Imputation and Impartation

Union with Christ in American Reformed Theology
A full listing of titles in this series appears at the end of this book.
Imputation and Impartation

Union with Christ in American Reformed Theology

William B. Evans
STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY AND THOUGHT

Series Preface

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To Fay, Andrew, and Rebecca
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Introduction

Over twenty years ago now, this writer encountered Charles Hodge’s review of Mercersburg theologian John W. Nevin’s *The Mystical Presence*. In that review, the Calvinist stalwart of Old Princeton Seminary took Nevin and his doctrine of the sacraments and union with Christ to task as incompatible with the Reformed faith in its purity. More surprising was Hodge’s treatment of Calvin in the same review. After dismissing the doctrine of union with Christ evident in Calvin’s view of the sacraments as a case of pandering to Lutheran interests, Hodge went on to allege that Calvin’s doctrine lay in conflict with a fundamental principle of the Reformation itself—the doctrine of justification by grace through faith.\(^1\)

The irony of nineteenth-century America’s arch-Calvinist pillorying Calvin himself for subverting a central principle of the Reformation is obvious. Further study and research uncovered a surprising amount of controversy within the nineteenth-century American Reformed community over the nature of union with Christ and over related matters having to do with applied soteriology, or the application of salvation to the Christian. This book is an attempt to place those controversies within the larger context of the development of the Reformed tradition itself.

The Centrality of Union with Christ in Reformed Theology

The centrality of “union with Christ” as an organizing motif in Reformed soteriology has long been recognized. In his compendium of classical Reformed theologians, Heinrich Heppe, the nineteenth-century German historian of dogma, wrote: “At the root of the whole doctrine of the appropriation of salvation lies the doctrine of *insitio* or *insertio in Christum*, through which we live in him and he in us. So the dogmaticians discuss it with special emphasis.”\(^2\) More recently, Emil Brunner has termed union with Christ “the center of all Calvinistic thought.”\(^3\) Indeed, some have argued with good reason that this Reformed emphasis upon union with Christ stands in marked contrast with the Lutheran tradition, which takes the doctrine of justification by faith as its point of departure when discussing the application of redemption.\(^4\)

Despite the centrality of this motif, it has received relatively little scholarly

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\(^3\)Emil Brunner, *Vom Werk des Heiligen Geistes* (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1935), 38.

attention. Calvin’s view of the theme and of its place in the larger soteriological context has received considerable scrutiny, but with little resulting consensus. With regard to the period after Calvin, while the motif is repeatedly recognized as important and even crucial, it has generally been treated only incidentally in the context of sacramental studies, studies of Puritan piety or in examinations of the federal theology which arose after Calvin and which was enshrined in later Reformed confessional documents such as the Westminster Confession and Catechisms.

The formal centrality of union with Christ underscores the significance of the theme. Many Reformed theologians from Calvin onward have attempted to subsume all of applied soteriology (acceptance with God and transformation of life) under the rubric “union with Christ.” But this formal agreement should not be allowed to mask fundamental and pervasive disagreements among prominent representatives of the tradition regarding the substance and implications of the theme. For this reason, this work will often refer to “union with Christ” as a “motif” or “theme” rather than a “doctrine.” We will see that a number of divergent conceptions of “union with Christ” have competed for recognition within the tradition.

**Scope of the Study**

The bulk of this work focuses on American Reformed thought from Jonathan Edwards through the nineteenth century. Although the theme was certainly discussed elsewhere (the intriguing suggestions of John McLeod Campbell [1800-1872] in Scotland come to mind), it was in America that the conceptual possibilities of the theme were most fully explored. This, of course, was a period of doctrinal crisis for the Reformed churches generally. For American Reformed thinkers in particular, it was a period of soteriological crisis as the older federal theology, which still found ardent and articulate supporters, was challenged by formulations both old and new. During this period there was intense conflict over topics which had traditionally been treated under the rubric “union with Christ”—the nature and mechanism of the imputation of the merits of Christ to the Christian, the relationship of justification to sanctification in the *ordo salutis*, the precise character of the *unio Christi*, and so forth.

We find in American Reformed thought of this period a community of inquiry as well. There was a good deal of spirited debate and interaction among American theologians on these matters; this was a time when, in the memorable words of Mark Noll, “Calvinists got down to the serious business of beating up on each other.”⁵ This community of inquiry should not, however, be viewed as provincial in outlook. In addition to being well-versed in the Reformed

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tradition, a number of the theologians to be examined kept abreast of the latest developments in British and continental theological scholarship. Indeed, certain developments cannot be understood apart from these influences.

Attention to both the pre- and post-history of the theme of union with Christ is also needful here. Because the exact nature of Calvin’s own thought became a matter of intense debate during the nineteenth century, the views of this magisterial Reformer are examined in detail. Similarly, because federal theology figures so prominently in the nineteenth-century controversies, the origins and character of the federal theology associated with Reformed scholasticism is also treated. In addition, these developments have continued to exert influence in Reformed and Evangelical circles down to the present, and so the latter portion of this work explores twentieth-century developments and contemporary implications. Here particular attention is paid to influential Continental and British theologians (Herrmann, Barth, Torrance), the Biblical Theology movement, the Dutch-American theologian Lewis B. Smedes, and developments in twentieth-century Evangelical theology.

Method of the Study

This study will involve the isolation and examination of a number of trajectories in American Reformed thought—the New England Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards and his successors, the Mercersburg Theology of John Williamson Nevin, and the Princeton theology of Charles Hodge. Each of these treats the theme of union with Christ in a distinctive fashion. The use of the term *trajectories* points to the developmental dynamic which characterizes any vital theological movement, no matter how much it may claim merely to reprise the past. The term *trajectories* also implies that, amidst change and development, we may discern a unity of concern or approach which is characteristic of a particular trajectory. In the examination of these trajectories, particular attention will be given to the public documents, the “school-texts,” which shaped the thought of generations of ministers and individual Reformed Christians. As much as possible, the authors of these texts will be allowed to speak for themselves.

Finally, in a study of this sort there is sometimes a temptation to rush too quickly to value judgments. More than a few earlier studies dealing with these matters have tended to present later doctrinal developments as lamentable declensions from an alleged earlier purity (Calvin is sometimes viewed as Paradise, with Reformed scholastic orthodoxy as the Fall). It is important that doctrinal developments be understood in their context. Even when a doctrinal move later turns out to be unfortunate, it was generally not without reason or logic in its immediate context, and an understanding of the rationale for it may shed considerable light on the dynamics of doctrinal development within the Reformed tradition.