurrection.
   a. Romans 6:1-11
      1) 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 (v. 2-11). He answers not with an 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 (v. 4-5).
      2) 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.
   b. 2 Corinthians 5:14: “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?
   c. Colossians 3:1-4: “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).
   d. Galatians 2:20a, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

4. Third, the redeemed share with Christ all of His soteric benefits in union with His person and work.
a. 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.”

b. Ephesians shows that what Christ received in His resurrection, we also receive.

1) Ephesians 1:20: “[God] worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.”

2) Ephesians 2:5-6: “[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.”

3) Ephesians 1:3: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places”

4) Two things are obvious from the structure of these passages.

   a) First, Paul is expressing that the believer is sharing with Christ—even now—in the benefits Christ offers. One of which is to be seated in the heavenly places, where “every spiritual blessing” resides (Eph. 1:3).

   b) 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).

c. Perhaps the most persuasive way to argue this point is to show how diverse Paul’s “In Christ” language is:

   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).

d. Romans 4:5 serves as a summary of our first three points: “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”

1) How can an event in the life history of Jesus serve as the believer’s justification?

2) 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.

5. Fourth, because Christ contains in Himself all the soteric benefits, union with Him provides all benefits simultaneously, distinctly, and inseparably.

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6 Herman Bavinck, Our Reasonable Faith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 399–400.
8 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.
a. 1 Corinthians 1:30: “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.”

1) Three key elements emerge from this text.

a) First, Christ has ‘become for us’ these soteric blessings. The clear implication is that without Christ these blessings are not attributed to believers.

b) 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.

c) Third, and following from the previous points, the work of union places believers in immediate possession of Jesus’ distinct-yet-inseparable soteric blessings. That the blessings are one-and-many is powerfully displayed in that it is comprehensively “wisdom” but is also, in its diversity, “righteousness, holiness, and redemption.”

C. Response to Detractors

1. Yes, there is a separation between justification and sanctification, but this occurs in the historia salutis not the ordo salutis. In other words, definitive sanctification and justification are given simultaneously, but progressive sanctification is worked out historically as a fruit of union.

2. What many fail to take into proper account is the role of definite sanctification.

   a. 1 Cor 1:2: “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours”

   b. 1 Cor. 6:11: “And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

   c. Eph 5:25: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”

III. Implications for Sanctification

A. First, a proper understanding of union provides the most comprehensive and definitive answer to the Roman Catholic charge that Protestant theology discourages sanctification (or encourages immoral living).

1. Calvin in the midst of RCC teaching said, “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.”

2. 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.

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B. Second, only union with Christ provides a corrective to the RCC sanctification model
   1. Lutheran models denied the merger of justification and sanctification, yet as much as sanctification necessarily followed and appears to flow from justification, they could not show why sanctification did not contribute to justification.
   2. Union, however, provides distinctness and inseparability. They are distinct realities, preserving a grace-focused theology, but they are also inseparable preserving the necessity of good works in the believer’s life.
C. Third, union with Christ highlights the Christ-centered nature of sanctification. One simply cannot be sanctified without union with the person of Christ.
D. Fourth, the basis for progressive sanctification is the definitive sanctification of Christ as that is worked out historically in the life of the believer.
   1. Romans 6:1-11
      a. As noted above, the soteric reality we have shared in provides the basis for our progressive transformation.
      b. In verse 6:2 he notes that believers have died to sin, yet in verse 11 he tells the believers to consider themselves dead to sin.
      c. Throughout the passage, Paul clearly reveals that Christ’s historic experience should be fundamental to our identity.
   2. Hebrews and Perfection (2:10; 5:7-9; 6:1; 7:11, 19, 28; 9:9; 10:1, 14 11:40; 12:2, 23; 13:14)\textsuperscript{10}
      a. We are told to go on to perfection (6:1), but even the heroes of the faith had not yet obtained this (11:40), and the religious rituals of Israel could not accomplish it (7:11, 19; 9:9; 10:1).
      b. However, Christ has been made perfect (2:10; 5:8-9; 7:28), and through him the Spirits in heaven are perfect (12:23).
      c. By means of His death, he made perfect all sanctified by Him (10:10, 14). This is why he can stand as the perfecter of our faith (12:2)

\textsuperscript{10} The idea for the following section comes from the chart on http://assets.bakerpublishinggroup.com/processed/esource-assets/files/1106/original/23-05.pdf?1417663267