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—RICHARD A. MULLER, *P. J. Zondervan Professor of Historical Theology, Calvin Theological Seminary*

“The Puritans are undoubtedly one of the most significant sources for theology that is both doctrinal and practical in equal measure. This massive volume by Joel Beeke and Mark Jones provides the reader with a comprehensive introduction to Puritan thought. It is a notable work of historical-theological synthesis and a book to which I will be returning again and again, both for scholarly reference and personal devotion. Simply an amazing achievement.”

—CARL R. TRUEMAN, *Paul Woolley Professor of Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary*

“Experiential theology begins with this—Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. It is personalized thus—He loved me and gave Himself for me. It can’t be studied in cold blood because of the grace that has delivered us from ignorance, shame, and hell. Who is the God who has done this? What am I that He should have done this for me? Theology answers these questions. Wrong answers will lead to wrong living. No body of men is more helpful in teaching the profoundest and yet the most accessible theology than the Puritans. They were lucid and passionate in explaining and applying what was true. This book will lead to deeper knowledge; it will also lead to greater love for Him who is the object of all true theology, the living God.”

—GEOFF THOMAS, *Pastor of Alfred Place Baptist Church, Aberystwyth, Wales*

“Joel Beeke and Mark Jones are to be congratulated on the publication of this volume. They have collaborated to produce a book missing from Puritan studies: a systematization of *loci* and topics in Puritan theology. This collection of studies represents both a labor of spiritual love and a love of spiritual labor. It shows an extensive grasp of the relevant literature and will soon become the first stop for any serious inquiry into Puritan views on theological subjects. More than that, it will become a devotional tool in its own right, since Puritan theology was as much about enflaming the soul as about informing the mind. May it be used of God to enable us to love Him with heart, mind, soul, and strength, even as we love our Puritan forebears as ourselves!”

—IAIN D. CAMPBELL, *Minister of the Free Church of Scotland, Point, Isle of Lewis, Scotland*

“This is a remarkable book, invaluable for our study of the Puritans, but more than that, invaluable in making us Puritans ourselves, using the Bible and its theology the way our Father designed it for the transformation of our hearts and lives. Very clearly and very succinctly it arranges the great Puritan themes in contexts and sequences we can recognize. It brings us up to date on the relevant scholarship on the most controversial of the themes and guides us carefully in evaluating that scholarship. I found this book especially helpful in showing us how to think in a Christ-centered way—something we talk much about but don’t usually know what we are saying.”

—D. CLAIR DAVIS, *Professor of Church History, Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary*

“All serious-minded Christians will be thankful for the labor of love performed by Drs. Beeke and Jones in compiling *A Puritan Theology*. The book will be an excellent reference resource for all who study or teach theology or want to grasp what the Puritans thought or what contribution they made to a particular *loci* of theology. But since it is so well written, it also will be edifying for anyone who simply reads through it *seriatim*.”

—JOSEPH A. PIPA JR., *President and Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology, Greenville Presbyterian Seminary*

“In *A Puritan Theology* Joel Beeke and Mark Jones help us to taste in one serving some of the best from the Puritan theological buffet on the Christian life. Many of us who have feasted sumptuously from these choice servants of God have stood helplessly as we have seen their prodigious production, wondering how we can have a feel of the entire culinary. Here is an answer to our prayers! The size of this book should not make you hesitate to join the feast. Rather, may it only whet your appetite to delve deeper into the kind of meal that has turned many spiritual infants into mature manhood in Christ.”

—CONRAD MBEWE, *Pastor of Kabwata Baptist Church, Lusaka, Zambia*

“At last! A book that addresses not simply a single Puritan writer or a single doctrine but that presents the breadth of Puritan theology, and does so not for professional theologians alone but for every believer who wants to know the blessing of this ‘doctrine for life’ in his own life. The authors do this not by giving their own summary of Puritan thought, but by presenting a great variety of Puritan thinkers and letting them speak for themselves, going to the primary sources and quoting them at length. This large volume represents a lifetime of research and reflection by authors who share the Puritan faith. It is a truly *magnum opus* that will soon become a standard textbook for its subject.”

—ROBERT B. STRIMPLE, *Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology, Westminster Seminary California*

“A systematic theology, covering the main *loci* of doctrine, from a Puritan perspective, with insightful comment and analysis from two respected Puritan scholars of our time. What more needs to be said by way of commendation? A necessary text for seminarians and all serious students of theology.”

—DEREK W. H. THOMAS, *Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary*

“In this volume the tremendous renaissance in Puritan studies that has been going since the 1960s finds its *magnum opus*, a truly fabulous resource for all who are interested in and love the Puritans. While nearly as exhaustive as one could wish for, it is also replete with chapters that detail the thought of individual Puritans. Without a doubt, this will be an indispensable guidebook to Puritan thought and practice for years to come.”

—MICHAEL A. G. HAYKIN, *Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*

“No expression of the Christian faith has excelled that of the great Puritans and those who followed in their steps. This excellent volume by Dr. Beeke and Dr. Jones presents to the reader a rich feast both in academic theology and practical divinity. It deserves to be read, studied, and re-read by all who are hungry to know God better and to know how to glorify Him more.”

—MAURICE ROBERTS, *Emeritus Minister in Inverness, Free Church of Scotland (Continuing)*

“For their exegetical insight, theological precision, and heartwarming devotion, the Puritans remain a gold mine. There are great modern editions of many Puritan classics, anthologies collecting their quotes on various subjects, and myriad studies of the movement. So it’s a little surprising that a Puritan systematic theology like this one has never been written. I’m just glad that it has been, and by two scholar-pastors whose familiarity with the primary and secondary sources is unsurpassed. I couldn’t put it down and will return to it again and again. It is an ambitious undertaking, but the authors’ pain is our gain. This will be an enduring reference work as well as devotional resource.”

—MICHAEL HORTON, *J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California*

“Leading Puritan studies scholars, Joel Beeke and Mark Jones, join forces to offer a comprehensive and impressive treatment of Puritan teaching on most major *loci*, or topics of theology, ranging from prolegomena to eschatology. This book is a unique achievement, for it supersedes all previous books on Puritan theology through its breadth of scope and its richness of both historical detail and theological insight. This book will interest a wide audience ranging from theologians to historians, from pastors to educated laymen, who seek to learn about how the Puritans sought to renew theology in conjunction with the practice of piety. At the same time it shows the modern reader that in Puritan theology rational activity is embedded in a scripturally deep spiritual receptivity that we rarely find in modern theology. Indeed, Puritan theology is doctrine for Life!”

—WILLEM J. VAN ASSELT, *Professor of Historical Theology, The Evangelical Theological Faculty in Leuven, Belgium*

“This is, undoubtedly, the *magnum opus* of Joel Beeke and Mark Jones—their greatest contribution to the study of our Calvinist forefathers, the Puritans. With this massive corpus, the authors make an enormous contribution to our understanding of Puritan theology by compiling this war chest of their teaching. This work is scholarly, well researched, precise, and comprehensive in scope, yet accessible in style. This one-volume theology allows us to sit at the feet of these luminous figures and be taught by their Scripture-steeped, God-saturated writings.”

—STEVEN J. LAWSON, *Christ Fellowship Baptist Church, Senior Pastor, Mobile, Alabama*

“An obvious labor of love, *A Puritan Theology* is at the same time an impressively competent and balanced study in historical theology. It should go a long way toward dispelling misconceptions present among those who, whether approvingly or dismissively, think they know what the Puritans said. In reading I have been impressed anew with the deep and cordial lines of continuity there are between Calvin, the mainstream of seventeenth-century Reformed orthodoxy of which this study shows the Puritans were an integral part, and the best of the redemptive-historical insights of more recent Reformed biblical theology. A broad audience from scholars to interested laypersons will read this lucid and winsomely written ‘doctrine for life’ (its subtitle) with great profit. I commend it most highly.”

—RICHARD B. GAFFIN, JR., *Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary*

A PURITAN
THEOLOGY

A PURITAN THEOLOGY

Doctrine for Life

JOEL R. BEEKE

AND

MARK JONES



REFORMATION HERITAGE BOOKS

Grand Rapids, Michigan

A Puritan Theology

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To

David P. Murray

spiritual brother, caring friend, loyal colleague,
Christ-exalting preacher, and gifted teacher;

and

the **theological students**

to whom I have been privileged to teach Puritan theology at
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary
Reformed Theological Seminary
Westminster Seminary California
Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia)
Grand Rapids Theological Seminary
and
seminaries in a few dozen foreign countries around the globe.

*Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think,
according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus
throughout all ages, world without end. Amen (Ephesians 3:20–21).*

—JRB



To

Barb

wife, friend, soccer star, and mother of our beloved children;

and

**Robert J. McKelvey, James F. Wright, Mark A. Herzer,
John L. Ronning, and Patrick Stevenson,**
who have taught me “doctrine for life.”

*Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power,
be unto him that sitteth upon the throne,
and unto the Lamb for ever and ever (Revelation 5:13).*

—MJ

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Foreword

The one thousand pages and more than half a million words you now hold in your hand constitute the largest and most comprehensive exposition to date on the theology of the English Puritans. It is a remarkable achievement, the fruit of many combined decades of reading, research, and reflection on the part of its authors.

Dr. Joel R. Beeke and Dr. Mark Jones are both published experts in Puritan theology. Here they have combined their resources to produce a work of such wide-ranging exposition and analysis that it will, surely, be many years before the like is attempted again.

There is something for everyone here. *A Puritan Theology* is a veritable Who's Who of the Puritan era. Here the twenty-first century reader can imagine him or herself transported back to London, Cambridge, and Oxford in the seventeenth century to rub shoulders with one of the most amazing spiritual brotherhoods in the history of English-speaking Christianity. Here we meet William Perkins, whose preaching left such an impact on the city and University of Cambridge that when Thomas Goodwin matriculated as a youngster ten years after his death, "the town was still full of his [Perkins's] preaching." And that is only the beginning. For soon we encounter the twin giants of Congregationalism, Thomas Goodwin and John Owen, as well as the master exposition of the law of God, Anthony Burgess; the systematic textual expositor and royal chaplain, Thomas Manton; the "sweet dropper," Richard Sibbes; the God-saturated Stephen Charnock; the commentator Matthew Henry; and many others. As one returns to the world of twenty-first century church, one cannot help feeling that there were giants in the land in those days.

There are too many outstanding features of this volume to list them adequately. The sheer range of theology covered—each locus in the theological encyclopedia is touched on—is breathtaking; the focus of attention on some of the most significant thinkers, preachers, and writers (who were men who, to a remarkable degree, combined all three) is profoundly impressive. Within this broad context, however, certain emphases are bound to impress even the cursory reader of these sixty chapters.

The first is just how deeply these men—who spent most of their lives in pastoral ministry—had studied and knew Scripture. Often one is struck with a sense of passages and texts being held up to the light like a freshly cut diamond and then being slowly turned so that each facet might reflect the light. These were biblical theologians—in both senses of the term: biblical in the sense that they quarried their theology from the Bible, but also biblical in the more modern sense of understanding and being concerned to expound the unified flow of the story of salvation and to see each element of it in its proper place in the story. To many who have never read the Puritans in detail, the claim of a recent scholar that John Owen matches (if not surpasses!) Geerhardus Vos

as a biblical theologian may seem incomprehensible;¹ but no one who has read the works of these men in detail would ever think they were simply “proof-texters,” interested in a statement here and a phrase there. Their sense of the deep-down interconnectedness of Scripture is impressive indeed. Hence, in this volume the discussion of covenant theology takes some one hundred pages.

But secondly, while in the best sense they were biblicists (after all, they believed the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are God’s Word), they were also profoundly conscious that they were called to comprehend the breadth, length, height, and depth of God’s love together “with all saints” (Eph. 3:18). Thus, while often thought of narrowly as “Calvinists,” they themselves were deeply conscious that they stood in an older and larger tradition than merely that of Geneva. Indeed one is far more likely to find them quoting Augustine than Calvin, for example. They were conscious, with Bernard of Chartres, that they were “dwarfs seated on the shoulders of giants so that we can see more than they.”²

But in addition to this it is clear that the “Puritan Brotherhood” were men who thought theologically, profoundly, and prayerfully. To read their work, be it on the Trinity or the person of Christ or the holiness of the Christian, is to enter a different and more rarified atmosphere than that to which most of us have become accustomed. When, for example, we discover that one of John Owen’s most celebrated treatises, *On the Mortification of Sin*,³ owes its origins to sermons preached to a congregation made up largely of teenage students at the University of Oxford, we are likely to feel a little dizzy. But then, on reflection, we begin to understand that Owen and his comrades in arms had it right: teaching Christian believers how to deal with sin should be done *before* we are overtaken in sin because of our naivety about our own spiritual strength and our ignorance of biblical instruction.

These pages are not replete with complexities and obscurities. Nor are they light reading. One is again reminded of some words of the young John Owen (at the time a somewhat edgy thirty-year-old!) as he introduces his work *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* with some comments to the reader:

If thou intendest to go any farther, I would entreat thee to stay here a little. If thou art, as many in this pretending age, a sign or title gazer, and comest into books as Cato into the theatre, to go out again—thou hast had thy entertainment; farewell!⁴

But if you share the concern of the Puritans to think biblically in order to live to the glory of God, these pages will prove to be a goldmine and an example of what Paul termed “the acknowledging of the truth which is after [i.e., accords with] godliness” (Titus 1:1).

Here, then, is a rare find: a thesaurus of theological, intellectual, spiritual, and practical treasure. Dr. Beeke and Dr. Jones have put us in their debt, and we are grateful for that. So, since the Puritans regarded themselves as at root followers of Augustine, all that remains to be said can be expressed in the words that led to his great change: *Tolle lege*—pick up the book and read it!

— Sinclair B. Ferguson
First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, South Carolina

1. See Richard Barcellos, *The Family Tree of Reformed Theology* (Palmdale, Calif.: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2010).

2. John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury: A Twelfth-Century Defense of the Verbal and Logical Arts of the Trivium*, trans. with intro. and notes by Daniel E. McGarry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), 167.

3. This treatise can be found in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Johnstone, 1850–53), 6:1–86.

4. In *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Johnstone, 1850–53), 10:149.

Acknowledgments

No book of this size leaves its authors without substantial thanks to a goodly number of people. I, Joel Beeke, would like to thank Mark Jones, my coauthor, for his remarkable cooperation in writing this book. There are few Reformed scholars in the world as easy to work with as Mark Jones! He originally sent me several chapters on the Puritan view of the covenants of works and grace to consider for publication. When I shared with him my vision to write a “Puritan systematic theology of sorts,” which I hoped to do after retiring from teaching, he showed keen interest in coauthoring the work with me. I drafted a plan for seventy-some chapters, which overwhelmed him (and me!). We cut it back to thirty chapters, but then it grew to sixty. Throughout, Mark was diligent and helpful. Without you, Mark, this book would have not seen the light of day for another decade or two, and it would not be as good as it is.

I am also deeply grateful to my teaching assistant, Paul Smalley, for his assistance in writing several chapters, in addition to coauthoring four chapters (6, 11, 12, and 28) with me. I am particularly grateful for our daily prayer times together, which included many petitions for divine benediction upon this volume. Paul, your servant heart, your love for Puritan theology, and your growing knowledge of the Puritans have been a source of great joy and strength to me.

Thanks, too, to my other coauthor friends: Jan Van Vliet (chapter 3), Sinclair B. Ferguson (chapter 10), James A. La Belle (chapters 26 and 56), Tim Worrell (chapter 37), and Matthew Westerholm (chapter 44). Thanks, too, to Sinclair for his excellent foreword. You have all been a tremendous source of encouragement.

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I also thank all our PRTS students and alumni, together with students at other seminaries around the world, as well as conference attendees, to whom I have taught Puritan theology. Several of these chapters have grown out of seminary lectures in my Puritan Theology class or out of conference addresses in various countries on aspects of Puritan thought.

My dear, faithful wife, Mary, is a constant source of inspiration. I thank her for amazing devotion to me and my work. Without her, I would not accomplish half of what I am privileged to accomplish. I am grateful for my loving children, Calvin, Esther, and Lydia, whose kindness to me is humbling.

Most of all, I am grateful to my triune God and Savior, who makes Himself increasingly lovable to me the older I grow. I certainly can concur with Samuel Rutherford (1600–1661) that I do not know which Divine Person I love the most, Father, Son, or Holy Ghost—but know that I love each of them and need them all. One thing that has allured me to the Puritans, whom I started reading fifty years ago at the age of nine, is their obsession with God Triune. Increasingly I covet their trinitarian centeredness, both as theologians and as believers in Christ.

In terms of past influences that stirred within me a love for reading the Puritans, I owe the most to my father, John Beeke, and his experiential conversations with me as a teenager. They reinforced the Puritan paperbacks in his bookcase, which I devoured. I am also grateful to Iain Murray and the Banner of Truth Trust's books and conferences; Sinclair B. Ferguson and his passion for John Owen; and D. Clair Davis and his encouragement while studying the Puritan view of assurance of faith for my doctoral dissertation at Westminster Seminary.

* * *

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Some of the chapters I wrote in this book are coauthored. I am privileged to have cowritten chapters with two of my mentors, Mark Herzer (chapter 29) and Bob McKelvey (chapter 51). They taught me at seminary and will, in this life, always be my superiors in doctrine and in life. Michael Haykin (chapter 27), Danny Hyde (chapter 41), Ryan Kelly (chapter 39), Gert van den Brink (chapter 8), and Ted van Raalte (chapter 45) also cowrote chapters with me. I am understating the case when I say that our cowritten chapters are far better than they would have been if I had done them alone. Readers will surely profit from their scholarship, as I have. Thanks, too, to Hunter Powell for all his assistance.

I owe much to Joel Beeke, my coauthor. Several years ago I would never have dreamt of writing such a substantial work on Puritan theology with him. But through various providences I have been given this wonderful privilege, and I only hope that my work will not look out of place alongside his. He is a living Puritan both in learning and in piety.

Writing this book has taken no small amount of time. I am deeply grateful for my congregation at Faith Vancouver Presbyterian Church. Some of the time I have spent on this book could perhaps have been spent on them instead. I willingly acknowledge their sacrifices in making this project a reality.

With the birth of my twin boys, Thomas and Matthew, in July 2010, I wondered if this book would ever see publication. Coupled with the already significant responsibilities of raising my other two covenant children, Katie and Josh, I gladly acknowledge the help of my wife, Barbara, whose love, patience, and encouragement are the chief reasons, humanly speaking, for why this book is now complete.

To the triune God who has loved me with an everlasting love, and who will continue to love me forever because of Jesus Christ, I join with the apostle Paul in doxology: “for of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

—Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones

The Puritans on Union with Christ, Justification, and Regeneration

By a true and real union, (but which is only passive on their part,) [the elect] are united to Christ when his Spirit first takes possession of them, and infuses into them a principle of new life: the beginning of which life can be from nothing else but from union with the Spirit of Christ.... Further, since faith is an act flowing from the principle of spiritual life, it is plain, that in a sound sense, it may be said, an elect person is truly and really united to Christ before actual faith.

—HERMAN WITSIUS¹

How does regeneration relate to the believer's union with Christ and his justification by faith alone? As on other matters, the Puritans were not silent on this question. Thomas Halyburton (1674–1712), a Puritan-minded minister and theologian in the Church of Scotland, provides a particularly incisive look into the relationship between regeneration and justification in his work *A Modest Inquiry Whether Regeneration or Justification Has the Precedency in Order of Nature*.² Does justification, "in the order of nature, precede the renovation of our natures by the spirit of Christ.... Or, on the other hand, are elect sinners first renewed, regenerated, and furnished with a principle of life... whereon justification follows in the same instant of time, yet as consequent in order of nature?"³ Sensitive to the intricacies bound up with this question, Halyburton catalogs a number of difficulties on both sides of the question.

Supposing that regeneration precedes justification, Halyburton lists the following seven difficulties: (1) How can God, in His wisdom, impart His image to a sinner who is under a curse? (2) How then can a sinner who is under God's curse be "dignified with the image of God"? (3) How can the object of justification be a renewed saint, which would seem to contradict Romans 4:5? (4) Can a soul partake of spiritual life before union with Christ? "Union is by faith, by which we come to Christ for life: but this renders it needless, because we have life before union." (5) This order would make receiving the Spirit antecedent to union and faith, but we receive the Spirit by faith (Gal. 3:14). (6) This would make the heart purified before faith, but the heart is purified by faith (Acts 15:9). (7) A person becomes a Christian by the Word; the

1. Herman Witsius, *Conciliatory, or Irenical Animadversions on the Controversies Agitated in Britain, under the Unhappy Names of Antinomians and Neonomians*, trans. Thomas Bell (Glasgow: W. Lang, 1807), 68.

2. Thomas Halyburton, *A Modest Inquiry Whether Regeneration or Justification Has the Precedency in Order of Nature*, in *The Works of the Rev. Thomas Halyburton...* (London: Thomas Tegg & Son, 1835).

3. Halyburton, *A Modest Inquiry*, in *Works*, 547.

Word is received by faith, which suggests that faith should precede regeneration.⁴ These various problems and mysteries follow from the view that regeneration precedes justification.

On the other hand, if justification precedes regeneration, there are also several difficulties involved. The first is ecclesiastical in nature, namely, Reformed divines “harmoniously teach the contrary”; and the Reformed confessions likewise deny that justification precedes regeneration. Moreover, how can acts of life exist if there is not an abiding principle for them from which to proceed? Even more pertinently, how can a dead soul “be the subject of this noblest act of faith that unites to Christ”? After all, there are many acts of justifying faith, such as assenting, choosing, approving, and resting in Christ. Can a dead soul do these things? The fruit of faith needs a root, and a dead root will not do.⁵ Halyburton claims that these and other difficulties exist with the view that justification precedes regeneration.

Threefold Union

Reformed theologians in seventeenth-century Britain typically posited a threefold union with Christ in terms of God’s immanent, transient, and applicatory works. Some even spoke of justification in relation to these three stages, which led to the doctrine of eternal justification.⁶ “Immanent union” refers to being elected in union with Christ from all eternity, before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4); “transient union” refers to believers’ union with Christ in time past, in His mediatorial death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3–11); and “applicatory union” refers to the believer’s experience of union with Christ in the present time (Eph. 2:5–6). Peter Bulkeley (1583–1659) follows this threefold pattern when he refers to the doctrine of justification, first, “as purposed and determined in the mind and will of God.... Second, as impetrated and obtained for us by the obedience of Christ.... Third, as actually applied unto us.”⁷ The third stage of union with Christ is often referred to as our “mystical” union with Christ.

Halyburton notes these distinctions and stresses that each part of this threefold union with Christ is related to the others in a fundamental way. Those who were elected in Christ in eternity past are those for whom Christ died and rose again in time past, and they are the ones to whom the Holy Spirit applies all the benefits of Christ’s mediatorial work. There is a unity in God’s will. All three persons of the Godhead concurred in the work of salvation in the eternal covenant of redemption. That is to say, the salvation of the elect is certain because it is rooted in the eternal, unchangeable decree of God. Moreover, there was a “general justification” effected by Christ’s oblation, but this is not “justification properly and strictly called.”⁸ Even for those who spoke of justification as eternal (e.g., Thomas Goodwin [1600–1680]), a sinner nevertheless abides under the wrath of God until he or she believes.⁹

Clearly, therefore, there are various ways in which believers are united to Christ, and they are all necessary for salvation. No one will come to faith in Christ who has not been elected in eternity, and not without the benefit of Christ’s oblation and intercession. This chapter will address “applicatory union,” the mystical or experiential union between the believer and Christ. The Puritans seemed to be agreed on the relationship between the believer’s experiential union with Christ and the believer’s personal regeneration.

4. Halyburton, *A Modest Inquiry*, in *Works*, 547.

5. Halyburton, *A Modest Inquiry*, in *Works*, 548.

6. See chapter 8, “Thomas Goodwin and Johannes Maccovius on Justification from Eternity.”

7. Peter Bulkeley, *The Gospel-Covenant* (London: Tho[mas] Parker, 1674), 358.

8. Halyburton, *A Modest Inquiry*, in *Works*, 550.

9. That is, “until the Holy Spirit doth in due time actually apply Christ unto them” (WCF, 11.4).

The Chief Blessing?

Of all the blessings of salvation, which is the chief or primary blessing? Is it justification by faith, that “article of faith by which the church stands or falls” (*articulus stantis aut cadentis Ecclesiae*)?¹⁰ In the judgment of several significant Puritan theologians, union with Christ, not justification by faith, is the chief blessing a Christian receives from God. The believer’s union with Christ enables him to receive all the benefits of Christ’s work, including justification, adoption, and sanctification. To have Christ is to have all.

John Calvin’s famous statement in the opening words of the third book of the *Institutes*, on the importance of union with Christ shows the basic continuity between the Reformers and the Puritans on this point.¹¹ Calvin asks, “How do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only-begotten Son—not for Christ’s own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men?” He answers, “First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.”¹² In plain terms therefore Calvin argues the absolute necessity of union with Christ for salvation. So long as we stand apart from Christ, nothing He did as mediator can be of use to us.

The Puritans agreed with Calvin on the necessity of union with Christ. For John Owen (1616–1683), union with Christ is the “principle and measure of all spiritual enjoyments and expectations.”¹³ He notes moreover that the first spiritual grace is “dignity,” that is, “it is the greatest, most honourable, and glorious of all graces that we are made partakers of.”¹⁴ Thomas Goodwin similarly comments that “being in Christ, and united to him, is the fundamental constitution of a Christian.”¹⁵ These comments provide insight into how union with Christ relates to justification, adoption, and sanctification.

10. Interestingly, Robert J. McKelvey has shown that Martin Luther may never have called justification the article by which the church stands or falls, even though the concept belongs to him. McKelvey writes: “Though the ‘stands or falls’ wording is often attributed to Martin Luther a primary source has never been cited. He could still be the originator of the phrase, as attribution to him comes as early as the seventeenth century. For example, William Eyre refers to justification as *‘articulus stantis aut cadentis Ecclesiae*, as Luther calls it.... Thus, Richard John Neuhaus...wrongly argues that the ‘stands or falls’ phrase did not originate until the eighteenth century.” Robert J. McKelvey, “That Error and Pillar of Antinomianism: Eternal Justification,” in *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin and Mark Jones (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), chap. 10.

11. Three recent studies on Calvin that address his doctrine of union with Christ are worth considering, though they are not without their different emphases and disagreements in places. See Cornelis P. Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ: The “Twofold Grace of God” and the Interpretation of Calvin’s Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007); Todd J. Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Mark A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin’s Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008). Cf. Lee Gatiss, “The Inexhaustible Fountain of All Goodness: Union with Christ in Calvin’s Commentary and Sermons on Ephesians,” *Themelios* 34, no. 2 (July 2009): 194–206.

12. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.1.1.

13. John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *The Works of John Owen, D.D.* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 20:146.

14. Owen, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *Works*, 20:148.

15. Thomas Goodwin, *Of Christ the Mediator*, in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, ed. Thomas Smith (1861–1866; repr., Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 5:350.

Union with Christ and the *Ordo Salutis*

As Halyburton notes, the common Reformed view on the order of justification and regeneration is that the latter precedes the former. But what about the role of union with Christ in relation to regeneration and justification? Goodwin affirms, as one would expect, that union with Christ is the “first fundamental thing of justification, and sanctification and all.”¹⁶ Thus, in specific relation to justification, Goodwin maintains that “all acts of God’s justifying us depend upon union with Christ, we having him, and being in him first, and then thereby having right to his righteousness.”¹⁷ But in relation to regeneration or, more specifically, effectual calling, Goodwin argues that union with Christ precedes regeneration. Christ first “apprehends” the believer: “It is not my being regenerate that puts me into a right of all those privileges, but it is Christ [who] takes me, and then gives me his Spirit, faith, holiness, &c. It is through our union with Christ, and the perfect holiness of his nature, to whom we are united, that we partake of the privileges of the covenant of grace.”¹⁸ This statement appears to indicate that union with Christ logically (not chronologically), precedes not only justification—a typical Reformed view—but even regeneration (narrowly considered).

What makes Goodwin’s views on this matter perplexing is the fact that within the space of six pages he affirms there is a “threefold union with Christ”¹⁹ and a “twofold union with Christ.”²⁰ The first union is a relational union, like the union between a husband and wife. “And this union is fully and completely done when first we are turned to God, and when Christ takes us.”²¹ The second union involves the dwelling of Christ in the human body (Eph. 3:17)—“an actual in-being of his person.” The third is objective, that is, having Christ as an object of faith “as the faculty doth view an object.”²² When Goodwin later speaks of the twofold union, he has in mind the first two under the heading of a “substantial union and communicative union.”²³ The union that we are especially concerned with is the first union, the union whereby the sinner is married to Christ. How does this happen? Returning to Goodwin’s comment above that “Christ takes me, and then gives me his Spirit, faith, holiness, &c.,” we are faced with the question of whether union with Christ precedes faith itself.

Goodwin’s *The Object and Act of Justifying Faith* is helpful in answering this question. In it, he speaks of the act of the will completing the union between Christ and the believer, which makes believers “ultimately one with him.”²⁴ However, as the bride, we are simply confirming the union that has taken place. So, contrary to the common view of marriage, which requires the consent of both partners since a man cannot marry a woman against her will, there is a spiritual union on Christ’s part to the elect that does not require assent from the sinner “because it is a secret work done by his Spirit, who doth first apprehend us ere we apprehend him.”²⁵ That is to say, Christ establishes a union with the elect sinner by “apprehending” him and then giving the Spirit to him.

16. Goodwin, *Of Christ the Mediator*, in *Works*, 5:350.

17. Thomas Goodwin, *The Object and Acts of Justifying Faith*, in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (1861–1866; repr., Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 8:406.

18. Goodwin, *Of Christ the Mediator*, in *Works*, 5:350.

19. Thomas Goodwin, *Exposition of Various Portions of the Epistle to the Ephesians*, in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (1861–1866; repr., Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 2:404.

20. Goodwin, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, in *Works*, 2:409.

21. Goodwin, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, in *Works*, 2:409–10.

22. Goodwin, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, in *Works*, 2:404.

23. Goodwin, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, in *Works*, 2:410.

24. Goodwin, *The Object and Acts of Justifying Faith*, in *Works*, 8:273.

25. Goodwin, *The Object and Acts of Justifying Faith*, in *Works*, 8:273.

But this union is only complete (“ultimate union”) when the sinner exercises faith in Christ. This basic pattern is confirmed later in Goodwin’s work on justifying faith:

It is true indeed the union on Christ’s part is in order of nature first made by the Spirit; therefore Philip. iii. 12, he is said first to “comprehend us ere we can comprehend him;” yet that which makes the union on our part is faith, whereby we embrace and cleave to him.... It is faith alone that doth it. Love indeed makes us cleave to him also, but yet faith first.²⁶

Goodwin is at his finest when he speaks of Christ “taking,” “apprehending,” and “comprehending” the sinner. Christ “takes hold of us before we believe” and “works a thousand and a thousand operations in our souls to which our faith concurs nothing.... Christ dwells in us and works in us, when we act not and know not our union, nor that it is he that works.”²⁷ Before the new believer is aware, our Lord unites us to Himself (“takes hold of us”) and works in us. The Spirit then regenerates the sinner, who in turn exercises faith toward Christ and completes the union. From that union flow all other spiritual blessings.

Owen highlights a number of ways in which union with Christ functions as the “greatest” of all graces. In terms of the present question, his point that union with Christ is the “first and principal grace in respect of causality and efficacy” is most pertinent to how we locate union with Christ in the *ordo salutis*. Like Goodwin, Owen claims that union with Christ is the cause of all other graces a believer receives: “Hence is our adoption, our justification, our sanctification...our perseverance, our resurrection, our glory.”²⁸ Therefore, union with Christ is the ground of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers.²⁹ Owen’s lengthy work on justification (volume 5) confirms the logical priority of union with Christ before other graces such as justification.³⁰ But regarding the relationship between union and regeneration, Owen seems to take a view similar to Goodwin’s. At first glance it appears this is not so, for Owen argues that no one “who hath not been made partaker of the washing of regeneration and the renovation of the Holy Ghost, can possibly have any union with Christ.”³¹ This seems to posit a logical priority of regeneration to union. But Owen then remarks immediately after that statement: “I do not speak this as though our purifying were in order of time and nature antecedent unto our union with Christ, for indeed it is an effect thereof; but it is such an effect as immediately and inseparably accompanieth it, so that where the one is not, there is not the other.”³² With a little more precision than Goodwin, though basically affirming the same position, Owen asserts that the act whereby Christ unites Himself to His elect is the same act whereby He regenerates them.³³

Dutch theologian Herman Witsius (1636–1708), writing on the Continent in the same period as Owen and Goodwin—his work was a contribution to the British Antinomian and Neonomian debates—takes a similar position concerning the relationship between regeneration and union with Christ. He affirms,

26. Goodwin, *The Object and Acts of Justifying Faith*, in *Works*, 8:463.

27. Goodwin, *Works*, 2:404.

28. Owen, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *Works*, 20:150.

29. Owen, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *Works*, 20:150.

30. See chapter 31, “John Owen on Justification by Faith Alone.”

31. John Owen, *Pneumatologia, or, A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, in *The Works of John Owen, D.D.* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 3:464.

32. Owen, *Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, 3:464.

33. Owen, *Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, 3:464.

By a true and real union, (but which is only passive on their part,) [the elect] are united to Christ when his Spirit first takes possession of them, and infuses into them a principle of new life: the beginning of which life can be from nothing else but from union with the Spirit of Christ.... Further, since faith is an act flowing from the principle of spiritual life, it is plain, that in a sound sense, it may be said, an elect person is truly and really united to Christ before actual faith.

Witsius sounds very much like Goodwin and Owen in insisting that the elect are united to Christ when Christ's Spirit "takes possession of them" and regenerates them. And he likewise affirms that union precedes actual faith. But then he makes a similar point to Goodwin's, namely, that a "mutual union" inevitably follows from the principle of regeneration:

But the mutual union, (which, on the part of an elect person, is likewise active and operative), whereby the soul draws near to Christ, joins itself to him, applies, and in a becoming and proper manner closes with him without any distraction, is made by faith only. And this is followed in order by the other benefits of the covenant of grace, justification, peace, adoption, sealing, perseverance, etc.³⁴

Not only is the "mutual union" emphasized by the act of faith in the sinner, but also by the fact that the benefits of the covenant of grace (e.g., justification) flow out of this union.

Goodwin, Owen, and Witsius are affirming what John Ball (1585–1640) had said earlier in *A Treatise of Faith*. Speaking of the order of spiritual blessings that believers receive from Christ, Ball affirms that faith is the "band whereby we are united unto Christ; after Union followeth Communion with him; Justification, Adoption, Sanctification be the benefits and fruits of Communion."³⁵ Commenting on the importance of union with Christ, Ball later affirms that after we are made one with Christ, "he and all his benefits are truly and verily made ours; his name is put upon us, we are justified from the guilt and punishment of sin, we are clothed with his righteousness, we are sanctified against the power of sin, having our nature healed and our hearts purified."³⁶

John Preston (1587–1628) likewise affirms that "to be in Christ is the ground of all salvation."³⁷ Thus, union with Christ is the motive for good works since all graces and privileges flow from this union.³⁸ Christ will take away not only the guilt but also the power of sin in those to whom He is united, which explains the importance of union with Christ for soteriology.³⁹

Thomas Cole (1627–1697) entertains a very important question that helps explain the subtle ways in which regeneration and justification relate. He asks, "Whether the first step in Regeneration be from Sin to Holiness, or from a sinful state and nature to Christ, that we may be made holy by him?" That is, are we made clean first, or are we joined to Christ first? Cole says,

There can be no Change made in our Nature by the Spirit of Christ in our Sanctification, but upon a Change of State from our closing in with the Blood of Christ for Justification. The Spirit of Christ doeth always follow the Blood of Christ; 'tis the

34. Witsius, *Conciliatory, or Irenical Animadversions on the Controversies Agitated in Britain*, 68.

35. John Ball, *A Treatise of Faith* (London: for Edward Brewster, 1657), 85.

36. Ball, *Treatise of Faith*, 132.

37. John Preston, *The Saints Qualification*, in *An Abridgment of Dr. Preston's Works...* (London: J. L. for Nicholas Bourn, 1648), 738.

38. Preston, *The Saints Qualification*, in *An Abridgment*, 739–40.

39. Preston, *The Saints Qualification*, in *An Abridgment*, 749.

Purchase of that Blood; so that the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, extends himself in all his saving Operations, no further than the Body of Christ; none but Members vitally joined to Christ their Head, can be quickened by him; therefore no man or woman can be savingly wrought upon by the Spirit of Christ, who continue in a state of separation from him.⁴⁰

Cole has carefully noted how all these benefits come from Christ, and therefore regeneration must be seen in the light of our union with Christ. He then offers a very precise definition of regeneration, saying that “*Regeneration is the Implantation of the Soul into Christ.*”⁴¹

William B. Evans has recently argued that for the Puritans, communion with Christ “tended to displace ‘union with Christ.’”⁴² This charge is utterly unconvincing as the evidence above shows. Union with Christ is the basis for communion with Him and, like Calvin, the Puritans viewed union with Christ in His divine-human person as the necessary context in which, and the means by which, redemptive benefits were applied to the elect. Evans’s point assumes that the Puritans deviated from a Reformed christological focus, but clearly they understood how union and communion worked together. William Bridge (1600–1671) said that “union is the root of communion” and “union is the ground of communion.” In context, Bridge is explaining the benefits of our union with Christ. He did not displace union with Christ but instead affirmed it as the foundation for his practical theology.⁴³ Similarly, Obadiah Grew (1607–1689) said, “Union is the ground of all our comfort, and privilege we have by the Lord Jesus Christ: Our communion springs from our Union with him.”⁴⁴ Bridge and Grew did not sever the believer’s communion with Christ from his union with Him.

There is a reason union with Christ is first in the order of nature and regeneration precedes justification. When Christ takes and unites the sinner to Himself, the Spirit regenerates the sinner. In regenerating the sinner, he is still guilty, that is, legally in a state of sin. True, he has a new nature, but that has not altered his legal status for past offenses (and all offenses thereafter)—no more than a murderer is exonerated because afterwards he becomes a model citizen. According to Stephen Charnock (1628–1680), it is when the sinner looks in faith to Christ that his status changes.⁴⁵ Justification “gives us a *right*, the other [regeneration] a *fitness*.” He also says, “In justification we are freed from the guilt of sin, and so have a title to life; in regeneration we are freed from the filth of sin, and have the purity of God’s image in part restored to us.”⁴⁶ Sinners are not justified because they were regenerated, but because Christ has paid the penalty of His sins and has applied all His benefits to them.⁴⁷ The real is before the legal because both are needed, and in one sense neither depends on the other; both depend on the believer’s union

40. Thomas Cole, *A Discourse of Regeneration...* (London: for Will Marshall, 1698), 81–82.

41. Cole, *A Discourse of Regeneration*, 83.

42. William B. Evans, *Imputation and Impartation: Union with Christ in American Reformed Theology* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 78.

43. William Bridge, *The Works of the Rev. William Bridge* (1845; repr., Beaver Falls, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1989), 1:371. This reference is taken from the fourth sermon of the series, “The Spiritual Life and In-Being of Christ in All Believers.”

44. Obadiah Grew, *The Lord Jesus Christ the Lord Our Righteousness* (London, 1669), 97.

45. Stephen Charnock, “A Discourse on the Nature of Regeneration,” in *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock* (1845; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), 3:89.

46. Charnock, “A Discourse on the Nature of Regeneration,” in *Works*, 3:90.

47. “We are not justified by an inherent righteousness; yet we are not justified without it. We cannot be justified by it [i.e., regeneration].” Stephen Charnock, “The Necessity of Regeneration,” in *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock* (1845; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), 3:43.

with Christ from whom the believer derives all saving benefits. Yet there is another sense in which justification depends on regeneration—that is, the person is enabled to believe by regeneration and is justified by faith alone. Charnock says, “Justification is *relative*; regeneration *internally real*. Union with Christ is the ground of both; Christ is the meritorious cause of both.”⁴⁸

Another aspect of union with Christ is addressed by William Lyford (1598–1653). He very precisely stated that we are united to Christ before we exercise faith, and that we in turn exercise faith to lay hold of Christ. Such a statement may be misunderstood, however carefully stated. Apparently the Synod of New England charged John Cotton (1585–1652) of teaching an error when he allegedly stated “that we are completely united to Christ, before, or without any faith wrought in us by the Spirit.”⁴⁹ Cotton refuted the charge to the Synod’s satisfaction, yet it seems the word “completely” was the source of his problem. Lyford believed it could be misleading to distinguish between the *act of faith* we exercise and the *habit of faith* we possess in our union with Christ, for “it seems to favour of the Leaven of *Antinomianism* and *Enthusiasm*.” Yet he also recognized that it does impart some truth as long as the “Faith is begun in action”—he was weary of viewing this union as being complete without the immediate exercise of faith. “The Union then is begun by action of the Spirit on us, and of Faith put forth by us to lay hold on Christ.”⁵⁰

Lyford adds one more point that is critical to the Puritans’ view of union with Christ and justification. How can someone else’s righteousness become ours? This was a question raised by the Papists. Lyford answers by pointing to our union with Christ: “Christ and the Believer be not Two, but One.” He explains, “*Peter* cannot be saved by the righteousness that is in *Paul*, because they be two; but the Members are saved by the righteousness of their Head, because Head and Members are not two.”⁵¹ The same answer is offered by Obadiah Grew. “A man’s capacity for such propriety in Christ’s righteousness, is this union with Christ.” Union with Christ is the ground on which His righteousness can become ours. “As by marriage-union the Wife is honourable by her Husbands honour.... Thus comes it to pass by our union of espousals to Christ, My beloved is mine, and I am his: that we have an interest and propriety in his merit and spirit, in his righteousness and life.”⁵² Lyford and Grew believed that our union with Christ was the best refutation of the Papists’ denial of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. Because we are united to Christ, His righteousness can be and is imputed to us by faith.

Conclusion

For the Puritans, the doctrine of regeneration was a fundamental aspect of soteriology, and its relation to the believer’s union with Christ was hugely significant. Union with Christ was typically understood in a threefold manner: immanent/eternal, transient/redemptive-historical, and applicatory/mystical. The redemption purposed by God in eternity and accomplished by Christ in time is incomplete until it is applied in the experience of the believer.

The special work of the Spirit is to apply the benefits of Christ’s mediation to the elect. There is a strict correspondence between Christ’s work and the Spirit’s work. For this reason,

48. Charnock, “The Necessity of Regeneration,” in *Works*, 3:43.

49. William Lyford, *The Plain Mans Senses Exercised...* (London: for Richard Royston, 1655), 120. See David D. Hall, ed., *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636–1638: A Documentary History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), 34–42, which deals with the believer’s union with Christ.

50. Lyford, *The Plain Mans Senses Exercised*, 121–22.

51. Lyford, *The Plain Mans Senses Exercised*, 125–26.

52. Grew, *The Lord Jesus Christ*, 96–98.

regeneration must never be considered apart from Christ; positively stated, regeneration must always be understood in relation to union with Christ.

What this chapter has shown is not only the fundamental necessity of regeneration for salvation but also its close connection to union with Christ. The risen Savior first apprehends the elect and makes them alive by His Spirit operating as the Spirit of Christ, so they can receive from Christ all the benefits of the work He accomplished on their behalf, as their mediator. Faith is only possible because Christ, through the Spirit, has joined Himself to the sinner. In response, the sinner exercises faith toward Christ, as an effect of regeneration. With the union complete, the sinner receives from Christ everything that Christ merited, including justification, adoption, and sanctification. This, in a nutshell, is the Puritan understanding of the relationship between regeneration and union with Christ.