

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Could You Be Emphasizing the Saving Work of Christ Too Much?

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PERSONAL UNION WITH CHRIST

In far too many evangelical expressions of the gospel, the saving work of Christ has been so distanced from his person that the notion of a saving *personal* union with the incarnate, crucified, resurrected, *living* Jesus strikes us as rather outlandish. We are content, more often than not, to refer to the “atoning work of Christ” or the “work of Christ on the cross” as the basis for our salvation. Yet, as important as such expressions are for a robust evangelical soteriology (the study of salvation), we are in dire need of the reminder that Christ’s saving work is of no benefit to us unless we are joined to the living Savior whose work it is. When we entertain the notion—consciously or not, intentionally or not—that we can be saved by the work of Christ apart from being joined to him personally, we are deepening a fissure that, left unrepaired, will continue to move us away from our biblically faithful theological heritage.

The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformer John Calvin insisted that we must never separate the work of Christ from his person if we wish to understand the nature of salvation. However much we may rightly extol and magnify the saving work of Christ on our behalf, however highly we may esteem what he accomplished in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, we will have missed what is utterly essential to this good news if we fail to understand that our salvation has to do with his very person. The saving work of Christ is not to be thought of as abstracted from the living person of Christ.

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Calvin's way of expressing this is striking and emphatic:

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 to us. Therefore, to share in what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us . . . for, as I have said, all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him.¹

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If Calvin's insistence on the intensely relational aspect of salvation—the personal indwelling of Christ—seems somewhat foreign to us, it may be because contemporary evangelical soteriology² has largely lost sight of a profound mystery that lies at the heart of the gospel, a mystery that the apostle Paul describes as “Christ in you, the hope of glory” ([Col. 1:27](#)). The mysterious reality of our union with Jesus Christ, by which he dwells in us and we in him, is so utterly essential to the gospel that to obscure it inevitably leads to an obscuring of the gospel itself. For a number of reasons, contemporary evangelical theology has routinely failed to incorporate this mystery into the heart of its soteriological understanding. This has led to the danger of what we might call “the objectification of salvation,” the creation of a dichotomy between the work and person of Christ or, in Calvin's words, the peril of seeking “in Christ something else than Christ himself.”³ ³ This soteriological oversight needs to be addressed for the purpose of maintaining gospel vitality and the richness of the church's life and confession. To this end, we do well to take a step back and recover the richness that is already present in our tradition, then bring it to bear on the church's life and confession.

Evangelicalism has been rightly characterized as a movement devoted to upholding the authority of Scripture, the centrality of the cross in Christ's saving work, and the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ; in other words, the evangelical movement is bibliocentric, crucicentric, and gospel-centric. These emphases constitute an admirable

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, *Library of Christian Classics*, Vols. 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), Book 3, chapter 1, paragraph 1 (hereafter, 3.1.1).

² There is a (growing) challenge in trying to define exactly what is meant by “evangelical.” Douglas Sweeney writes succinctly, “Evangelicals comprise a movement that is rooted in classical Christian orthodoxy, shaped by a largely Protestant understanding of the gospel, and distinguished from other such movements by an eighteenth-century twist [the renewal movements of the Great Awakening]” (*The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005], 24). This book attempts to retrieve a Protestant understanding of the gospel that is rooted in classical Christian orthodoxy and which is, therefore, evangelical.

³ This memorable comment is from John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844–56; reprinted in 22 vols., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), [John 6:26](#).

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legacy for which we should be thankful. At times, however, in gratitude for one's heritage, and in the interest of continuing its biblical, historical, and theological faithfulness, there is a need for renewed reflection and constructive criticism. Despite its relative clear-sightedness on many essential gospel issues, evangelicalism has largely lost its sense of a profound, essential saving reality that is deeply rooted in both the biblical portrayal of salvation and the appropriation of that portrayal in the historic confession of the Christian church. The apostolic writers, with the church fathers and Reformers following suit, described this reality with a host of stunning and arresting images. This reality, which was central to their understanding of the gospel, was the mystery of the believer's union with Jesus Christ.

There is much more to say about what it means to say that salvation consists in, or is rooted in, the believer's becoming one with the Savior—the One who, for us and for our salvation, was crucified, buried, and resurrected, and who then ascended to the right hand of the Father. But before that, a word about a present danger that threatens evangelical theology is in order.

As I mentioned above, evangelical theology generally, and evangelical soteriology more specifically, has been overtaken by a subtle dichotomization of the person and work of Christ. This is reflected in the tendency to discuss salvation in rather abstract, extrinsic, and impersonal terms. In textbooks, sermons, and classrooms, salvation is often conceived of as the reception of something Christ has acquired for us rather than as the reception of the living Christ. In other words, salvation is described as a gift to be apprehended rather than the apprehension of the Giver himself. To put it yet another way, the gospel is portrayed as the offer of a depersonalized benefit (e.g., grace, justification, or eternal life) rather than the offer of the very person of Christ (who is himself the grace of God, our justification, and our eternal life).⁴

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as abstracted from the living person of Christ.*

These conceptions, expressions, and portrayals, though certainly not ill-intentioned, fail to fully capture not only the beauty, wonder, and mystery of our salvation, but, more importantly, the personal reality that is its essence. Because they tend to refer to salvation

⁴ Even the familiar phrases “saved by grace” or “saved by the cross” can dissolve into abstractions. Grace saves us only because we enter it by being joined to Jesus Christ, who is the grace of God to us. The cross saves us only because, in our union with the crucified Christ, we experience the benefits of his death. Jesus Christ is, in other words, the content of both grace and cross: we are saved in Christ.

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in terms of benefits or gifts that are abstracted from Jesus Christ, these ways of speaking about salvation run the risk of one-sidedly objectifying the saving work of Christ so that his living person—as well as the necessity of our union with him—begins to fade into obscurity. Contemporary evangelical theology has rightly stressed the saving work of Christ, but it has simultaneously overlooked the reality through which we benefit from this saving work. We have emphasized the work of Christ, but too often to the exclusion of the saving person of Christ. The impression we give too often is that salvation is reducible to the work (or gifts) of Christ in isolation from the fullness of his saving person, as though he were a divine Santa Claus, showering us with gifts but not including us in his very person and life. This view subtly succumbs to a dangerous soteriological reductionism in which we begin to speak of receiving the benefits of Christ apart from receiving the Giver himself—Christ *for* us without Christ *in* us. We ought, rather, to insist that the atonement (the saving work of Christ) is indivisible from the One who atones (the saving person of Christ).⁵

Christ is our salvation and we are the recipients of his saving work precisely and only because we are recipients of the living Christ. Our union with the living Christ is, in other words, what it means to be saved.



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This article is adapted from *One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* by Marcus Peter Johnson. © Crossway USA, July 24, 2024. Retrieved July 30, 2024.

<https://www.crossway.org/articles/could-you-be-emphasizing-the-saving-work-of-christ-too-much>

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⁵ As Thomas F. Torrance put it, Christ does not merely perform an action called the atonement, “Christ Jesus IS the atonement” (cited in *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009], 94, emphasis in original).