

Living in Union with Christ

*Paul's Gospel
and Christian Moral Identity*

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B
Baker Academic

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Introduction

Union with Christ as the Basis for Christian Life

Apart from me you can do nothing.

Jesus in John 15:5

There is a Latin expression that is often encountered in popular culture: *sine qua non*. It means “without which nothing.” It is an expression we use of something that cannot be omitted or set aside without voiding an endeavor entirely: absent this thing, nothing can be done.

The core claim of this book is that all talk of the Christian moral life must begin and end with Paul’s statement “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20), and must understand the work of the Holy Spirit rightly in relation to Christ’s presence. This assertion is the *sine qua non* of the Christian moral life, which is rendered void in its absence. This means that we can never talk about the moral activity of a Christian without always, in the same breath, talking about Jesus, because the goal of our salvation is not that we become morally better versions of ourselves but that we come to inhabit and to manifest *his* moral identity. This Pauline language is mirrored by the words from John’s Gospel, quoted at the opening of

this chapter, which develop the organic representation of the Christian as a branch of Christ himself, the vine. It ought, then, to be unthinkable that Christian leaders would see their task as training believers to live more effectively for God without constantly leading them back to this point. Similarly, it ought to be unthinkable that preachers could ever see their task as *simply* explaining the passage before them and showing the moral burdens it places on their congregations, without also feeling compelled to point to the one person *in* whom those responsibilities could be met. And yet, much of our teaching does precisely this. It seeks to make our people “experts in the Scriptures” so that they will be morally prepared to make the right decisions, but that is all they become: not disciples but scribes.¹

The key point explored in some detail through the body of this book can here be summarized in terms of the prepositions that govern it. Jesus Christ is not represented simply as the one *through* whom we have forgiveness, or even as the one *by* whom the moral life is exemplified, but as the one *in* whom the life of discipleship takes place. Christ himself is present *in* the life of the disciple as the principal moral agent. We are not simply saved *by* him, nor do we merely follow *after* him—though both of these continue to be true—but we participate *in* him. This is why Paul so frequently specifies that the realities of the Christian life are “in Christ.” There is no need here to provide some proof-texts of this, for we can hardly turn a page in the Pauline writings without encountering that expression or a close equivalent. The Spirit, meanwhile, who is so important to Paul’s account of the moral life, is represented not as helping us to fulfill our frustrated potential but as realizing within us the identity of the Son, and he does this because he himself is the Spirit of the Son (Gal. 4:6).

Behind this lies an honest recognition of how sin bears upon our natural selves: sin corrupts each of us through and through, bending our perceptions and values at every level, to the extent that we can only be delivered by someone outside ourselves. This is why we need an “alien” righteousness, for there is no native potentiality for righteousness within us that can meet the need. We need an

1. The word “scribes” is used for the experts in the law with whom Jesus clashes in the Gospels. Some versions (e.g., ESV) translate the underlying Greek term simply as “scribes,” while others (e.g., NIV) use the more dynamic “teachers of the law.”

alien righteousness to be credited to us if we are to stand justified in God’s presence, but we also need it to inhabit our limbs, lips, and neurons if we are to live and think in a way that honors God, if we are to confess him rightly. Hence, the plight of the sinner² can never be solved *by* the sinner, no matter how well trained or well taught we may be, but only by another: the Righteous One who enters our reality to constitute fresh possibilities for our lives. Any attempt to address the plight apart from this One will serve only the idolatrous instincts of the human condition, what Paul calls “the flesh,” and this continues to be true of the Christian life at all points, as idolatrous flesh wars with Christ’s Spirit.

Recognizing this, John Calvin famously wrote of salvation as involving a *duplex gratia*, a “double grace” of both justification and sanctification (a word that here indicates moral transformation and growth), in which both parts of the *duplex* are constituted by Jesus, not justification only. This is why Calvin considered any neglect of sanctification to “rend Christ asunder.”³ It was not because justification by faith in Christ ought to result automatically in moral change but **because moral change** is also a function of the person to whom we are united by the Spirit in faith.

The Problem: A Gospel with Missing Notes

Here, though, is our problem. As I note in chapter 2, the account of salvation that typically underpins models of discipleship within the contemporary church, including within contemporary evangelicalism, differs from Paul’s conception (and Calvin’s) in subtle but highly problematic ways. It runs along the following lines:

The death of Jesus pays for our sins, takes the punishment that we deserve, and makes it possible for us to be right with God; once we are right with God, we receive the Holy Spirit to give us the ability to raise our moral game and to live in obedience to God’s commandments. We still need the gospel of forgiveness, because even in this new life of

2. Note the use of the noun: sin is not just something we do, however frequently, but something constitutive of what we are.

3. See Garcia, *Life in Christ*.

obedience, we continue to fall into sins that need to be paid for, but the transformation of our lives—sanctification—is a different thing, something that comes through the gift of the Spirit.⁴

Some readers may be surprised by any suggestion that this summary of the gospel is open to question; they may already be reaching for biblical passages that will support such an account of salvation. In the past, I would have done so myself. What we need to consider, however, is that the account is problematic because it does not say *enough*. It does not adequately describe in terms of Christ's own personhood the identity of the believer who lives in fellowship with God. It does not sufficiently articulate how the Spirit is to be identified in relation to Jesus Christ. It allows us to talk about the Christian life as something that *we* practice in fellowship with the Spirit, without really forcing us to pay attention to *who we now are* in Christ. In doing so, it allows key elements of the gospel to be assimilated, without our recognizing it, to a modern individualism that will always compromise our Christian growth.

Let me attempt an extended analogy that I think captures something of the current state of evangelical culture and its account of the gospel. When I was a child, we moved frequently because of my father's work, dragging a piano with us on each of the moves. Over time, that poor piano lost some of its workings: some strings went irremediably out of tune, some hammers became dislodged, and some keys became unusable. That did not stop me from annoying my piano teacher by spending most of my time working out how to play the sound tracks to my favorite movies rather than practicing whatever miserable piece of classical music I was supposed to be learning. Yet I had to work around those missing notes. Major themes became curiously minor as flats were substituted for their letter equivalents; other notes were replaced with ones an octave out of register. As the piano deteriorated further and the number of available notes shrank, the tunes became less and less recognizable, until finally reaching the point that they could no longer be labeled with their original titles. What I was playing could no longer meaningfully be called

4. See chap. 2, "Who Am I Really?"

the *Star Wars* theme, for example, because too many of the original notes were missing, and no matter how hard I hit the B-flat, it could not replace the C-sharp. If we had maintained the piano in better condition and ensured that all the notes remained operational, the results would have been fine, but once the notes started to fail, the possibility of playing the tune properly began to be lost. Eventually, I gave up playing altogether, for the piano had really ceased to be a piano and had become an ornament.

The relevant part of this analogy is not the cause of the piano's disrepair but simply its progressively eroding condition. As vital notes from the scale were lost, the remaining notes, though good, were insufficient to make up for their absence. For various historical reasons—good reasons, at that—evangelicals from diverse backgrounds have committed themselves collectively to defending certain truths in the face of their critics. But while we have maintained these notes carefully and have sounded them loudly, gaining a sense along the way of what we hold in common that is distinctively "evangelical," we have allowed other truths to fall into silence. Our ability to sound those other notes where appropriate has been lost. At some point, we must ask ourselves whether we are still playing the original tune or are, perhaps without recognizing it, playing something else, something different. Have we sounded certain good notes so loudly and exclusively that they have come to constitute a different melody? Have we lost so much from our theological scales that what we proclaim is, in fact, a different gospel, much as Paul speaks of something as a "different gospel" in Gal. 1:6? I don't think there is a simple answer to this last question, but the question itself exposes the problem that we need to consider.

Eccentric Participation: Living in Christ and Not in Ourselves

The idea of the Christian self as constituted by Jesus may be difficult for us to wrap our heads around for at least two reasons, both of which I think have contributed to the deterioration of modern accounts of discipleship and ethics. The first is that, as moderns, we are accustomed to speaking about a "person" or a "self" as if it were a

thing in its own right, something that can be isolated from the world around it and still have a definable or describable identity. This is the concept that Charles Taylor famously labels “the buffered self,”⁵ and it is a very important—and notoriously problematic—feature of modern thought. It underpins much ethical debate, as, for example, in the discussion around whether, or at what stage, rights can be assigned to a fetus or embryo; often this is approached as something connected to the point at which we can meaningfully speak of the embryo attaining personhood. The danger for us is that such a way of thinking about the self—as a buffered, isolable thing that inheres in my body and brain—can be so ingrained that we unwittingly assimilate NT teaching to it. Without thinking, we modify the significance of language that speaks of the self or the person in different ways in order to accommodate this modern concept.⁶ We attenuate the force of anything suggesting that “I” might be constituted as a person through my relationships with others, including this particularly significant other called Jesus. This is one of the reasons we find it difficult to comprehend what it means to say “Christ lives in me” or “to live is Christ”: each of us assumes that we are an identity in our own right. We lack a category for our identity being formed through our relational encounter with another.

The second reason is more theologically raw. It bears on our identities as something formed not only by our relationships in general but by our relationship with this one particular person, Jesus Christ. Our minds balk at the idea of our selves being constituted in union with Christ because our minds are sinful, and sin seeks to maintain its grip on us even when its power has formally been broken. If sin is, as Luther described it, a turning inward into ourselves,⁷ then it

5. See Taylor, *Secular Age*. The expression occurs throughout, but important discussions are found on pages 37–42 and 134–42. The latter, in particular, considers the significance of Descartes and the *cogito* for the modern problem of selfhood. For a more comprehensive study of identity, see Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*.

6. For a fuller examination of the modern problem and its bearing on the reading of Paul, see Eastman, *Paul and the Person*. Eastman engages broadly and constructively across the modern disciplines that have grappled with how selfhood is to be understood, drawing on philosophy and psychology as well as on theology.

7. The famous expression used by Luther, who lifted the concept from Augustine and applied it to his reading of Paul, is *homo incurvatus in se*. Some modern theology

is entirely opposed to the act of opening ourselves to the indwelling presence of another, particularly *this* other, who has such power to transform us. Sin seeks to dig in, to hold on to what it occupies.

As Susan Eastman has recently pointed out,⁸ the language that Paul uses of sin’s controlling power (esp. in Rom. 7:20) has some quite striking parallels to the language he uses of Christ’s liberating presence (esp. in Gal. 2:20): both are represented with the language of occupation. Sin dwells in us, compromising our agency and controlling our passions: it is no longer I who act, but the sin that dwells in me (Rom. 7:17). The only solution is to be indwelled by a better presence so that we can say, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). But the sin that inhabits our flesh and our minds will always war with the Spirit, by whom this better indwelling is realized and by whom our minds are transformed. And sin will often do so subtly, disguising its real character with a cloak of religion and piety.

This leads me to a claim that some might find surprising or even offensive. Although we throw the word “sin” around easily and often, especially within evangelicalism, we do not take seriously enough the extent to which it will afflict and subvert our piety—both our practice and our doctrine—if it is not always challenged by the gospel. This, surely, is one of the dominant themes of Scripture in both the OT and NT: those who have received the Word of God turn even it toward the ends of idolatry, and they need to be graciously delivered from their corruptions. It was true of those who danced around a golden calf after they had been led out of Egypt (Exod. 32); it was true of the Pharisees (Matt. 23); it was true of the circumcision group in Galatia and the pseudo-humble in Colossae (Col. 2:23). Most unnervingly, it was true of Peter, a Spirit-filled apostle who had to be challenged by Paul (Gal. 2:11–14). In most of these cases, the persons’ commitment to Scripture is not in question: no one would claim that the Pharisees did not take God’s Word seriously or that Peter’s “evangelicalism” was doubtful. But at some point to which they themselves were blind, their piety was warped by sin and began to serve the wrong ends.

has been critical of this way of thinking about sin, seeing it as highly androcentric. See Jensen, *Gravity of Sin*.

8. Eastman, *Paul and the Person*, 6–8.

If it was true of them, could it be true of us? Might we, even while congratulating ourselves on our commitments to Scripture and its truths, be thinking in fundamentally idolatrous ways?

Legalism: The Idolatrous Self and the Divine Commandments

We often think of idolatry in terms of putting something in the place that should properly be occupied by God alone. That is not wrong, but it needs to be taken a step further. Idolatry is defined by its subjects as much as it is by its objects; we are constitutionally idolatrous, and that is why we turn things into idols. We put such things in the place that God should occupy because it suits our self-centeredness to do so, even if the things we so place then come to enslave and tyrannize us. We put physical idols that represent gods in that place because we see them as things that can be controlled by us: we can appease them, satisfy them, and manipulate them through our rituals, our worship, and our offerings. If we give them the right things, they will give us rain or sunshine or the right kind of children. Yahweh is not like that, but “the gods” are. When we approach God, we do so on *his* terms; when we approach our idols, we do so on *our* terms, since they are really the things *we* have made to be set in God’s rightful place. When those idols then enslave us, it is really our selves that hold us prisoner, because those selves are the things in which sin dwells.

When we put other things in that place (sex, money, success, status, etc.), the same problem is at work: the self is idolatrous because it is self-centered and not God-centered, and having idols of all kinds is the easy way to satisfy the cravings of the self, until the cravings grow worse and the idols grow less rewarding. The easy route to gratification has led us to being owned by the very things we thought would serve our desires.

As I will discuss in chapter 3, Paul uses the same imagery for being enslaved to sin in idolatry—being controlled by the “elemental principles”—that he also uses for legalism. For in truth, legalism is a particular species of idolatry that reflects this same dynamic of self-centeredness. Legalism takes God’s good gifts of Scripture and commandments and turns them to the ends of the self, using them as

the means to gain symbolic capital by controlling the way others think about us and attempting to control the way God thinks about us.

We need to challenge ways of thinking about legalism that see it as someone else’s problem. We tend to think of legalism in terms of a card-carrying commitment to salvation by works, a belief that we ascribe to other religions or to other Christian traditions but from which we ourselves have been delivered. Quite aside from the questions that have been raised about whether the Jews of Jesus’s day ever held to such a belief,⁹ this way of speaking about legalism does little justice to what seems to be a dominant theme in Galatians: legalism involves pursuing status in the eyes of fellow believers, whether consciously or not, and not just seeking to gain credit before God.

Alternatively, we sometimes think of legalism as if it were identical to the maintenance of traditional values, seeing it as a problem that afflicts older Christians who seem to be more morally constrained than we are. We believe that there is not enough grace in their lives, which is why they are so concerned to follow certain traditional practices. Again, aside from the possibility that we may be judging people whose apparently traditional commitments are actually real manifestations of godly decisions, there is a danger that we overlook our own moral motivations, the drive behind our own practices of prayer or worship. In living out our “vibrant,” “modern,” “radical” Christianity, are we actually living out the old problem of idolatry, by which even the goodness of God’s commands is turned into something that the sinful self can commodify?

Here is the most uncomfortable of thoughts. At a certain point, Paul considers the teaching or beliefs of people who appear to have trusted in Christ and to have received the Spirit to constitute a “different gospel” (Gal. 1:6). Paul labels some such people “false brothers” (2:4), but he also speaks of opposing a fellow apostle (Cephas, i.e., Peter, in 2:11) for acquiescing to such beliefs, and of course he writes to the Galatians because such theology is now rife in their midst.

⁹ These questions were asked carefully in Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. While Sanders’s interpretation of Paul has been criticized over the decades, his core claim that grace was a ubiquitous concept in Second Temple Judaism has been broadly accepted, and this in turn has problematized common ways of conceptualizing “works righteousness.”

Scripture itself, then, represents this as a corruption that manifests itself within churches that have professed faith in Christ and have experienced the Spirit. It is not a problem that we can simply project onto other traditions of the church without asking first whether it lives among us.

As we will see in chapter 4, the language that Paul uses of this different gospel represents it as a species of the idolatry from which believers are supposed to have been delivered. This, I think, is a particularly stark example of something that runs as a theme throughout the NT: our constitutional sinfulness, our "flesh," will continue to manifest itself in idolatry whenever it is not seen for what it is and treated with its only antidote, the personal presence of Jesus Christ acting through his Spirit. If we begin to think or to speak about any part of Christian life and ethics apart from Christ, our flesh will turn it into idolatry. Even the best of things, even the commandments of God, taken in isolation from Jesus, will become the stuff of idolatry, as they did for the Galatians, because the commandments are easier to deal with than God himself. If we really take sin seriously, we will recognize this; but perhaps our problem is precisely that we don't take sin seriously enough. For all the frequency with which we talk about sin, we don't acknowledge how deeply it compromises us and how absolute our need for Jesus will always be. We are, by nature, idolaters; the only thing that can overcome this reality, whenever it surfaces, is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Each of us must reflect on this: does the label "evangel" in our particular evangelicalism actually designate that different *euangelion* (gospel) of which Paul speaks? Wouldn't that be an awful thing for any of us to admit?

The Present Study: Its Goals and Shape

What I seek to do in the present study is not to provide a comprehensive account of Christian identity or a systematic discussion of Christian philosophies of selfhood. For those interested in such discussions, other studies are available that do a much better job than I ever could.¹⁰ Neither do I seek to give a systematic or comprehensive

10. See, e.g., Rosner, *Known by God*.

account of sanctification; again, other excellent studies of this kind are available.¹¹ Instead, what I will do is work through a number of passages in which Paul's underlying sense of the reconstitution of Christian identity comes through in the warp and woof of his writing. I will draw out how Paul's different way of thinking about identity in Christ disrupts natural ways of thinking about the moral life. This can, in turn, be brought into dialogue with the more systematic studies noted above, helping to qualify or nuance them. More important, it can be brought into dialogue with the thought, speech, and practice visible in the church today.

This identifies the present work as one of practical theology, though it is a particular species of this. It is the kind of practical theology that is shaped quite immediately by engagement with biblical texts, but in ways oriented toward contemporary challenges and questions; it is practical theological interpretation. This is the kind of interpretation that Luther, Calvin, and the other fathers of Protestant theology engaged in. Luther's reading of Paul has often been criticized for projecting his contemporary situation back onto the apostle's writing, but in truth it is a careful reflection on how Paul's teaching speaks into Luther's situation. Whereas modern biblical scholarship is generally satisfied with the findings of exegesis as a historical task (i.e., what Paul meant, what he intended to say), the practical theological task considers how these findings might be related to the contemporary situation (what Paul now means). This involves an awareness of the character of that contemporary situation, elements of which may be novel and alien to that of the ancient situation, and it involves a sensitivity to the fact that no part of Scripture stands alone. Our reading of Paul must be related to the wider canon of Scripture and to the theological traditions. These elements cannot always be visible in what we do, for space is always limited, but they must inform it.

Because the work is oriented toward the task of practical theology, and hence to the life of the church, I have sought to keep footnotes concerning biblical scholarship to a minimum so that they do not clutter the study. In truth, much of the scholarly literature is really

11. In particular, I direct readers to Allen, *Sanctification*.

concerned with contextual data, often for its own sake (or for the sake of demonstrating erudition), rather than with data genuinely necessary for interpreting the passage. Where I do cite biblical research, it is because I think it is genuinely relevant not just to biblical scholarship but also to pastoral readings of the biblical material. Also, because of this orientation, I have transliterated the Greek so that the work is readable for those whose training may not have included the biblical languages.

The core of this book (chaps. 2–6) was originally delivered as the 2018 Kistemaker Academic Lecture Series in New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando. My series title was “The Reformed Self in Paul,” a play on the theme of personal transformation and the way this theme has been understood in relation to union with Christ in the Reformed tradition. In developing these lectures for publication, it has seemed important to add some further material to contextualize and then conclude my studies. Chapter 1 provides a critical overview of some recent developments in scholarship on Paul and his ethics. Some criticisms will be leveled at other scholarly accounts within this chapter, but for the most part I will simply highlight what I consider to be inadequacies that will be demonstrated by my own readings in the later chapters. Some readers may want simply to skip chapter 1, since the material that follows can be read without it. My sense, though, is that the book would be incomplete without it, since these scholarly movements are quite influential and their effects are felt even at a popular level. Because this chapter will frame what follows in relation to scholarship, it will be fairly heavily footnoted, unlike the remainder of the book. In chapter 2, we will consider what Paul says in the opening chapters of Galatians, relating this to the way he now evaluates his old, natural way of thinking about his righteousness in Phil. 3. Now that the viciousness of his natural self, his flesh, has become visible to him, he has come to recognize that he had been treating righteousness like a commodity that he could own and accumulate, thereby acquiring power over others and over God. Now that he is “in Christ,” his whole way of relating to God and the world has changed, and with it his whole way of conceiving righteousness. In chapter 3, we will focus on baptism as a practice that is represented in terms of our union with Christ,

which is rendered through the imagery of clothing ourselves with him. In chapter 4, we will look at the role that the Lord’s Supper (Eucharist) plays in Paul’s account of Christian moral identity: in the Lord’s Supper, we occupy and perform a memory of Jesus that makes his story ours and, in doing so, redefines our relationships with the world and with God. In chapter 5, we will consider how sanctification and transformation are portrayed as a genuine struggle, the war of flesh and Spirit, showing how this is represented not in terms of programmatic development but in the personal terms of clothing ourselves with who Christ is. Chapter 6 will then take this imagery of struggle and conflict and relate it to Christian hope, our orientation toward a future that will involve a decisive transformation. Chapter 7 will offer a set of concluding reflections directed explicitly toward pastoral application.