

UNION WITH CHRIST AND THE CHURCH'S WORSHIP

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"There is no doubt that the object of the whole spiritual government of the Church is to lead us to Christ, as it is by him alone we come to God, who is the final end of a happy life."¹

A distinctive mark of Sovereign Grace Churches—one of our seven shared values—is our gospel-centeredness. One of the underlying convictions of this mark is the understanding that we cannot exhaust the riches of the gospel. The good news of God's kingdom cannot be emptied like a gallon of milk. It does not wear out like a pair of jeans. The good news of the gospel is an ever-flowing fountain that cannot run dry. It is a beautiful diamond with which we will never grow familiar. Out of the perfect completeness of the triune God flows the glorious grace and goodness of the gospel.

We are and desire to remain gospel people. One of the places this priority is clearly seen is in our corporate worship. We are committed to preaching the gospel, singing the gospel, praying the gospel, and building our churches upon the gospel. Step into any Sovereign Grace church throughout the world this coming Sunday and you will observe a people passionate about proclaiming the perfect life, substitutionary death, victorious resurrection, and glorious ascension of Jesus Christ.

1. JOHN CALVIN, "MUTUAL CONSENT IN REGARD TO THE SACRAMENTS BETWEEN THE MINISTERS OF THE CHURCH OF ZURICH AND JOHN CALVIN, MINISTER OF THE CHURCH OF GENEVA," IN TRACTS AND LETTERS OF JOHN CALVIN, TRANS. HENRY BEVERIDGE, (1849; REPR., CARLISLE, PA: BANNER OF TRUTH, 2009), 2:212.

As gospel people, we love reminders of what the gospel has accomplished in our lives. We have received forgiveness, justification before God, reconciliation with him, adoption into his family, and many other blessings. But it can be easy to overlook a primary implication of this good news: *we are united to Christ*. The gospel not only saves us, but it also joins us to Christ, giving us a new identity in him. This doctrine of union with Christ should have significant implications on how we worship as the church.

Indeed, this union is the very well-spring of our salvation, apart from which we, as the people of God, cannot be who God has made us to be. Our identity as the church and our basis for relating to and worshiping the triune God is rooted in Jesus Christ alone. Thus, the church should be tethered to Christ at every point of its corporate worship, where—enabled by the Holy Spirit

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and governed by the Word of God—the church assembles to gratefully witness the revelation of the triune God by doing three things: receiving from Christ, acting in him, and longing for him to come again.

Receiving from Christ

The first implication of union with Christ in our corporate worship is that we gather to receive from him. The church is built into Christ, not by offering something new to God, but by receiving from God what already belongs to us in Christ—his goodness, grace, mercy, and sufficiency. This takes place through the Holy Spirit’s work, primarily through the proclamation of God’s Word.

When we hear Scripture read or preached, Jesus Christ is declaring himself to his people. Our God is a God who speaks to us through his Word, so when we gather that Word should be the loudest and clearest voice. Our corporate worship should be infused with the Bible.

So, our primary disposition in gathering together for worship is not to speak and act but to listen. This means that whenever Scripture is read—whether to call us to worship, prepare for preaching, or send us out—it is not merely a convenient transition to some other event. It is the main event of our worship where God reveals himself to his people through the Word.

Acting in Christ

A second implication of union with Christ for corporate worship is that our activity—the singing, praying, fellowshiping, preaching—is not just done *for* Christ but takes place *in* Christ. It can be all too easy to think that after receiving from Christ, it is now up to us to respond. But the gospel means Jesus is not only the object of our worship—the one *to* whom we offer our praise—but the subject in our worship—the one *in* whom we offer our praise. When we gather in worship, we act together in Christ by the Spirit.

In practice, this means that we are set free to simply bear witness to what God has already spoken. We gather to testify to the “glad news of deliverance” and the “faithfulness of [his] salvation” (Ps. 40:9-10). This applies not only to those preaching but to all of us. We act in Christ as we speak his Word through singing to one another, praying together, and fellowshiping with one another. Our words should be shaped by and flow out of God’s Word revealed to us in the pages of the Bible.

We also act in Christ by recognizing our constant dependence on him. Our worship is not made more holy or more special through anything we do but is accepted in what Christ has done, empowered by the Spirit.

Longing for Christ

A third implication of union with Christ in our corporate worship is that it points us forward. Gospel-centered people know something about the future: Jesus Christ is coming again. Though Christ is indeed present by the Spirit, his ascension tells us that he is physically absent from us. So we long for him to come again.

Peter describes the church as both “sojourners and exiles” (1 Pet. 2:11). Because of who we are in Christ, this world is not our home. We assemble and remember to which kingdom we belong. We remember the place for which we are made.

In practice, longing for Christ in corporate worship means we consistently read and preach Scriptures that direct our attention up to Christ and forward to his return. Life in this world is not all that it one day will be. But in God’s Word, we get a taste of “the powers of the age to come” (Heb. 6:5). We receive the comfort that the Word that is a lamp to our feet now will

soon be the light by which the nations walk (Ps. 119:105; Rev. 21:24). We are oriented to the hope of life in Christ when he returns, and we also “appear with him in glory” (Col. 3:4). And until that day, we make this our prayer: “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20).

Treasuring Christ

Robert Robinson’s hymn reminds us that we are “prone to wander” and “prone to leave the God [we] love.” One subtle but common expression of this wandering is our tendency to forget who we are in Christ. We readily adopt the identities and values the world presents to us through news and advertising, books and movies, Instagram and Netflix, and many other voices and stories.

But for the people of God, only one identity defines who we are. One story supersedes all others. And that story is found in Jesus Christ. He is our life. We have died, and our lives are hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3).

To be gospel-centered is not just to declare the glories of Calvary; it is to live in the good of them, experiencing the fullness of the life we now have in Christ—and this transforms everything that we do. By receiving from Christ, acting in Christ, and longing for Christ’s return, God has given us a tremendous gift in corporate worship as we grow together to treasure Christ. As a people who delight in the gospel of Jesus Christ, may we experience more and more the joy that comes from being united to him. All we have, all we need, all we want is found in Jesus Christ.

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