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New or Nuanced Perspective on Calvin?

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NEW OR NUANCED PERSPECTIVE ON CALVIN? A REPLY TO THOMAS WENGER

MARCUS JOHNSON*

Thomas Wenger's recent article in *JETS* has provided the service of bringing to the fore some significant and even perennial issues relating to the heart of Protestant soteriology.¹ His concerns are weighty in that they deal with bedrock doctrinal convictions that undergird basic Protestant beliefs about salvation—that is, justification, sanctification, union with Christ, and the relationship between them (*ordo salutis*). As such, his concerns are important and commendable. Wenger's more specific concern has to do with the alleged misappropriation of these basic soteriological doctrines by those in a group he labels the "New Perspective on Calvin." Because this strain of Reformation scholarship has subsumed Calvin's soteriology under the rubric of union with Christ, they have jettisoned the "traditional understanding of Calvin's theology" and have proposed a "realignment of Calvin's doctrines of justification and sanctification." Wenger's claim is that for various reasons—methodological, historiographical, and exegetical—this reading of Calvin, which overstates the importance of the union with Christ, is "an unfair one."² The commendation of Wenger's interests and concerns aside (after all, response articles are not primarily laudatory so much as critical), in this article I want to redress a number of Wenger's criticisms in the order in which they were presented.

Before moving to concerns of more substance, a preliminary note on the use of the label "New Perspective on Calvin" is in order. Although Wenger is careful to disassociate his use of the label from any real or perceived connections with other strands of scholarship, the disclaimer does not make the selection of phrase any more salutary, and this for at least two reasons. The first is that there is nothing particularly "new" in the assertion that union with Christ is a controlling principle in Calvin's soteriology. John Williamson

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¹ "The New Perspective on Calvin: Responding to Recent Calvin Interpretations," *JETS* 50 (2007) 311–28.

² *Ibid.* 311–12. The reader may consult Wenger's introductory footnote for a bibliography of those he considers representative of this type of scholarship. The two persons and articles that draw the primary attention are Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards," *WTJ* 65 (2003) 165–79; and Craig B. Carpenter, "A Question of Union with Christ? Calvin and Trent on Justification," *WTJ* 64 (2002) 363–86. Nearly all of the works cited are either articles published in *WTJ* or Ph.D. dissertations written at Westminster Theological Seminary.

Nevin (1803–1886), the noted Reformed theologian and co-founder (with Philip Schaff) of the Mercersburg Theology, formulated an articulate defense of the significance of the union motif in Calvin's theology. Calvin's understanding of the believer's union with Christ, Nevin thought, was crucial to his soteriology and had definite implications for his understanding of justification and sanctification.³ So, too, may we note the magisterial and highly influential work on Calvin's thought by Francois Wendel, who recognized not only the indispensability of union with Christ for understanding Calvin's soteriology, but also the implications for Calvin's theology with respect to the relation between justification and sanctification.⁴

The second reason is the almost inescapable association the phrase "New Perspective on Calvin" (NPC) has with the controversial NT studies movement, "New Perspective on Paul" (NPP). Although Wenger is quick to note that he intends not to infer "guilt by association," it is difficult to overlook such associations given the precedent in existing scholarship.⁵ Frankly, the association runs the risk of obscuring the interests and concerns of one group at the expense of the other. There are other concerns with such a label,⁶ but we must turn now to issues of greater substance.

³ Nevin's most important work in this regard is *The Mystical Presence. A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1846), reprinted in *The Anxious Bench and The Mystical Presence* (American Religious Thought of the 18th and 19th Centuries; ed. Bruce Kucklick; New York: Garland, 1987). Of particular interest to the present article is the observation that Nevin's work was negatively reviewed by the stalwart Princeton theologian, Charles Hodge, who was Nevin's former professor and mentor: "Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord's Supper," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 20 (1848). In this review, Hodge essentially rejected Calvin's views on the Lord's Supper, claiming that Calvin's view had died out very early in the history of the Reformed church. The question which surfaces, and which is germane to the present topic, is this: did Hodge believe he could reject Calvin's understanding of the presence of Christ in the Supper and still claim doctrinal allegiance with Calvin's soteriology more generally? More on this idea will follow in the conclusion.

⁴ *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought* (trans. Philip Mairet; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002). Wendel writes of the implications of union with Christ for Calvin's soteriology, "[I]t is not this distinction [between justification and sanctification] that presents the most interest but the fact that, for Calvin, justification and sanctification are two graces of equal value" (p. 257). See also *ibid.* 233–34, 258. For another example one may consult Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (trans. Harold Knight; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956). Niesel asserts that Calvin "lays all possible stress on (union with Christ) as the essence of salvation" (p. 125).

⁵ For example, the association is implicit in Guy Waters Prentiss, *Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2006). See also D. A. Carson, "The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields," in *Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates* (ed. Mark Husbards and Daniel J. Treier; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004) 46–78. Wenger concedes that Carpenter "actually invited comparison" with the New Perspective on Paul, thus acknowledging that the association is at least latent. For those familiar with the literature surrounding the NPP, it is evident that issues involving union with Christ and justification are of no subsidiary concern.

⁶ For instance, who exactly constitutes the "New Perspective on Calvin"? Does the group consist of only those mentioned in Wenger's article? Or are there possibly more? More importantly, would these scholars refer to themselves in such a way? Wenger's use of the phrase only serves to obscure the issues he is concerned to address. Finally, Wenger also disavows any relation of his label with Tuomo Mannermaa and the new Finnish School of Luther interpretation ("New Perspective" 311–12). Given that he asserts such a relation would be "illegitimate" and may produce "guilt by association," it is fair to assume that Wenger is critical of this reading of Luther. I want to suggest

I. CALVIN AND UNION WITH CHRIST:
CENTRAL DOGMAS AND METHODOLOGY

Wenger's caution about establishing union with Christ as Calvin's central dogma is surely correct. Calvin scholars are generally agreed that the search for a central dogma in Calvin's writing, around which his entire theological enterprise may be said to revolve is best abandoned. To say that Calvin's theology is a logically oriented system that relies upon a fundamental doctrine for its rationality and coherence—whether this doctrine is the absolute sovereignty of God, predestination, or Christology, among others—fails to do justice to the complexity of Calvin's thought, or his intention to write biblical as opposed to philosophical theology. The effort to view Calvin's theology as the product of his duties as pastor of Geneva and as biblical exegete, rather than as logical system-builder, is to be commended. Indeed, even Calvin's major "systematic" work, the *Institutes*, comprises a very small portion of his literary output, the largest portion being devoted to biblical commentary. Therefore, when we read that the "NPC" has "sought to establish [union with Christ] as Calvin's central dogma, or architectonic principle" there is justified concern.⁷

Just how warranted is this concern, however? How many of those whom Wenger cites would actually make the claim that union with Christ is the central dogma, or architectonic principle, of Calvin's *entire* theology? There is a significant difference between the claim that union with Christ is the *central dogma* of Calvin's thought, and the claim that union with Christ is the "controlling principle of the Reformer's doctrine of applied soteriology."⁸ The former claim falls into the errors discussed above, while the latter claim allows for the observation that Calvin viewed certain biblical and theological themes (e.g. union with Christ) as basic to the understanding of certain theological *loci* (e.g. the application of redemption). Put another way, one is not necessarily guilty of the central dogma fallacy by reason of the observation that Calvin's soteriology is so shaped by his understanding of union with Christ that his thought is properly grasped only with an appreciation of this theme. To recognize this theme as crucial to his soteriology is not the same as establishing a premise from which Calvin's theology can be deduced. Nor need such a claim serve to diminish the importance of another doctrine, such as justification, which is clearly a prominent *locus* in Calvin's soteriology.

that, despite some ecumenically-driven excesses, the Finnish School has done the service of highlighting the importance of the union with Christ motif in Luther's theology, an aspect of Luther's theology largely neglected, and which provides a window into the prominence of the theme in Calvin as well. See Marcus Johnson, "Union with Christ in Luther and Calvin," *Fides et Historia* (Fall 2007) 59–77.

⁷ Wenger, "New Perspective" 312.

⁸ Wenger (*ibid.* 313) is quoting Carpenter, "Union with Christ" 365–66. Even Charles Partee's sometimes excessive claims are tempered by his recognition that Calvin did not expound his theology from any one doctrine ("Calvin's Central Dogma Again," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 18/2 [1987] 191–99).

Attention to matters relating to Calvin's *ordo docendi* and the *ordo salutis* await examination in the next section. At present, I wish only to make the modest claim that recognizing a determinative theme in Calvin's soteriology is not nearly as aberrant as Wenger seems to imply. Given the now well-accepted thesis that Calvin thought of himself primarily as an expounder of the Scriptures, and that the *Institutes* was a compendium of theological *loci* arranged to help the reader in identifying key doctrines in Scripture (and thus alleviating Calvin of the burden of elaborating on each doctrine as it appeared in Scripture), it should not be an oddity to suggest that Calvin identified union with Christ as a key element in the biblical matrix of salvation. This ought to be an especially unremarkable claim given the likelihood that Calvin followed Melancthon in organizing the *Institutes* according to the *ordo docendi* of Paul's Epistle to the Romans.⁹ It should be no more remarkable than claiming that union with Christ is a determinative theme in the apostle Paul's understanding of salvation, or even that this theme in Paul has implications for his understanding of justification. As it was for Paul, union with Christ was for Calvin a more "comprehensive" way of understanding the application of salvation.¹⁰ Again, this claim need not be stretched to mean that Calvin *began* with the theme of union with Christ and then synthetically proceeded to order his soteriology. But it does suggest that Calvin's soteriology can hardly be comprehended without an understanding of the determinative significance of this theme for his doctrines of justification and sanctification.

I do not wish in the space of this article to defend the view that Reformed Scholasticism signaled a departure from Calvin's theological method or content. Wenger has provided a sufficient articulation and bibliography of the pertinent scholarship refuting such a position.¹¹ It must be noted, however, that the claim that Calvin's Reformed heirs were no less biblical theologians than he, or that they "founded their theology on careful, meticulous exegesis, 'produced biblical commentaries, critical texts, translations, hermeneutical studies,'" does not mean that there were no differences in *emphasis*.¹² In other words, it is not immediately clear that Muller's thesis is relevant to Wenger's argument. Wenger is, in essence, making the claim that the "NPC" pits Calvin's method "over against what is presumably the Protestant

⁹ Richard Muller, "Ordo Docendi: Melancthon and the Organization of Calvin's *Institutes*, 1536–1543," in *Melancthon in Europe: His Work and Influence Beyond Wittenberg* (ed. Karin Maag; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 137, 139. I will discuss Wenger's broader claims regarding a Melancthonian influence in the next section.

¹⁰ So Carson: "If we speak of justification or of imputation . . . *apart* from a grasp of this incorporation into Christ, we will constantly be in danger of contemplating some sort of transfer *apart* from being included in Christ, *apart* from union with Christ" ("Vindication" 72). Carson also writes of Paul's union with Christ language as being more "comprehensive than the categories tied immediately to righteousness/justification" (p. 76).

¹¹ "New Perspective" 315–16.

¹² *Ibid.* 314–15. Wenger is quoting Muller, "The Problem of Protestant Scholasticism: A Review and a Definition," in Willem J. Van Asselt and Eef Dekker, eds., *Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 47.

scholastic era.”¹³ This contention seems a bit overdrawn, given the evidence that is presented. The recognition that Calvin’s soteriological emphasis on union with Christ determined his understanding of the application of redemption—and the additional claim that the Reformed tradition which succeeded him does not either similarly emphasize this understanding or mirror Calvin precisely at this point—need not necessitate the sweeping objection that Calvin’s theology is thus opposed to, or in contrast with, the tradition which bears his name. Difference in emphasis is not wholesale theological discontinuity. Anyone who reads both Luther and Calvin, for instance, would neither want to claim that they shared identical theological concerns or emphases, nor that their differences reflect a broad theological dissonance.

There are two related errors that need to be avoided: the first is the attempt to create unwarranted distance between Calvin’s theology and that of his successors in service of a theological agenda; the other is the failure to recognize that Calvin, as any other theologian, may have emphasized certain themes in a different manner than those who followed him (which is merely the observation that the trajectory of Reformation theology was not altogether homogeneous). To make the argument, as Wenger does, that because Muller (and others) have shown that there is no *contrast* in theological method or content between Calvin and the Reformed scholastics does not thereby mean that they shared a uniform understanding of the application of redemption (*ordo salutis*). Such an argument needs to be demonstrated rather than merely assumed.

II. HISTORIOGRAPHIC REFLECTIONS

In a section of his article entitled “Historiographic Criticism” Wenger lodges three complaints against the “NPC.” The first is the lament that “it is difficult to believe that this late in the game there are still Calvin vs. the Calvinists assertions being made, especially from these scholars.” The second is that some of these scholars have “not been able to resist the siren song of divining central dogmas in Calvin’s thought.”¹⁴ These two criticisms, and their relative accuracy, have been addressed in the previous pages. Wenger’s third historiographic criticism is that because the “NPC” has imposed upon Calvin the “controlling principle” of union with Christ (which Wenger equates with a central dogma), they mistakenly uncover an *ordo salutis* that is quite foreign to Calvin’s thought. This imposition fails, in Wenger’s view, to account for the fact that Calvin “clearly never set out to establish a formal taxonomy of the logical or temporal order of salvation.” The reason for this failure is the neglect of evidence which shows that Calvin was actually following an *ordo docendi* that mirrored Melancthon’s description of Paul’s organization of Romans.¹⁵ Thus, Calvin’s *Institutes*, beginning with the 1539 edition, follows a Pauline *ordo docendi* bequeathed him by Melancthon,

¹³ “New Perspective” 314.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 315–16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 317–20.

which makes the attempt to read Book 3 of the *Institutes* as a reflection on the *ordo salutis* a reading which fails to account for Melanchthon's influence.

This third criticism introduces some worthy cautions. The more general observation regarding Melanchthon's wide-ranging influence on the theological method and content of the Reformation can only be ignored at the scholar's own peril. Calvin's respect and admiration for Melanchthon and his teaching are now well attested.¹⁶ Furthermore, and more specifically, Wenger cites Muller's work demonstrating Melanchthon's influence on Calvin's *ordo docendi* in the *Institutes*, a thesis which is not to be overlooked in discussions revolving around Calvin's soteriology. Despite some incautious statements about the ignorance of the "NPC" regarding Luther's and Melanchthon's influence, Wenger is surely correct to point to the above factors when examining the *Institutes*.¹⁷

Nevertheless, I would like to offer correction—or, better, nuance—to the above criticisms. For one, while Wenger is right to point out the far-reaching influence of Melanchthon for the content and methodology of Reformation theology, this does not mean that method always *equals* content. As Timothy Wengert and Randall Zachman have shown, Calvin was able to appreciate Melanchthon's methodology and doctrine, without slavishly following either. Calvin and Melanchthon differed, for instance, on questions such as free will, predestination, absolution, and the Lord's Supper.¹⁸ Thus, it was evident that Calvin felt a theological kinship with Melanchthon without following with him in all matters theological. It may be certain that Calvin followed Melanchthon's *ordo docendi* when compiling his *Institutes*, and yet be far from certain that Calvin followed Melanchthon's every emphasis, nuance, or theme. Put another way, Melanchthon's methodological influence is by no means co-extensive with his theological influence on Calvin, even if the latter is significant. Perhaps on this point Wenger would be in agreement. But I believe this point has some further implications.

It seems that Wenger's primary historiographic criticism of the "NPC" is that they read into Calvin an *ordo salutis* that is simply not there:

¹⁶ Ibid. 320, n. 40. To Wenger's bibliography we may add Randall Zachman, "Calvin and Melanchthon on the Office of Evangelical Teacher," in *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) 29–53.

¹⁷ "One reason that the NPC has ignored these considerable influences from Melanchthon is because they frequently pit Lutherans and Calvin against one another on issues such as justification, thus precluding the possibility of Lutheran influence in many areas of Calvin's doctrine and method. . . . Consequently, they also ignore Calvin's own words of admiration for Luther and Melanchthon and the agreement he saw between them theologically, despite the differences they had" (pp. 320–21). I am far from certain that the "NPC" (whoever these scholars are) can be categorized indiscriminately as those who "ignore" Melanchthon/Lutheran influence, or who "ignore" Calvin's appreciation of the Lutherans. Wenger only cites one book review by David Garner as evidence of such ignorance (p. 320, n. 39).

¹⁸ Timothy Wengert, "We Will Feast Together in Heaven Forever: The Epistolary Friendship of John Calvin and Philip Melanchthon," in *Melanchthon in Europe* 19–44; Zachman, "Calvin and Melanchthon" 29–53. Zachman helpfully shows that, despite rosy portraits of Calvin's allegiance to the Augsburg Confession, after Melanchthon's death Calvin repeatedly tried to keep the Confession from being introduced into France (p. 53, n. 102).

Hence, if Calvin was following Melancthon's description of Paul's organization of Romans, then it is improper to assume that his *ordo docendi* is tantamount to an *ordo salutis*, because his intent was not to describe such a thing at all. In addition, it is improper to begin in Book 3 and interpret it in isolation from the rest. The entire *Institutes* follows the Pauline order and thus must be interpreted in that light. So to claim, as the NPC does, that Calvin used union with Christ as his organizing soteriological principle based on their assumed *ordo salutis* beginning in Book 3 not only lacks internal evidence but is also completely out of accord with the historical context of the *Institutes'* development.¹⁹

Because they have failed to recognize the historical context of Calvin's ordering of the *Institutes*, the "NPC" falsely imposes an *ordo salutis* that begins with Book 3, neglecting the specifically soteriological emphases apparent in Book 2. This naturally leads to the (false) assumption that sanctification precedes justification in Calvin's thought. Nevertheless, as important as the observation is that Book 2 addresses soteriological concerns—following the Pauline/Romans structure—this seems to overlook two important points. The first is the distinction between "accomplished" and "applied" soteriology. The soteriology of Book 2 is primarily concerned with the redemption that has been accomplished in the person of Christ in his mediatorial office, thus very little is said of how the redemption won by Jesus Christ is temporally applied to the believer. Even though it is true that Calvin speaks of justification and sanctification in Book 2 (in connection with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ), there is very little explicit teaching on how exactly these benefits accrue to the believer.²⁰ Calvin made quite explicit his transition to applied soteriology in the beginning of Book 3, which bears the title "How We Receive the Grace of Christ (*De modo percipiendae Christi gratiae*." Having already examined the redemption Christ has won in his death and resurrection (Book 2, esp. chaps. XV–XVII), Calvin proceeded to ask the question which framed his discussion in Book 3: "How do we receive those benefits which the Father has bestowed on his only-begotten Son—not for Christ's own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men?"²¹ One could hardly ask for a more unambiguous transition from accomplished to applied soteriology.

And, after all, is it not *applied* soteriology that is principally in focus in discussions that revolve around the *ordo salutis*? The fact that the methodology of Calvin's *Institutes* follows that of Melancthon's Pauline model does not preclude Calvin from addressing issues germane to an *ordo salutis*. Whether or not this was for Calvin a formal taxonomy seems beside the point. He is careful to signal the transition from accomplished to applied

¹⁹ "New Perspective" 320.

²⁰ Of course, Calvin does not bypass the means of reception altogether. He wrote of how one "participates" and is "joined" to Christ in his death, and how one is "engrafted into" and "shares" in his resurrection. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vols. XX–XXI (ed. J. T. McNeil; trans. F. L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 2.16.3, 7, 13. References to the *Institutes* will be from this edition.

²¹ Calvin, *Inst.* 3.1.1. (emphasis mine).

soteriology himself, at least indicating that he was acutely aware of the difference and the importance of such a transition. As Wenger notes, this does not mean that Calvin was explicitly involved in establishing a position for “debates that arose after his time.”²² Surely he was not. But how “formal” would Calvin’s logical, scriptural, or temporal ordering in the realm of soteriology have to be in order to qualify as his reflections on an *ordo salutis*, and thus bear upon subsequent discussion/debate?

In addition, we must notice that Calvin is by no means unaware of the implications of the ordering of soteriological benefits. After examining how one comes into possession of Christ’s redemptive benefits (through union with the Redeemer by the Spirit, Book 3, chap. 1), and after discussing the instrumental means of that union (faith, chap. 2), Calvin went on to write:

Even though we have taught in part how faith possesses Christ, and how through it we enjoy his benefits, this would still remain obscure if we did not add an explanation of the effects we feel. . . . Now, both repentance and forgiveness of sins—that is, newness of life and free reconciliation—are conferred on us by Christ, and both are attained by us through faith. *As a consequence, reason and the order of teaching (docendi series) demand that I begin to discuss both at this point.*²³

This passage need not be taken to indicate a formal awareness of an *ordo salutis* of the type that developed only later in the Reformed tradition, as long as it makes clear that Calvin most certainly concerned himself specifically with the “order of teaching” that the application of salvation might demand. Thus, it is no falsified imposition on Calvin’s theology to recognize the soteriological ordering of Book 3. Indeed, the very structure of Book 3 implies that Calvin recognized the logical/temporal priorities of some soteriological realities in relation to others—i.e. the work of the Spirit must precede the reception of faith—even as he is influenced by the Pauline/Melanchthonian order. There is no sufficient reason to think that Calvin was *precluded* from logical/temporal soteriological distinctions merely because he followed Melanchthon’s *ordo*. His very words above suggest the opposite. Rather, he was able to include such reflections *within* that *ordo docendi*. There is no reason to “abandon” an attempt to establish “Calvin’s *ordo salutis*” if we are sensitive to two faults: (1) imposing a later debate about the *ordo salutis* upon Calvin, and (2) assuming that Calvin has no concern for the distinction between redemption accomplished and applied, nor specifically for the ordering of the benefits within applied soteriology.²⁴ Calvin may not have been attempting to formulate an explicit *ordo salutis* in Book 3, but this does not mean that he is oblivious to such concerns. If this is granted, it is difficult to overlook the distinct emphasis that he places on the believer’s union with Christ in his discussion of applied soteriology. Union with Christ

²² “New Perspective” 318.

²³ Calvin, *Inst.* 3.3.1.

²⁴ Wenger asserts that while Calvin does have concern for logical/temporal/scriptural ordering in salvation, this concern is absent from Book 3 of the *Institutes* (“New Perspective” 320–21).

is, quite simply, the overriding presupposition of Calvin's understanding of the "way in which we receive the grace of Christ."

One final issue should be addressed here. If it is accepted that Calvin was indeed sensitive to the ordering of the *duplex gratia* which issues forth from Jesus Christ in salvation, then attempts by scholars to correct what they see as distortions of Calvin's understanding cannot not be dismissed as mere anachronism. To bring Calvin's theology to bear on later, or even contemporary, discussions of an *ordo salutis* can be done faithfully to Calvin's own concerns. Indeed, this is not only a salutary practice for the integrity of the Reformation tradition, but is demanded by the sometimes inaccurate and curious assertions made by scholars in the tradition which so often looks to Calvin for its theological bearing. As I hope to demonstrate in the following section, the claim made by Wenger and others that for Calvin sanctification was "founded" upon justification, or that sanctification "flows" from justification, is a misappropriation of Calvin's soteriology.²⁵ Aside from the fact that this misunderstanding fails to appreciate the constitutive reality of the believer's union with Christ—in which union the benefits of salvation are grounded, and from which union justification and sanctification "flow" distinctly but inseparably—it is also possible that such a misunderstanding (of Calvin) is actually imported from later conceptions of the *ordo salutis*.²⁶

III. EXEGETICAL REFLECTIONS

Wenger's primary exegetical criticism of the "NPC" is that they utilize erratic readings of Calvin to establish their case that union with Christ is the principle behind his soteriological ordering/understanding, a principle that allows Calvin to place sanctification before justification in Book 3 of the *Institutes*.²⁷ I have already touched upon the reason why Wenger opposes such a conception, namely that Calvin had no intention of formulating an *ordo salutis* in Book 3; he was simply following the Melancthonian/Pauline

²⁵ Wenger, "New Perspective" 322–23. See also R. Scott Clark, "The Benefits of Christ: Double Justification in Protestant Theology before the Westminster Assembly," in *The Faith Once Delivered: Essays in Honor of Dr. R. Wayne Spear* (ed. Anthony T. Selva; Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2007). Clark says of Calvin's soteriology: "From justification flows the Christian life of progressive sanctification" (p. 130).

²⁶ In Louis Berkhof's view, the Reformed conception of the *ordo salutis* traditionally placed justification before sanctification in that justification "obliges man to a new obedience and also enables him to do the will of God from the heart." See his *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) 418. For a discussion of American Reformed conceptions of the *ordo salutis* with respect to union with Christ, see William Borden Evans, "Imputation and Impartation: The Problem of Union with Christ in Nineteenth Century American Reformed Theology" (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1996). Lane Tipton has recently argued that Calvin's soteriology needs to be distinguished from post-Reformation Lutheran soteriology in which justification occupies the theological center, and from which union with Christ and sanctification are derived ("Union with Christ and Justification," in *Justified in Christ* [ed. K. Scott Oliphint; Ross-shire, UK: Mentor/Christian Focus, 2007] 41–45).

²⁷ "New Perspective" 321–22.

structure of Romans. Wenger goes on in this section to claim that the main theme in Calvin's soteriology (Book 3) is just that of Romans—justification by faith. Thus, it is not union with Christ that undergirds Calvin's soteriology, but what Calvin saw as the primary purpose of Paul's letter to the Romans.²⁸

It is, in particular, the following contention from Richard Gaffin's article that seems to cause Wenger the most consternation: "Calvin proceeds as he does, and is free to do so, because for him the relative 'ordo' or priority of justification and sanctification is indifferent theologically."²⁹ Wenger seeks to substantiate his claim that "[w]hen one looks for Calvin's actual arguments on the matter, he is quite explicit that when explaining these doctrines, one ought *never* to establish sanctification before justification, but rather that the former is always to be founded upon the latter."³⁰ The passage from Calvin that Wenger uses to fortify his argument needs to be reproduced here in full:

I believe I have already explained above, with sufficient care, how for men cursed under the law there remains, in faith, one sole means of recovering salvation. I believe I have also explained what faith itself is, and those benefits of God which it confers upon man, and the fruits it brings forth in him. Let us sum these up. Christ was given to us by God's generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us in faith. By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life. Of regeneration, indeed, the second of these gifts, I have said what seemed sufficient. The theme of justification was therefore more lightly touched upon because it was more to the point to understand first how little devoid of good works is the faith, through which alone we obtain free righteousness by the mercy of God; and what is the nature of the good works of the saints, with which part of this question is concerned. Therefore we must now discuss these matters thoroughly. And we must discuss them as to bear in mind that this is the main hinge on which religion turns, so that we devote greater attention and care to it. For unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation nor one on which to build piety toward God.³¹

The first of Wenger's arguments stemming from this passage is largely semantic. He proposes that it is significant that Calvin twice described sanctification as "secondary," suggesting that Calvin thus understood justification as the "primary" of the "double graces." This argument runs into the following problems: (1) it is not clear that Calvin intended to assign a relative *worth* to sanctification when he described it as "second" in order, as if

²⁸ Wenger quotes Calvin here: *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans: The Argument* (trans. John Owen; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947) xxix.

²⁹ Gaffin, "Biblical Theology" 177, as quoted in Wenger, "New Perspective" 322.

³⁰ "New Perspective" 322 (emphasis his).

³¹ Calvin, *Inst.* 3.11.1.

justification were first in order of soteriological value and sanctification a rung lower in value; (2) Calvin did not describe justification and sanctification here as “double graces,” but as a “double *grace* (*duplex gratia*).” This is important to note because Calvin understood that the *duplex gratia* is received only by “*partaking of him*” in whom the benefits reside. When Christ is “grasped and possessed by us in faith,” we receive the *duplex gratia* of justification and sanctification; it is a two-fold grace, not two graces.

The second of Wenger’s arguments from this passage stems from Calvin’s statement that he had already “touched upon” justification before discussing sanctification, which is taken to indicate the priority that justification assumed in Calvin’s soteriology. Presumably, this is confirmation of the fact that Calvin is following a Melanchthon/Paul/Romans ordering that placed justification in a “primary position theologically.”³² However, despite the evidence that Calvin may well have been following Melanchthon’s order, there are several indications that Calvin did not feel himself to be *strictly* limited to such an order. Calvin’s comments in the above passage cited raise at least the following questions: (1) If justification was in a “primary position theologically,” why would Calvin only “lightly touch upon” justification, proceed to discuss sanctification *in full*, and then return only later to “discuss these matters more thoroughly” (that is, discuss *in full* the doctrine of justification)? As I have noted above, Calvin was aware that subsequent to a discussion of faith (Book 3, chap. 2), the “order of teaching” demanded that he turn to either justification or sanctification. If justification had been his primary concern, this surely would have been the place to discuss the doctrine, rather than postpone it until after sanctification. (2) In what sense can Calvin’s self-described order of teaching—to “lightly touch upon justification,” discuss sanctification in full, and then return to a full discussion of justification—be said to faithfully reflect a Melanchthonian/Romans order? Melanchthon does not truncate or postpone his teaching on justification to discuss sanctification (good works/new obedience), most likely because he did not see such an order in Paul.³³

The purpose of raising these questions is not to diminish the importance of justification in Calvin’s theology. It clearly occupies a prominent place in his thought, as it did for every other theologian whose sympathies lay with the Reformation. Calvin’s writing consistently reflects this. After all, justification often stood at the center of the highly polemical debates between the Reformers and Rome which precipitated much of the theological literature. Justification was bound to occupy Calvin’s thought across broad spectrums of theological, biblical, and pastoral reflection. This does not mean, however—no matter how many times one cites Calvin to the effect that justification is “the main hinge on which religion turns”³⁴—that justification is an

³² “New Perspective” 323.

³³ Melanchthon’s order in his 1543 *Loci Communes* is typical: Sin-Law-Gospel-Grace and Justification-Good works. See *Loci Communes: 1543* (trans. J. A. O. Preus; St. Louis: Concordia, 1992). Muller discusses the order of Melanchthon’s 1535 *Loci Communes* in “*Ordo Docendi*” 134–40.

³⁴ *Inst.* 3.11.1.

independent soteriological reality that somehow has the power to effect sanctification, or, to cite Wenger, “for sanctification to proceed, it must be grounded in justification and theologially cannot happen in another order.” Calvin’s understanding of the relationship between justification and sanctification, as Wenger has it, is one of cause and effect: sanctification is impossible if not founded on justification.³⁵

The primary evidence Wenger presents for these claims is Calvin’s refutation of Osiander in Book 3 of the *Institutes*. Having already warned his readers of the problem of “erratic readings” and “proof-texting,” I am a bit surprised that Wenger chose the dispute with Osiander to prove his point. As the texts that Wenger selected show quite clearly, Calvin’s problem with Osiander was that his understanding of justification destroyed the foundation for the believer’s *assurance of salvation*. By asserting that Christ is our righteousness according to his divine nature—in a “mixing of essences”—Osiander construes justification as both forgiveness *and* renewal unto holiness.³⁶ Osiander’s understanding of union with Christ resulted in a commingling of justification and sanctification which Calvin flatly rejected.³⁷ Calvin’s concern with Osiander is *not* that he has inseparably bound together justification and sanctification,³⁸ Calvin’s concern is that Osiander has included sanctification *within* justification and thus destroyed the foundation on which a believer’s assurance rests. The assurance of one’s reconciliation with God, the peace that quiets the soul, is grounded in justification, not in one’s inherent holiness (sanctification).³⁹ Thus, Calvin’s point is not that *sanctification* must be grounded in justification, but that the *assurance of salvation* must be grounded in justification.

As Calvin stated repeatedly, justification and sanctification are benefits that are to be distinguished but never separated (*distinctio sed non separatio*). In this respect, the importance of 1 Cor 1:30 for Calvin could hardly be over-

³⁵ “New Perspective” 323, 325.

³⁶ *Inst.* 3.11.5–6. For an extended discussion on the intricacies of Calvin’s refutation of Osiander, and the importance of the sacramental context of the dispute see Mark Garcia, “Life in Christ: The Function of Union with Christ in the *Unio-Duplex Gratia* Structure of Calvin’s Soteriology with Special Reference to the Relationship of Justification and Sanctification in Sixteenth-Century Context” (Ph.D. thesis; University of Edinburgh, 2005) 197–252. Garcia’s Ph.D. thesis will be published as *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin’s Theology* (Studies in Christian History and Thought; Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2008). See also my “Eating by Believing: Union with Christ in the Soteriology of John Calvin” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity College, University of Toronto, 2007) chapter VI.

³⁷ Calvin’s refutation of Osiander can be found in *Inst.* 3.11.5–12. Wenger’s assertion that the “NPC” understanding of union with Christ in Calvin results in a “commingling” of justification and sanctification, not dissimilar to Osiander’s, is troubling (“New Perspective” 323). I am confident that none of those whom Wenger considers “NPC” would say that Calvin “commingles” these benefits.

³⁸ *Inst.* 3.11.6: “To prove the first point—that God justifies not only by pardoning but by regenerating—(Osiander) asks whether God leaves as they were by nature those whom he justifies, changing none of their vices. *This is exceedingly easy to answer: as Christ cannot be torn into pieces, so these two which we perceive in him together and conjointly are inseparable—namely, righteousness and sanctification*” (emphasis added).

³⁹ Wenger’s citations of the dispute with Osiander address precisely this issue (“New Perspective” 325).

stressed as a paradigm for understanding the relationship between the two benefits.⁴⁰

From this also, we infer, that we cannot be justified freely through faith alone without at the same time living holily. For these fruits of grace are connected together, as it were, by an indissoluble tie, *so that he who attempts to sever them does in a manner tear Christ in pieces*. Let therefore the man who seeks to be justified through Christ, by God's unmerited goodness, consider that this cannot be attained *without his taking him at the same time for sanctification* or, in other words, being renewed to innocence and purity of life.⁴¹

The "indissoluble bond" by which justification and sanctification are connected is Christ himself. To sever these benefits is to "tear Christ in pieces." Sanctification, as much as justification, proceeds from the person of Christ who is grasped in faith. Justification no more "grounds" sanctification than sanctification grounds justification: both are grounded in, and proceed from, the believer's union with Christ:

Why, then, are we justified by faith? Because by faith we grasp Christ's righteousness, by which alone we are reconciled to God. Yet you could not grasp this without at the same time grasping sanctification also. For he 'is given unto us for righteousness, wisdom, sanctification, and redemption' (I Cor. 1:30). Therefore Christ justifies no one whom he does not sanctify. *These benefits are joined together by an everlasting and indissoluble bond*, so that those whom he illumines by his wisdom, he redeems; those whom he redeems, he justifies; those whom he justifies, he sanctifies. . . . *Although we may distinguish them, Christ contains both of them inseparably in himself*. Do you wish, then, to attain righteousness in Christ? You must first possess Christ; but you cannot possess him without being made partaker in his sanctification, because he cannot be divided into pieces (I Cor. 1:13). Since, therefore, it is solely *by expending himself* that the Lord gives us these benefits to enjoy. He bestows both of them *at the same time*, the one never without the other.⁴²

Calvin's consistent refrain, one that was evident in his debate with Osiander, was that justification and sanctification are distinct benefits that are never to be separated, any more than Christ himself can be separated.⁴³ They are distinct only by reason of their soteriological function. As C. P. Venema has noted, the twofold benefit of union with Christ is distinct in conception: "Justification answers the question, how and on what basis are we acceptable to God? and regeneration (sanctification) answers the question, what positive fruit or effect does the Spirit accomplish in the lives of those

⁴⁰ Garcia notes that this verse was employed by Calvin as a sort of "biblical short-hand" for his conception of the *duplex gratia Dei* ("Life in Christ" 219; cf. 217–28, 236–37).

⁴¹ Calvin, *Comm.* I Cor. 1:30. Calvin made use of this verse no fewer than twelve times in the 1559 *Institutes*.

⁴² *Inst.* 3.16.1. Consider Calvin's *Comm.* I Cor. 6:11: "Christ, then, is the source of all blessings to us; from him we obtain all things; but *Christ himself*, with all his blessings, is communicated to us by the Spirit. For it is by faith that we *receive Christ*, and have his graces applied to us" (emphasis added).

⁴³ See, e.g., *Comm.* Colossians 1:22; Romans 8:2; John 3:36; *Inst.* 3.2.8; *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (rev. ed.; Edinburgh and Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973) 288.

who have trusted in Christ alone for their salvation?"⁴⁴ Calvin emphasized the distinction between the two benefits only insofar as they served differing soteriological ends. It is the living Christ who contains the twofold benefit in himself and who is the living, effectual reality behind both justification and sanctification. They are not related in terms of cause and effect, or of ground and consequence, but in terms of their relation as a dual reality in the singular, redemptive person and work of Christ.

One final note in this section is worth pursuing. Wenger singles out Craig Carpenter's article as a particularly glaring example of faulty historical exegesis. Carpenter is charged with "blatantly revisionist claims" for intimating that a kind of theological harmony existed between the Council of Trent and Calvin on the issue of union with Christ, which may lead to "more positively affable relations" than have historically been prosecuted between the disputants.⁴⁵ This criticism seems far wide of the mark, however. Carpenter's point was *not* that Calvin and Trent shared a common understanding of union with Christ, but that there was a fundamental *discontinuity* on the nature and effects of that union.⁴⁶ Whereas Trent had included renewal unto holiness within justification, thereby confounding the two benefits, Calvin insisted on a distinction without separation. It is precisely at this point that Calvin disagrees with Trent on the efficacy of union with Christ, a point on which Carpenter is clear. In Calvin's estimation, Trent erred in erasing the distinction between justification and sanctification, *not* in the holding of them together:

It is not to be denied, however, that these two things, Justification and Sanctification, are constantly conjoined and cohere; but from this it is erroneously inferred that they are one and the same. For example:- The light of the sun, though never unaccompanied with heat, is not to be considered heat. Where is the man so undiscerning as not to distinguish one from the other? We acknowledge, then, that as soon as any one is justified, renewal also necessarily follows: and there is no dispute as to whether or not Christ sanctifies all whom he justifies. It were to rend the gospel, and divide Christ himself, to attempt to separate the righteousness we obtain by faith from repentance.⁴⁷

Calvin consistently appealed to union with Christ in his debate with Rome, but hardly to demonstrate their agreement. It was Calvin's understanding of this union that made Rome's accusation against the Reformation doctrine

⁴⁴ Venema, "The Twofold Nature of the Gospel in Calvin's Theology: The 'Duplex Gratia Dei' and the Interpretation of Calvin's Theology" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1985) 281.

⁴⁵ "New Perspective" 325.

⁴⁶ Carpenter, "A Question of Union" 375, 379, 384. Carpenter writes: "Just as he did in his own day. I suspect that Calvin would spend more energy challenging Rome's view of sin and depravity, on the one hand, and of union with Christ, on the other, always underscoring the controlling significance of this union for every saving benefit, including justification by faith" (p. 386). I would agree with Wenger that Calvin's primary concern with Trent has to do with justification rather than union with Christ *per se*, although I take this as a given considering that it was the article of justification that divided Rome from its Reformation adversaries.

⁴⁷ Calvin, "Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote," in *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, vol. 3 (ed. Henry Beveridge; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) 115–16.

of justification *sola fide a non sequitur*. Calvin's comments on 1 Cor 1:30 are again instructive: "Those, however, that slander us, as if by preaching a free justification through faith we called men off from good works, are amply refuted from this passage, which intimates that faith apprehends in Christ regeneration equally with forgiveness of sins."⁴⁸ Thus, Carpenter's claim is hardly a "blatantly revisionist claim." Calvin's appeal to union with Christ versus Rome undergirded his insistence that justification and sanctification, while distinct, are at the same time no more to be separated than Christ himself. After all, to separate them was to render the gospel "lame and corrupt."⁴⁹

IV. CONCLUSION

Wenger concludes his exegetical criticisms with the rather startling assertion that there is no single chapter or *locus* devoted to union with Christ in the entire *Institutes*.⁵⁰ This assertion is presumably meant to fortify his position throughout that while union with Christ is an important concept for Calvin, it is by no means a controlling principle in his soteriology (or theology more generally). I will conclude my rejoinder with two crucial observations regarding this assertion.

First, while it may be true that none of the chapters in the *Institutes* are specifically labeled with the heading "Union with Christ," it is nearly impossible to conceive of the first chapter of Book 3 as anything other than a *locus* on union with Christ. Indeed, the fact that Calvin opened his discussion on "The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ" with a chapter on the Spirit-wrought union with Christ surely indicates the importance and even priority of this concept in his soteriology. Nor should the absence of a specific *locus* entitled "Union with Christ" obscure the fact that not only is Calvin's discussion of faith (chap. 2) inundated with this concept, but also that Calvin began his discussions of sanctification and justification by reminding his readers that either benefit is received only insofar as faith receives/grasps/possesses Christ himself.⁵¹ Sanctification (repentance), as Calvin explained it, consists of two elements: mortification and vivification—"Both things happen to us by participation in Christ."⁵² The believer "truly" partakes in Christ's death and resurrection, which are the effectual power behind sanctification (thus, justification does not produce sanctification). Furthermore, Calvin makes clear that justification is itself a result, a consequence, of the believer's union with Jesus Christ.

Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes

⁴⁸ *Comm.* I Cor. 1:30. See also *Inst.* 3.11.1; 3.16.1.

⁴⁹ *Comm.* Acts 5:31.

⁵⁰ "New Perspective" 327, n. 61.

⁵¹ See *Inst.* 3.2.2, 6, 8, 24, 30, 35; 3.3.1; 3.11.1.

⁵² *Inst.* 3.3.9.

us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him.⁵³

Second, Wenger's assertion that there is no single chapter or *locus* devoted to union with Christ in the entire *Institutes* quite simply fails to do justice to the sacramental nature of Calvin's soteriology. Surely it cannot be denied that Calvin's discussion of the Lord's Supper is in fact a *locus* devoted to union with Christ (4.17.1). And surely the same can be claimed for his treatment of baptism—a "token of our communion with Christ" (4.15.6). Calvin's soteriology was so intimately bound up with his sacramentology that one readily encounters soteriological discussion (narrowly defined) within his discussion of the sacraments.⁵⁴ Even if this observation is on one level fairly obvious, it is meant to underscore that Calvin's soteriology cannot be properly understood without reference to his sacramentology. Not only must scholars appreciate the soteriological elements in Book 2 of the *Institutes* (as Wenger has pointed out), they must also go beyond Book 3 to Calvin's understanding of the sacraments to fully appreciate his soteriology (a point overlooked by Wenger). As Calvin made clear in his discussion of the Lord's Supper, this sacrament is a lucid picture of the *gospel*—a faith participation in the body and blood of Jesus Christ.⁵⁵ In short, there is for Calvin no participation in the benefits of salvation without a true partaking of the salvific body and blood of Jesus Christ—that is, outside of union with Christ. It is this union with Christ, received by faith both inside and outside the sacraments, that is the presupposition of Calvin's applied soteriology and which governs his understanding of the *duplex gratia*. Justification and sanctification are received only insofar as one is grafted into Christ himself, in whom the benefits reside, *distinctio sed non separatio*.

⁵³ *Inst.* 3.11.10.

⁵⁴ *Inst.* 4.15.1–6; 4.17.2, 4, 11.

⁵⁵ *Inst.* 4.17.1–12; "Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper," in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. XXII (ed. and trans. J. K. S. Reid; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 144–48; "Catechism of the Church of Geneva," in *ibid.* 136.