

PRAYER AND UNION WITH CHRIST

DOUGLAS F. KELLY

The Rutherford Lecture for 1988

In the Epistle to the Hebrews there is a remarkable connection between Christ and his people - between his priesthood for them and their priesthood in him. I wish to explore that connection and its ramifications for the ministry of intercession of God's church. We will find clues to help us grasp this fruitful connection between the incarnate Christ and his interceding people not only in Hebrews, but also in John's Gospel, chapters 6 and 14-17, in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, chapters 5-8, and Ephesians, chapter 2, as well as in other relevant biblical texts.

Various church Fathers and Reformers as well as more modern theologians have helped to shed much light on the meaning and bearing of these passages on our subject. From time to time I will be referring to Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, Anselm, Richard of St. Victor, John Calvin, and to such nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers as B. B. Warfield of Princeton, B.M.Palmer and J.L.Girardeau of the American Southern Presbyterian tradition, the Congregationalist P. T. Forsyth of England, as well as, from the Scottish tradition, MacLeod Campbell, Thomas F. Torrance and Ronald S. Wallace. These and a number of others, including William Still and James Philip, have helped to focus my thinking on the glad tidings for all who pray - that their life and prayers are taken up into the life and prayer of their risen and enthroned Saviour and Lord.

Let us get right into the subject by taking a very brief and superficial overview of the connection I have noted in the Epistle to the Hebrews between the humanity of Christ and his people and between his prayers and their prayers. We must deal with details later, but let us note by way of introduction, in Hebrews 1:3, that God the Father speaks his last and final word and thus reveals the fullness of his character in the person of his Son, who becomes incarnate or enfleshed in our human nature in order to redeem us. Then in chapter 2:10, we notice that the Son of God, 'tasted death for every man' in order that through suffering he might 'bring many sons to glory'. In chapter 3:1, we are admonished to 'consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus...'. 'Apostle' at its root means that Christ is the one sent out from God the Father to us, and 'High Priest' signifies that the one who was sent out takes us

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

back with him into the favourable, loving presence of the Father on the basis of what he has accomplished in the meantime.

Chapter 5: 7-9 of Hebrews speaks of the suffering and death which his holy, filial, total obedience in our humanity cost Christ, which caused his 'prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears' to be heard by the Father. Then chapter 6:19 tells the glad tidings that our soul's anchor 'enters within the veil' of the Father's innermost heavenly presence, where 'the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedek'. Calvin rightly takes this verse to mean that Christ has taken his people behind the veil with him, to that blessed place where the Father hears and answers prayers.¹ Hebrews 9:13,14 speaks of how Christ shed his blood and offered himself to God through the eternal Spirit, and then of how that same eternal (thus, ever present) Spirit 'purges our consciences from dead works to serve the living God'. And finally, Hebrews 13:15,16 shows the people of God on earth (who, mysteriously but really, are also within the veil 'in the Spirit, through the Son') offering two kinds of priestly sacrifices: praises to God and good works towards men. What a glorious note: we former worms of the earth and children of hell, now restored in Christ and offering up priestly sacrifices to the Father and also practical blessings to the world! Calvin comments:

So when we come to pray and say: 'Our Father, who art in heaven,' we must recognize that, as far as we are concerned, our lips are unclean, and we are not even worthy to call him God our Creator, let alone being so presumptuous as to regard ourselves as his children. But in spite of this, our Lord Jesus Christ is our spokesman, and our prayers and intercessions are sanctified by him, just as it says in the last chapter to the Hebrews, that it is through him that we render to God the sacrifices of praise and all our prayers, and that he is our Mediator and today we call upon God our Father in his name.²

And Cyril of Alexandria, commenting on this same wonderful change, writes:

Although the host above and the holy spirits worship him, when he became as we are, he worshipped with us as man ... offering, as fragrant incense, himself on our behalf, and us through himself and in himself to God the Father³

1 John Calvin, *Commentary on Hebrews 6:9*.

2 John Calvin, *Sermons on Isaiah's Prophecy of the Death and Passion of Christ*, translated and edited by T.H.L.Parker, pp. 144, 145.

3 See T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation* (London 1975), p. 176.

PRAYER AND UNION WITH CHRIST

Having looked very briefly at this 'missionary movement' which constitutes the very heart of the gospel — Christ the Son, coming out from the Father to lead many sons back to the Father, thus giving them a share in his own life and priesthood, so that their intercessions reflect his and bring joy to the heart of the Father and blessings to the world as they live and pray in the realm of the eternal Spirit — we must now explore in rather more depth this mighty gospel movement in order to draw out encouragements to prayer for those who are united to the Father through the Son in the Spirit.

I think this basic movement of the gospel of God in the Epistle to Hebrews most naturally lends itself to being understood in terms of a threefold or Trinitarian structure, and hence we shall consider the effects of the union of believers with Christ upon prayer under a threefold heading.

I. The Character of the Father in the Son

The Greek word from which we get our English word for 'character' is found only once in the New Testament, in Hebrews 1:3, where Christ is 'the brightness of God the Father's glory, and the express image (or character or outshining or effulgence) of his person'. Speaking of how the sufferings of Jesus Christ bear testimony to the infinite love of God for us, Calvin wonderfully says in his sermons on Isaiah 53 that in Christ, 'It is as if God laid bare to us his heart and set before us his inmost feelings to testify to us how dear we are to him and how precious our souls are to him.'⁴ Or as Professor T. F. Torrance quotes H. R. Mackintosh, 'When I look into the face of Jesus Christ and see the face of God, I know that I have not seen that face elsewhere and could not see it elsewhere, for he and the Father are one All creation in heaven and earth, all the divine ways of history, all time and eternity — they meet and converge in this one transcendent Figure.'⁵

In other words, we look at Christ and we see the heart of the Father. In the New Testament we learn that basic to the reality of the living God is his triune nature, as one God eternally existing in three persons. The triune nature of God was apparently not yet revealed in the Old Testament, because as B. B. Warfield suggested, the revelation of the Trinity had to wait upon the timely unfolding of the historic fact of redemption: the sending Father, the incarnate,

⁴ Calvin, *op. cit.*, p.95.

⁵ T. F. Torrance, 'Hugh Ross Mackintosh, Theologian of the Cross,' in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 5 (1987), p. 163.

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

atoning, resurrected Son, and the outpoured Spirit.⁶ So, 'in the fullness of the time, God sent his Son' (Gal.4:4), and then on the day of Pentecost, from the enthroned Father and the Lamb, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon a waiting church, reconstituting it and thus giving it new birth.

What I wish to underscore here is the importance of the fact that our experience and knowledge of God in historic redemption as Father, Son and Holy Ghost, ever one God, fully rests upon what this one God in three persons is in himself, beyond history, in the endless reaches of eternity. The revelation of the Trinity in the history of redemption is rooted in what God was and is and will be before history, in history and after history. Jesus shows us what this one, true God was, is, and ever will be.

Richard of St. Victor, one of the greatest of Scottish theologians, who moved to France in the twelfth century, meditated as profoundly as any sanctified human mind ever has upon the meaning of the eternal, inner nature of God as triune. In his *De Trinitate*, he thinks of the Trinity of the one God as being rooted in the truth of 1 John that 'God is love'. It is the nature of love, writes Richard, not to be inturned and self-centred, but to be outgoing, generous and overflowing, seeking like natures with whom it may share its life, light and love. Thus our God, says Richard, has never been a single, solitary, lonely person, an atomistic individual cut off within himself. Rather, he has always existed with a rich inner life of communion and exchange of those three attributes so often mentioned in the Johannine writings: light, life and love. This sharing has been between three co-equal persons, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, in the words of the Shorter Catechism, 'the same in substance, equal in power and glory'.

Furthermore, because the inner love of the triune God is so great and overflowing, the Father chose to create a world which would be peopled by a race created in the image of his Son, so they could reflect the glory of the Son and share in the eternal life and blessedness of the Trinity. This purpose of God lies behind everything that is or ever will be and behind everything that has happened or will ever happen. Therefore, as Richard of St. Victor has helped us to see, when we gaze upon Jesus, we are taken into the very fullness of the eternal life and purpose of God the Father Almighty and of the ever blessed Holy Spirit.

The importance of this unity between Son on earth and Father in heaven is not hard to grasp. If Jesus is one with the Father, then what he did for us in space and time is eternally validated and rooted in

6 See B.B.Warfield, 'The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity' in *Biblical Foundations* (London, 1958), pp. 79-116.

PRAYER AND UNION WITH CHRIST

God the Father Almighty. In his commentary on John 14:30, John Calvin insightfully notes that when Jesus is saying 'I and the Father are one', he is referring not merely to unity of substance in the inner Trinitarian life (although from other passages that is profoundly true), but he is actually speaking 'about the agreement which he has with the Father, so that whatever is done by Christ will be confirmed by the power of his Father'. That is why the early church in the third and fourth centuries, guided by such as the great Athanasius, insisted so strongly and uncompromisingly upon the *homoousios* – the fact that Jesus Christ is of one and the same substance with the Father – enshrined in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. In the words of Athanasius: 'The fullness of the Father's Godhead is the being of the Son, and the Son is the whole God.'⁷

Stated negatively, the denial of this important truth of the unity of Son and Father has this consequence, which was bluntly stated by Cyril of Alexandria: 'if Christ who suffered for us was mere man and only the organ of Deity, we have not really been redeemed.'⁸

In his book on *The Trinitarian Faith*, T. F. Torrance has stated very lucidly the joyful consequences of the character of the Father being truly revealed in the person of the Son:

If we are really to have knowledge of God we must be given a point of access to him which is both in God himself and in our creaturely existence. That is precisely what we have in the incarnation, where God's self-revelation as Father takes place through his self-giving to us in Jesus Christ his Son. When God gives us access to knowledge of himself like that he does so within the conditions of space and time and therefore within the bounds of what we human beings may apprehend. At the same time the knowledge which God thus gives us of himself in his incarnate Son is from a centre in his own being, where all our human understanding and conceiving of him may be governed and tested in accordance with his divine nature. Thus when we approach God as Father through the Son, our knowledge of the Father in the Son is grounded in the very being of God and is determined by what he essentially is in his own nature. Since in Jesus Christ we are really enabled to know God in accordance with his own nature as Father and Son, we may know him in a way that is both godly and precise.⁹

We must now go on to consider the purpose of the Father's revelation of his character in the Son.

7 Athanasius, *Cont. Arianos* 1:9.

8 As quoted in T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 159.

9 T. F. Torrance, *op. cit.*, pp. 52, 53.

II. 'Many Sons to Glory' – Priesthood of the Son in Human Nature

John Calvin so often brings out in his writings that all that Christ did on earth was not done for himself, for he had no need of anything in the ultimate sense since he was God of God, but rather, he did everything for us. That is precisely the reason why he took on our condemned human nature – so that he, the Son, might by so doing 'bring many sons to glory'. This theme is the particular concern of Hebrews chapter 2. There and elsewhere, we find two closely connected elements in this divine theme of Christ's bringing many sons to glory: first, the reality of Christ's priesthood in our mortal flesh; and second, the consecration of the saints in his incarnate priesthood.

The Reality of Christ's Priesthood in our Mortal Flesh

First, we note that Hebrews 2 is in fullest harmony with the rest of the New Testament in bearing witness to the full flesh-and-blood reality of the incarnation of the eternal Logos, second person of the holy Trinity, in our mortal human nature to be our priest. Hebrews 2.13, quoting Isaiah 8:18, takes the word/action of the prophet Isaiah, who presented himself with his two sons to the king, and places its fulfilment in the word/action of Christ the Son, presenting his church to the Father above: 'Behold I and the children which God has given me.'

In order to present a redeemed humanity to the holy Father above, the eternal Son had, in the words of verse 14, 'to take hold of flesh' since 'the children are partakers of flesh and blood, so that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage'. Verse 16 further confirms the reality of Christ's true manhood by denying that he took on himself the nature of angels. Angels do not physically die and, more to the point, angels are not to be redeemed. But Christ takes on himself that which he is going to redeem – the nature of the seed of Abraham. He thus becomes a real man with mortal flesh, 'made under the law to redeem those that were under the law' (Gal. 4:4). Hebrews 2 shows that the way the last Adam 'brings his many sons to glory' is by assuming their flesh, taking it down into death 'to make reconciliation for the sins of the people' (v.17), thus destroying the power of death over them (vv.14,15).

PRAYER AND UNION WITH CHRIST

In order to fill out the teaching of Hebrews on what was happening when Christ took on our flesh, we need to join chapter 5:7-9 to chapter 2, as Cyril of Alexandria does so well:¹⁰

He wept as a man that he might hold back your tears – he became afraid, as economically, he allowed his flesh to suffer what is proper to it that he might make us very courageous – he refused the drink that the Cross might expose the impiety of the Jews. He is said to be weak in respect of his human nature that he might do away with our weakness. He offered up prayers and supplications that he might render the hearing of the Father open to your entreaties. ¹¹

In other words, Christ was not only doing something tremendous in our nature on our behalf as he was dying on the cross for our sins, but also, all through his incarnate life, he was living the life of holiness in our flesh, resisting sin, keeping the whole law in filial devotion to the Father, and therefore turning our whole nature back to God. As John Calvin remarks in *Institutes* 2:16:5, Christ has redeemed us ‘by the whole course of his obedience ... in his very baptism ... he fulfilled a part of righteousness in obediently carrying out his Father’s commandment. In short, from the time when he took on the form of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us.’

In this context, Calvin quotes Romans 5:19, ‘As by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous.’ In this connection between ‘the whole course of his obedience’ and the work of the last Adam, Calvin gives us the right clue for grasping the profound relationship between Hebrews 2, where Christ takes our flesh down into death, and Hebrews 5, where he suffers in our flesh in order to turn it to God in prayer. Great light is shed on this unbreakable relationship between the holy life and prayers of Christ in our nature and on our behalf and his victorious death in the flesh of ‘the seed of Abraham’ by the great Pauline concept of Christ as the last Adam. In Romans 5:12-21 and in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul contrasts the first and the last Adam. Both are representative men. All humanity are in the first Adam, even as all the redeemed will abide in the last Adam forever. As the fall of the first Adam brought all who were in him into sin and death, so the obedience of the last Adam will bring all who are in him into righteousness and eternal life.

We must think of this obedience, as Calvin and Cyril and Paul have shown us, as involving not only his death in our humanity on

10 See T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, p. 174.

11 Cyril, *Apol. Con. Theodoretum* (PG 76, 441).

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

the cross of Calvary, but his whole incarnate life. Or in classical theological terms, we must hold together Christ's active and his passive obedience. Indeed, Principal Alex F. Mitchell (of St. Andrews University in the last century) shows that there was considerable debate at the Westminster Assembly of Divines in the 1640s on whether or not the active obedience of Christ was needed by the believer as well as his passive obedience. The Assembly came down very strongly in favour of the conveyance to the believer of both the active and passive obedience of Christ.¹²

Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century developed this Pauline concept of the great exchange accomplished by the last Adam in our flesh in terms of the 'recapitulation' of the human race in Christ, who came to restore what was lost in the first Adam. In his famous *Adversus Haereses*, Irenaeus says:

When he became incarnate and was made man, he commenced afresh the long line of human beings, and furnished us, in a brief comprehensive manner, with salvation; so that what we had lost in Adam – namely, to be according to the image and likeness of God – that we might recover in Christ Jesus (3:18:1).

In his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, Irenaeus states why Christ had to obey in our very flesh (and here he is greatly influenced by Hebrews 2 and 5):

Because death reigned over the flesh, it was right that through the flesh, it should lose its force and let man go free from its oppression. So the Word was made flesh that through that very flesh which sin had ruled and domesticated, it should lose its force and be no longer in us (31).

He (God) sent his creative word, who in coming to deliver us, came to the very place and spot in which we had lost life . . . and hallowed our birth and destroyed death, loosing those same fetters in which we were enchained (38).

In a rather unusual passage in *Adversus Haereses*, Irenaeus develops the idea (not specifically found in St Paul) that Christ's very passage from infancy to adulthood sanctified the various ages and stages of life through which he grew. Indeed he had the idea that Christ lived to be fifty years old, so that old men too could be sanctified.¹³ Although here Irenaeus obviously stretched a good point too far, we cannot doubt that his instincts were soundly

12 Alex F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly* (Philadelphia, 1897), pp. 154-160.

13 Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 2:22:4.

PRAYER AND UNION WITH CHRIST

biblical and evangelical in seeing – with Hebrews 2 and 5 – that the priesthood of Christ in our flesh involved the totality of his existence as man, from conception to coronation, and that all that he was and did, and is and does, was for us – not for himself.

In the nineteenth century the controversial theologian, John MacLeod Campbell, tried to think through precisely what was taking place within the humanity of Christ while he, as the last Adam, was sanctifying by his holy presence all stages of our life. Campbell wrote that ‘the atonement not only . . . was rendered possible by the incarnation, but (was) itself a development of the incarnation’.¹⁴ Commenting at some length on Romans 8:3 (‘God sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh as a sacrifice for sin’), Campbell states that Christ would have suffered from the beginning because of his holy mind of love towards the Father dwelling in our humanity with its evil selfishness and enmity towards God.¹⁵ But as he suffers in our mind and flesh, he is turning our humanity back in humility, repentance and love to the Father. In language that offended many, MacLeod Campbell expanded on what he understood passages such as Hebrew 5 and 2, Romans 8, John 6, 14, and 17 to mean, as regards what Christ was doing in our nature on our behalf:

Christ’s own condemnation of our sins, and his holy sorrow because of them, indicate that dealing with the aspect of the divine mind towards sin which prepared the way for intercession. That oneness of mind with the Father, which towards man took the form of condemnation of sin, would in the Son’s dealing with the Father in relation to our sins, take the form of a perfect confession of our sins. That confession, as to its own nature, must have been *a perfect Amen in humanity to the judgment of God on the sin of man...* He who would intercede for us must begin with confessing our sins.

He who so responds to the divine wrath against sin...*in that perfect response he absorbs it.* For that response has all the elements of a perfect repentance in humanity for all the sin of man – a perfect sorrow – a perfect contrition – all the elements of such a repentance, and in absolute perfection, all – excepting the personal consciousness of sin; – and by that perfect response in Amen to the mind of God in relation to sin is the wrath of God rightly met, and that is accorded to divine justice which is its due, and could alone satisfy it.¹⁶

14 John MacLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement* (London, 1878), p. 122.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 116–118.

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

By the way, I take it that this does not mean for a moment that sinners do not need to repent of sin. On the contrary, it means we *can* repent because of our union with 'the Apostle and High Priest of our profession' (Heb. 3:1), 'the author and finisher of our faith' (Heb. 12:2). That way alone can we solve the problem mentioned by the great evangelist, George Whitefield (as quoted by MacLeod Campbell): 'our repentance needeth to be repented of, and our very tears to be washed in the blood of Christ.'¹⁷

Our acceptable repentance before the Father in and because of our union with the Son in his human priesthood leads us to examine the second element involved in the theology of Christ bringing many sons to glory, as taught in Hebrews.

Consecration of the Saints in Christ's Incarnate Priesthood

Commenting on Hebrews 6:19, Calvin writes that 'In the person of one man all entered the Sanctuary together'.¹⁸ Similarly, in his commentary on Exodus 28, Calvin describes how the priest entered the Sanctuary with the names of the twelve tribes engraved on the two stones on the shoulders of the ephod and how he wore a breastplate with twelve jewels representing the tribes. As Calvin puts it: the priest 'was not separate for private advantage but that in his one person they were all a kingdom of priests'.¹⁹ When Calvin deals with Hebrews 10:14 ('For by one offering he has perfected forever them that are sanctified'), he prefers to translate *teteleiōken* by 'consecrated' rather than by 'sanctified' or 'perfected', as Professor Ronald S. Wallace has pointed out.²⁰ Thus Calvin comments on this verse: 'All the saints have a full consecration in the one offering of Christ.'²¹

Centuries earlier, Athanasius had seen the same mighty truth, when, arguing against the Arians, he showed that Christ took on our humanity – including its prayer and worship – so that he might consecrate it and take it up with himself to the Father.²² Cyril of Alexandria actually says that Christ, the High Priest of our souls (referring to Heb. 3:1), 'carried up the mind of believers into the one nature of the Godhead'.²³ To quote Cyril:

17 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

18 John Calvin, *Commentary on Hebrews* 6:19.

19 John Calvin, *Harmony of Pentateuch*, on Exodus 28:9.

20 Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Edinburgh, 1959), p. 12.

21 John Calvin, *Commentary on Hebrews* 10:14.

22 Athanasius, *Cont. Ar.* 4:6.

23 See T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, p. 175.

PRAYER AND UNION WITH CHRIST

Just as he remained God when in human nature, so while being in the nature and majesty of Godhead he is nonetheless man, Emmanuel. It is indeed still as man that he exercises his priestly ministry in the innermost seat of the Godhead.²⁴

Elsewhere, Cyril states that through his continuing humanity in the world of glory, Christ represents us to the Father. Praying on our behalf and taking our prayer up into himself, he presents us through his own self-offering to the Father.²⁵ In a wonderful way the inspired writer in Hebrews 4:14-16 binds together the profoundly human understanding that Jesus Christ has of us because of his personal experience of our infirmities and temptations with his victorious passage into heaven – still in our flesh – to intercede for us and actively wait to extend grace and mercy to us in time of need.

The consequences of our consecration in Christ – particularly for the matter of prayer – are immense. In his *Commentary on 1 Peter* 2:9, Calvin writes:

Moses called your fathers a sacred kingdom, because the whole people enjoyed, as it were, royal liberty, and from their body were chosen priests, both honours therefore were at the same time joined together. But now you are royal priests indeed in a more outstanding way because you are each of you consecrated in Christ that you may be associates of his kingdom and partakers of his priesthood.

In *Sermon XXII* on 2 Samuel, Calvin explains in plainer language the practical importance for prayer of our consecration to the Father in Christ:

...if we are separated from our Lord Jesus Christ, there will be no accord between the head and the members, and consequently we will be stripped of his presence, in which the salvation of men consists. Be that as it may, to call on the name of God without always basing our approach on the name of his Son, will surely throw us into the abyss of death. As I have said, we cannot participate in the remarkable favours which are promised us by the mouth of our Lord and by the message of his prophets, until our Lord Jesus Christ accepts us in his body, which is done by the faith of the gospel. Well, now we see that all those who think they are praying to God, but do not think that our Lord Jesus Christ is their Advocate to introduce them to God his Father, are doing nothing but beating the water and even abusing the name of God and profaning it.

Let us learn, therefore, that if we want to pray to God, if we want to taste his goodness and want him to answer our requests, we must begin this way: that is, to recognise that all the good gifts of our Lord Jesus Christ

24 Cyril, *Adv. Nestorium* (PG 76, 132-3).

25 See Torrance, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

are given to us and that we are made participants in them. That is why St Paul says that 'he impoverish himself to enrich us' with his blessings. For he took all our wants on him in order that all that belonged to him might be communicated to us, insofar as it would be expedient for our salvation.²⁶

This complex subject, just mentioned by Calvin, of how we participate in the self-consecration of Christ for us so that 'the wondrous exchange' between his riches and our poverty occurs, will take us to the third major division of this essay on our union with Christ and prayer.

III. The Reality of the Holy Spirit Uniting Believers to the Father Through the Son

Hebrews 9:13, 14 teaches that the blood of Christ was offered to God 'through the eternal Spirit'. As Professor Milligan of Aberdeen suggested in his work *The Resurrection of Our Lord*, this offering of the blood of Christ to God according to the context of Hebrews 9:11-12 and 23-26, refers not only to his actual passion and death on the cross, but also his presentation of his completed work in his victorious resurrection body in heaven above.²⁷ And this gives us the clue to understand how believers are united to the Lord Jesus Christ in his incarnate life, atoning death, glorious resurrection and continuing intercession: we are united to him who lived, died, and ever lives by the eternal Spirit.

At its simplest level, this means that since the Holy Spirit is eternal, he is not limited by time (or space). The Gospels teach that the human nature of Christ was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit; that the Holy Spirit was communicated to his humanity 'without measure', and as we have seen, that he 'offered himself through the eternal Spirit'. That same eternal Spirit is just as present in our time and place as he was in Christ's time and place. Thus he can make absolutely real to us the life, death and resurrection of Christ, since Christ performed them through him. If the eternal Spirit was and is in Christ and the same eternal Spirit is in the believer, then the believer and his Lord are spiritually bound together.

We must now consider first the nature of this union of Christ and his people and secondly the fruit of this union, particularly in relation to the prayers of his people.

26 John Calvin, *Sermon XXII* on 2 Samuel (this author's translation), pp. 14, 15.

27 William Milligan, *The Resurrection of Our Lord* (London, 1884).

The Nature of the Union of Christ and Believers

In his *Commentary on Galatians* 2:20, Calvin speaks of our union with the Saviour as 'a real and substantial union'. That is, it is not merely mental or moral but enters into the ontological reality of our very existence. And yet Calvin also makes clear in his *Institutes* (particularly where he argues against theologians such as the Lutheran Osiander) that our real union with Christ is a spiritual union wrought by the Holy Spirit, so that there is 'no gross mixture' of the substance of Christ and ourselves (see *Institutes* 3:11:10; 3:1:3).²⁸ In his comments on the Gospel of John, Cyril of Alexandria brought out, centuries before Calvin, the same emphasis on the substantiality of this union with Christ, while avoiding any idea of a mixture of divine and human substance or any loss of individual humanity by us.²⁹

The ancient theologian, Epiphanius, taught that not only was the Holy Spirit the bond of the holy Trinity, he was also the bond of the believer's union with Christ.³⁰ The Epistle to the Hebrews speaks three times of believers and Christ being in some sense mutual 'partakers'. In Hebrews 2:14, 15, Christ partakes of our flesh; in Hebrews 3:4, we are encouraged to remain partakers of Christ; and in Hebrews 12:10, we are partakers of his holiness. This close relationship of the Holy Spirit to the human life and work of the historic Christ and then his relationship to believers in conveying the blessings of the Christ even to them, helps us understand why it was only at Pentecost that the Holy Spirit definitively came down to inhabit permanently the people of God.

In answer to the old question of why the Holy Spirit had not done this before, Milligan wisely suggested that the eternal Spirit came to indwell us only after Christ had indwelt a human body as his own human nature, so that the Spirit comes '... from one who is not only Spirit, but who has at the same time an exalted body... We have communications from him not as one who is Spirit only, but as one who is still possessed of real and complete humanity. In a glorified humanity he not only lives himself, but he binds us to himself as one living in that state. The very power that comes to us from heaven is pervaded by human elements.'³¹

Calvin reminds us that only the Holy Spirit can so join things in heaven and things on earth, and that the life, virtue and knowledge of

28 Ronald S. Wallace, *op. cit.*, chapter 3.

29 See T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, p. 181.

30 Epiphanius, *Anc.* 5-10.

31 Milligan, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

the one can be genuinely shared by the other.³² Calvin often refers to the sacraments as a visible depiction of this wonderful union of mankind with Christ in the Holy Spirit.³³ In the words of Athanasius, the Son has given us 'the first fruits of the Spirit, so that we may be transformed into sons of God, according to the image of the Son of God'.³⁴

If we may speak temporally, one of the 'first' things the Spirit does in those who are bonded into union with the risen Christ is to raise them to faith in Christ. Calvin states that faith enables us to partake of the life made available through the death of Christ,³⁵ and that faith actually inserts us into the body of Christ,³⁶ which allows us to possess and enjoy Christ himself.³⁷ In a word, Calvin says that faith unites man to God and makes God to dwell in man.³⁸

When Paul speaks of the last Adam in 1 Corinthians 15:45 as a 'life-giving spirit', we may properly envisage the risen Christ sending the Spirit from his throne to bond the new humanity into union with himself by resurrecting their spirits to faith in him. In *A Man in Christ*, James S. Stewart caught vividly the significance of this movement:

Everything turns upon faith. Justification does not happen in a vacuum. It happens in a faith-pervaded atmosphere. . . . The sinful soul, confronted with God's wonderful self-disclosure in Christ, and with the tremendous and subduing fact of the cross where the whole world's sins were borne, responds to that divine appeal and abandons itself to the love that stands revealed: and that response, that abandonment, Paul calls faith. This is what God sees when he justifies the ungodly.³⁹

This spiritual union with Christ which gives rise to faith has many aspects which we do not understand. Indeed, Calvin wisely said that ultimately this union is incomprehensible to the human mind.⁴⁰ Similarly, James Philip in his book, *Union With Christ* (1973), brings out the important point that this union by which we are 'baptised into Christ's death and resurrection' in terms of Romans 6, is not

32 Calvin, *Sermon on Ephesians* 5:32.

33 Calvin, *Sermons on Acts* 2:1-4.

34 Athanasius, *Con. Ar.* 8 (PG 26, 997).

35 Calvin, *Commentary on John* 5:11.

36 Calvin, *Institutes* 3:2:30.

37 Calvin, *Commentary on I John* 4:14. I owe these last three references to R. S. Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

38 *Ibid.*, 4:15.

39 James S. Stewart, *A Man in Christ* (London, 1935), p. 256.

40 Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians* 5:32.

PRAYER AND UNION WITH CHRIST

something we feel, any more than we specifically feel our union to the first Adam. Thus, although these two unions – with Adam and then with Christ – are the most important things that can be said about who we really are, they go both deeper and higher than the human mind and human feelings. Some famous theologians in the later Byzantine tradition tried to specify more details on this union (such as the writings of Gregory Palamas on the ‘energies’ of God⁴¹), but we will undoubtedly do best to remain satisfied with the silences of Scripture. But what we can note, however, is that the union of Christ and believers is fruitful.

The Fruit of the Union of Christ and Believers

Hebrews 13: 15, 16 show the fruit of the great movement by which the Apostle and High Priest of our profession has come down to us and taken us back with him up to the Father: ‘By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.’ The joyful note of this royal ministry which has been made ours as sons who are united to the Son is caught by Calvin in one of his sermons on Isaiah 53:

When we are humbled like this, we can come to our Lord Jesus Christ in the knowledge that it is he who is spokesman for us, and that it is also through him that we can boldly call ourselves the children of God. So when we come to pray and say: ‘Our Father, who art in heaven,’ we must recognise that, as far as we are concerned, our lips are unclean, and we are not even worthy to call him God our Creator, let alone be so presumptuous as to regard ourselves as his children. But, in spite of this, our Lord Jesus Christ is our spokesman, and our intercessions are sanctified by him, just as it says in the last chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, that it is through him that we render to God the sacrifices of praise and all our prayers, and that he is our mediator and today we call upon God our Father in his name. We can indeed boldly glory that he regards us as his children.⁴²

In Revelation chapter 8, we are given a pictorial movement to reflect this reality of how the prayers of the saints reach the throne of God who then in answer to their intercession casts fire into the earth. It is instructive to note that something happens to the saints’ prayers once they reach the heavenly places and before they are granted entrance to the Father: an angel sprinkles incense upon them.

41 E.g. see John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* (London & Oxford, 1974), p. 164.

42 Calvin, *Sermons on Isaiah* 53, pp. 144, 145.

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

This is clearly reminiscent of the work of the high priest in the book of Leviticus (16:12), who spread the fragrant incense as a way of demonstrating that the worship of the people had to be sweetened by the Lord himself for it to be acceptable. And so the incense sprinkled by the angel in Revelation 8 cannot be disconnected from the wounds of the Lamb that was slain who now sits upon the throne. The perfume speaks of the merits of his holy life and victorious death and resurrection. It is as though Revelation 8 thinks of the prayers of the saints – with all their unworthiness as they come from people of unclean lips – being taken through the cleansing, beautifying nailmarks of Jesus, and thus turning into the most desirable and powerful influences with almighty God. These intercessions of the saints through the Lamb thus prevail and cause fire to be cast into the earth. They change history, for later in Revelation 8, ships, mountains and trees are burned up because of prayer.

How we need today this focus on the validity of the prayers and spiritual sacrifices of God's imperfect people, prevailing to the casting of fire into the earth, because of who they are in Christ, not who they are in themselves! In the biography of General Thomas J. 'Stonewall' Jackson of the Confederate Army by the Southern Presbyterian theologian, Robert L. Dabney, a moving scene is described as the body of the deceased general was lying in state in the Capitol in Richmond, Virginia. Thousands of the Confederate people had filed by all day to look upon their slain hero. At sunset, the officers in charge began closing the large bronze doors of the Senate chamber to keep anyone else from entering. Suddenly, a rough old soldier, in tattered grey uniform, with tears running down his lined, bearded face, pushed his way forward and cried, as he held up the stump of a missing right arm: 'By this right arm which I gave for my country, I demand the privilege of seeing my general for the last time.' Before the officer of the day could push the old veteran of the Stonewall Brigade down the steps, the Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia, who happened to be standing by, insisted: 'Open the gates and let this man in: he has won entrance by his wounds.'

In an altogether more profound way, the prayers of believers win entrance to the Father because they, as it were, go through the wounds of Christ. Or, to speak rather more accurately, Christ's people are present with him in his life, death, resurrection and continuing intercessions, and hence they – and their prayers and spiritual sacrifices – find glad entrance to the Father so that fire is cast into the earth. Theologically, it would be hard to improve on the way this truth is summarised by Cyril of Alexandria:

PRAYER AND UNION WITH CHRIST

Although the host above and the holy spirits worship him, when he became as we are, he worshipped with us as man . . . offering, as fragrant incense, himself on our behalf, and us through himself and in himself to God the Father.⁴³

Now we must note here not only the influence of the union with Christ in winning acceptance with the Father for the prayers of believers, but also the influence of the union upon the very prayers themselves as they rise out of the deep places of the lives of Christians, who are indwelt by the eternal Spirit. This eternal Spirit, in the words of the nineteenth-century Southern Presbyterian theologian B. M. Palmer, 're-echoes the intercessions of Christ' within the spirits of believers.⁴⁴

Palmer, of course, has reference to Romans 8:26, 27, where we are told that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness and confusion when we do not know what to pray or how to pray. When we can do no better than groan, somehow the blessed Spirit is in us, actively working like a mirror to reflect back to heaven the mind of Christ through our very groanings – and thus accomplish things through our praying that far surpass the human understanding. That is undoubtedly one of the reasons why prayer, which is one of the weak and foolish things of this world, is so absolutely powerful with God to the pulling down of strongholds and the doing of mighty exploits. It is one of the tragedies of the twentieth century that so much of the church seems to take the humanist, deistic view of the secular world that prayer is weak and foolish, rather than God's assurance that prayer is the mightiest of all channels between heaven and earth through which the life and virtue of his Son are constantly passing up and down, doing wonders.

Hence, P. T. Forsyth says: 'it is the Christ at prayer who lives in us, and we are conduits of the Eternal Intercession.'⁴⁵ Basil the Great spoke of the Holy Spirit as 'the proper place' where there was true worship (including prayer),⁴⁶ and Hippolytus of Rome spoke of the Holy Spirit as 'the high-priestly Spirit'.⁴⁷ T. F. Torrance has appositely highlighted the significance of the ministry of the 'high-priestly Spirit' as follows:

The Spirit is so closely related to the being and activity of the incarnate Son from whom he is sent to us by the Father and from whom he

43 See T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, p.176.

44 Benjamin M. Palmer, *The Theology of Prayer*, pp. 318–321.

45 P. T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer* (London, 1954), p. 16.

46 Basil, *The Holy Spirit* 62–64.

47 Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 3.5.

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

receives, that in a real sense he is Christ's *Alter Ego* or *Alter Advocatus*, glorifying Christ and acting in his place. The Paraclete is the living and life-giving Spirit of God who mediates to us the life of God, glorifies Christ as the Son of the Father, by throwing his radiance upon him, who thus actualises among us the self-giving of God to us in his Son, and resonates and makes fruitful within us the intervening, atoning and intercessory activity of Christ on our behalf. It was quite in line with this biblical teaching that Hippolytus had called him 'the high-priestly Spirit.'⁴⁸

St Paul is dealing with an important aspect of this same reality when in Romans 8 and Galatians 4 he speaks of God sending the Spirit of his Son into us to cry that intimate family word to our heavenly Father: 'Abba', Father. And for all who pray, this is good news, for in the words of MacLeod Campbell:

The feeblest cry of the spirit of sonship is sure of a response in the Father's heart, being welcome from its own very nature, as well as for that of which it is the promise, as it is also the fruit – for it both comes from and grows into the perfect sonship which is in Christ. But the thought of the righteousness which God has accepted in accepting Christ, the righteousness to which the words, 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, hear ye him,' turn the mind, altogether encourages the child's cry in us – indeed, is its source – for to cherish to utter that cry, is the spiritual obedience to the word, 'hear ye him.'⁴⁹

From this same point of view, we must remember that the Spirit of sonship (by which we pray) ultimately comes out from the Father as well as the Son. The God who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son (John 3:16) is the Father who provided the Son of his heart to propitiate the wrath stirred by the integrity of his holy character against sin which is the contradiction of that character. And this Father whose love sent his Son to cleanse our guilt and make us sons by adoption is the same one who sends prayers to us from his own heart 'through the Son in the Spirit' in order that by the intercessions of his church he might answer those prayers and advance his purposes of almost incredible grace and glory. If this is, in fact, what God is like, could there be anything more needed at this hour, and anything more relevant to the desperate needs of individual humans and the corporate life of our corrupt, secularised nations than a chastened, believing church, once again on its knees, interceding for this world 'to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit', for in so doing it expresses the truest, deepest heart of the Father towards this

48 T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, p. 249.

49 John MacLeod Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

PRAYER AND UNION WITH CHRIST

world, and so – in a royal priesthood – unleashes the benedictions of his infinite goodness upon it.

It is my humble prayer that this lecture may in some way be used by the Holy Spirit to stir many of the people of God once again to range themselves alongside the disciples, and with all of their hearts to ask him: 'Lord, teach us to pray.'