

## ***Perichoresis, Theosis* and Union with Christ in the Thought of John Calvin**

This article examines recent proposals that Calvin's view of the Christian's union with Christ is a form of mysticism, or means that he has a doctrine of *theosis* or that it is a *perichoretic* union. Each of these proposals seeks to revise our understanding of Calvin and to suggest that he operates with an explicitly ontological soteriology rather than in a covenantal framework. I will argue that not only does this obscure Calvin's theology, but that the introduction of *perichoresis* into a doctrine of union with Christ is inevitably problematic.<sup>1</sup>

Before examining Calvin's doctrine some brief definitions are in order, specially since the terms *theosis* and *perichoresis* are often not clearly defined. *Theosis* or divinisation is the doctrine that salvation consists of humans coming to share in the divine nature. *Perichoresis* has been used in Trinitarian theology to describe the mutual indwelling of the Father, Son and Spirit. Hilary of Poitiers explains the concept (without using the term) when he speak of the three who "reciprocally contain one another, so that one should permanently envelope, and also be permanently enveloped by, the other, whom yet He envelopes."<sup>2</sup> Both terms, and the concepts they denote, require careful examination in the context of any particular writer's thought since they can be put to quite varying use.

### **Union and knowledge of God**

A consideration of Calvin's theological project illustrates the

<sup>1</sup> Since finishing this article I have become aware of a paper by Bruce McCormack titled 'Union with Christ in Calvin's Theology: Grounds for a Divinisation Theory?' given in Geneva in July 2009. This will be available in a forthcoming volume *Tributes to John Calvin*, David W. Hall, ed. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2009). It argues a position complementary to this article.

<sup>2</sup> Hilary, *De Trinitate* 3.1 in *A select library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene fathers of the Christian church*. Second series. Volume 9. P. Schaff and H. Wace (trans and ed) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 62.

importance of the theme of union with Christ. His *Institutes* are an extended reflection on how we know God. The famous opening words declare: 'Nearly all wisdom we possess ... consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.' For Calvin the knowledge of God precedes true knowledge of self. He argues that although looking at ourselves should make us realise our need of God, in fact 'it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinise himself'.<sup>3</sup> Further true knowledge of God results in piety, 'We shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known where there is no religion or piety'.<sup>4</sup>

This knowledge of God comes only in redemption, for sin stops the revelation in creation from having its proper effect: 'so great is our stupidity, so dull are we in regard to these bright manifestations, that we derive no benefit from them'.<sup>5</sup> So for Calvin knowing God comes about in Christ and is always accompanied by true piety or religion.

When we then ask how a sinner comes to know God in redemption, Calvin's answer has two parts. Book II of the *Institutes* shows how God's joining himself with humanity in the incarnation and the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ is the basis for the redemption. The other aspect is expressed in the famous opening words of Book III, 'as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to us'.<sup>6</sup> That is, sinners must be united with Christ and participate in him in order to enjoy his benefits.

Thus the notion of union with Christ is at the heart of Calvin's theology. Union with Christ is how we enjoy redemption, and redemption is the only source of knowledge of God.<sup>7</sup> It is important then to clarify as far as

<sup>3</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. J. T. McNeill (ed), F. L. Battles (trans), (London : SCM Press, 1961) I.i.1-2, 35-37.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, I.ii.1, 39.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, I.v.11, 63-64. On the distinction between the knowledge of God in creation and that found in redemption see E. A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (2nd ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> *Inst* III.i.1, 537.

<sup>7</sup> This article will not deal with the question of the relations of the aspects of salvation which flow from union with Christ and thus will not take a position

possible what Calvin means by ‘union with Christ’.

For Calvin saving union with Christ rests on the incarnation and the resulting unity of Christ with humanity. Incarnational and saving union are related, but not identical. Garica points out that Calvin writes to Vermigli that the incarnational union is ‘very general and feeble’ and that a mystical union with Christ, leading to a spiritual union, is necessary for sinners to enjoy the benefits secured in the incarnation.<sup>8</sup>

### **Union with Christ as Mysticism**

There has been considerable discussion about how Calvin’s doctrine of ‘union with Christ’ should be understood. Calvin retains the traditional language of ‘mystical union’, leading some to conclude that he has a form of mysticism.<sup>9</sup> Tamburello offers a ‘generic’ definition of mysticism as ‘the insistence upon a direct, inward and present religious experience’ and a more specific definition drawn from Jean Gerson (1363-1429) as ‘experiential knowledge of God attained through the union of spiritual affection with him.’<sup>10</sup> He claims that Calvin’s thought fits within both these definitions.<sup>11</sup> However, to describe Calvin’s view of union with Christ as ‘mystical’ is misleading. Calvin’s emphasis on doctrine of the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, the need for the Scriptures, the role of faith rather than love, the importance of mediation and limitation on knowledge of God in this age, all set him apart from mysticism.<sup>12</sup>

in the debates on the relations of the forensic and transformative aspects of the *duplex gratia*. Although this article favours Garcia’s account of union, that is not an endorsement of his view of the *duplex gratia*. See J. Fesko, ‘A Tale of Two Calvins: A Review Article’, *Ordained Servant*, March 2009 cited 21 March 2009 [http://www.opc.org/os9.html?article\\_id=139](http://www.opc.org/os9.html?article_id=139) for an outline of the difference between Billings and Garcia on this matter.

<sup>8</sup> M. A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin’s Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 186-7.

<sup>9</sup> *Inst* III.xi.10, 737.

<sup>10</sup> D. E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 7,11.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, 102-3.

<sup>12</sup> C. Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 170-72, argues that Calvin does not conform to any common definition of mysticism. He concludes that Calvin’s faith ‘can be described as spiritual, even mystical in a certain sense, but his theology is dominantly confessional

### Union with Christ as *theosis*

Others have suggested that Calvin's view of union is more like the Eastern doctrine of *theosis*, in which the redeemed are filled with the *energia* but not his *ousia*.<sup>13</sup> Partee has summarised the arguments for and against finding a theme of *theosis* in Calvin, and argued convincingly that it is not a theme in Calvin's thought.<sup>14</sup> One of the objections regularly made against attempts to interpret Calvin's doctrine of union with Christ as mystical or deificatory is that Calvin has a robust Trinitarian doctrine. Both Butin and Billings have both sought to use this very claim to argue that Calvin had a doctrine of *theosis* grounded in a perichoretic union. Their claim is that Calvin's view of union with Christ is identical to, or close to identical to, his view of the relationship of the Triune persons. The closer that identity can be drawn the stronger is the case that Calvin's view of salvation is a form of *theosis* since he views believers as sharing in the same relation as is found in God's own existence. The burden of this paper is to examine this claim.

### Union with Christ and *perichoresis*

Billings presents Calvin's view of participation as 'a oneness that extends the oneness of the Father and Son to the oneness of the Son with the "whole body of believers"'.<sup>15</sup> He suggests that Calvin quite easily

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and exegetical, focused on his experience but on the Lordship of Christ'.

<sup>13</sup> Partee mentions J. C. McLelland, 'Sailing to Byzantium: Orthodox-Reformed Dialogue: A Personal Perspective', *New Man*, Vol 16, 1973, 10-25; C. Mosser, 'The Greatest Possible Blessing: Calvin and Deification', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55/1 (2002), 36-57; J. T. Billings, 'United to God Through Christ: Assessing Calvin on the Question of Deification', *Harvard Theological Review* 98/3 (July 2005), 315-334; and M. Habets, 'Reforming Theosis', in S. Finlan & V. Kharlamov (eds), *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2006), 146-67.

<sup>14</sup> Partee, *op.cit.*, 172-9.

<sup>15</sup> J. T. Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 64. Partee refers to Billings article but not to his book and does not particularly deal with the question of union with Christ. Gibson offers a positive assessment of Billings' work and his arguments against a participationist interpretation of Calvin, D. Gibson, 'Review of' *Themelios* (33/2) September 2008 cited 21 March 2009 from <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/publications/33-2/book-reviews/>

referred to this as a substantial union, though this was not the ‘indistinct union’ of late medieval mysticism but a ‘perichoretic’ and ‘Trinitarian’ participation.<sup>16</sup> With some caution he argues that this view of participation in Christ allows Calvin to have a ‘doctrine of deification.’<sup>17</sup>

Butin also describes Calvin’s view of union as perichoretic. He uses the term ‘perichoretic’ to describe ‘ways of understanding the unity of the three hypostases that focus on their mutual indwelling or inexistence, their intimate relationship, and their constantly interacting cooperation.’ He notes that this implies a contrast with the Western tradition which assumes ‘the unity of God’ and has to explicate ‘how this God can exist in three persons.’<sup>18</sup>

### ***Perichoresis and the Persons***

The first question to be asked in assessing this claim is whether Calvin views the relations of Father, Son and Spirit as *perichoresis*. There is an element in Calvin’s approach to the Trinity which makes a perichoretic dimension likely. Calvin views the persons of the Trinity as *autotheotic*. He holds that the entire divine essence is in each of the Father, Son and Spirit and these three Persons are distinguished one from another by an incommunicable property.<sup>19</sup> That is, Calvin focuses on the three persons and their unity, rather than on a single divine essence. It then seems likely that he would conceive of their unity in terms of their mutual indwelling, that is as *perichoresis*. Butin claims that this is indeed Calvin’s conception.

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calvin-participation-and-the-gift-the-activity-of-believers-in-union-with-christ. This article focuses exclusively on Billings’ claim that Calvin’s view of union is ‘perichoretic’ and leads to a view of *theosis*.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, 61-66.

<sup>17</sup> Billings refers to ‘Calvin’s doctrine of deification, if we may call it such’ and repeats all his qualifications in note 162, see p. 60.

<sup>18</sup> P. W. Butin, *Revelation, Redemption and Response: Calvin’s Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 161 n. 34.

<sup>19</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian religion* J. T. McNeill (ed), F. L. Battles (trans), (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I.xiii.1-2, 120-23. See G. Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 199-212, and B. B. Warfield, ‘Calvin’s Doctrine of the Trinity’, *Princeton Theological Review*, vii. 1909, 553-652 available from [http://www.lgmarshall.org/Warfield/warfield\\_calvintrinity.html](http://www.lgmarshall.org/Warfield/warfield_calvintrinity.html).

However, the claim is not supported by the evidence. In the relevant sections in the *Institutes* there is no appearance of the terms *perichoresis* nor its equivalents *co-inherence*, or *circumincession*.<sup>20</sup> Butin contrasts Calvin's claimed 'perichoretic' approach with Western views that the unity of God is a 'given'. However, Calvin does not discuss the unity of the Father, Son and Spirit as arising from their mutual indwelling, but as from their sharing a single essence. He states that 'in God's essence reside three persons in whom the one God is known.'<sup>21</sup> He further explains that 'although the [divine] essence does not does not enter into the distinction as a part or a member of the Trinity, nevertheless the persons are not without it, or outside it.'<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity must exclude the idea of *perichoresis*, but he makes no obvious use of the term or the idea. Thus the claims that Calvin views the believer's union with Christ as perichoretic in the same way as he views the unity of the divine persons stumbles at the first hurdle, that is not how Calvin describes divine unity.

The claim that Calvin's account of unity of the persons is 'perichoretic' is drawn from T. F. Torrance.<sup>23</sup> Torrance has argued that although Calvin quotes Augustine on the Trinity far more than Nazianzus 'at every essential point the basic conceptions that Calvin wants to adduce come from Gregory.'<sup>24</sup> However Torrance gives little evidence to support his claim and Lane has shown that the vast majority of the parallels which Torrance claims to find come works which were not available to Calvin until 1550.<sup>25</sup> If Calvin does not use *perichoresis* as part of his doctrine of God, then it makes Billings' and Butin's case far harder to sustain.

### **Perichoresis and Union with Christ**

The next question to examine is whether Calvin presents union with Christ in term of *perichoresis* or if he uses an analogous concept. In fact

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* I.xiii.16-20 & 25 pp. 140-45, 53-54.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* I.xiii.16, 140.

<sup>22</sup> *Inst.* I.xiii.25, 154.

<sup>23</sup> See Butin, *op. cit.*, 161 n. 34.

<sup>24</sup> T. F. Torrance, 'The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity in Gregory Nazianzen and John Calvin,' *Sobornost* 12 (1990), 7.

<sup>25</sup> A. N. S. Lane, *Calvin — Student of the Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 84-85.

Calvin seeks to emphasise the difference between union with Christ and the union of the divine Persons. John 17:20-23 is a text which speaks of believers united with one another and with the Father and the Son. When Calvin comments on this text he carefully differentiates Christ's unity with the Father from the unity of the divine persons, explaining that Christ 'does not speak of his divine essence, but that he is called one in his person as Mediator and inasmuch as He is our Head'.<sup>26</sup> That is, Christ's unity with the Father as the incarnate Mediator is on view, not his unity as the Eternal Son.

Billings and Butin use the term *perichoresis* as both a description of the relation of the Father, Son and Spirit and use it adjectivally to describe the believer's union with Christ. The use of the adjective is ambiguous. If it is taken to mean that union with Christ is grounded in divine *perichoresis* then it is not a controversial claim, either as an interpretation of Calvin nor as a statement in systematic theology. Butin reviews Calvin's reflection on the economic relationship of Father, Son and Spirit and shows its connection with the Spirit's work in uniting believers with Christ. He concludes, 'God's present work *in redeemed humanity*, then, has an explicitly Trinitarian dynamic that consists in the pneumatological determination of God's prior work *for redeemed humanity* in Christ.'<sup>27</sup> This is simply to state that Spirit-mediated union with Christ is an articulating motif in Calvin's soteriology and that it can be seen to be so because it rests on a careful Trinitarian account of the work of Christ.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> J. Calvin, *The Gospel according to St John. Part 2. 11-21. The First Epistle of John*. (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), 148. Billings refers to the work of Butin who also argues that Calvin has a 'bold inclusion of believers in the *perichoresis* of the divine life through their participation in Christ by the Holy Spirit' and uses the passage from the commentary as evidence (Butin, *op.cit.*, 3 and 161 n. 38). This, however, is to ignore Calvin's explicit strictures against reading John 17:21 as a reference to the Son's unity with the Father as eternal God. When the Fathers did this he says they 'seize on detached passages and twist them to a foreign sense'.

<sup>27</sup> Butin, *op.cit.*, 82.

<sup>28</sup> The same thought in other words is expressed by C. E. Gunton at the end of his discussion of Calvin in *Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). He is critical of Calvin for not giving a sufficiently Trinitarian account of creation, while he does give such an account

If, however, the adjective ‘perichoretic’ is taken to mean that our union with Christ is of the same nature or type as the union of the Father and Son, then that is a claim which Calvin does not make and which is problematic. Both Butin and Billings seem to mean this in their statements. Butin writes that according to Calvin ‘the bond of Christ’s relationship with God the Father is identical to the bond of the believer’s relationship with God the Son, because in both cases that bond is God the Holy Spirit’. The problem with this claim is not the idea that the Spirit is bond in both cases but that the bond is therefore ‘identical’.

Butin offers Calvin’s comment on John 14:20 and Romans 8:9 as evidence.<sup>29</sup> However, in neither of these passages does Calvin speak of the perichoretic bond as the same bond as that which unites believers to Christ. In commenting on John 14:20 he makes it clear that, as in John 17:23, this text deals with the incarnate mediator. Calvin always considers the incarnation of the Son in the context of Triune relations, but he does not state that even in the person of the mediator the bond is the *same* as between the Triune persons, nor does he claim that believers share in an identical bond, though they certainly share in the Spirit.<sup>30</sup>

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of redemption. Gunton comments using Irenean terminology, ‘it should be said that creation, reconciliation and redemption are all to be attributed to the Father, all realised through the works of his two hands, the Son and the Spirit, who are themselves substantially God. There is mediation, but it is through God, not ontological intermediaries’, 154.

<sup>29</sup> Butin, *op.cit.*, 83 and 186, n.45 & n. 46.

<sup>30</sup> Whether Calvin’s exposition of the unity of the Triune God in *Inst* I.xiii.19, 143-44 is best described as ‘perichoresis’ can be left aside for this paper. Letham finds *perichoresis* in the commentary on John in comments on Jn 14:10 and 17:3; R. Letham, *The Holy Trinity: in Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 2004), 264. P. Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 64-65, points to the discussion from the commentary on Jeremiah in which Calvin explains the distinction between *unio* (union) and *unitas* (unity). *Unio* is applied to the two natures while *unitas* speaks of the person (see *Inst* I.xiii.17, 141). Calvin praises Gregory of Nazianzus’ expression and states that thinking of the three must lead us back to a unity (*unitatem*). That is, he speaks of the divine-human relation as *unio* but the divine-divine as *unitas*.



### **Perichoresis and Christology**

Both Billings and Butin claim that for Calvin the union of the incarnate Son with the Father is perichoretic. Their case seems to depend on an ambiguity in the use of 'perichoretic'. In order to clearly analyse Calvin's thought three Christological relations must be kept on view: a) the relation of the Father and Son considered absolutely, b) the relation of the divine and human in the one person of the Mediator, and c) the relation of the incarnate Mediator to the Father. None of these relations may be treated separately from the other, and each has to be understood in harmony with the other, but each raises different questions.<sup>31</sup>

The term *perichoresis* was first used in Christian theology to speak of the hypostatic union in which two natures are united in one person in Christ, that is relation b).<sup>32</sup> In this case the relation under consideration is asymmetrical. Crisp puts this asymmetry very starkly, 'The divine nature of Christ interpenetrates his human nature without confusion and without being mingled with it. But the human nature of Christ does not interpenetrate the divine nature in any way.'<sup>33</sup>

In the case of relation a), the unity of the persons of the Trinity, there is a symmetry expressed by the formula of the Council of Florence (1441 AD): 'Because of this unity the Father is wholly in the Son and wholly in the Holy Ghost, The Son is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Ghost is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Son.' Crisps points out that in order to maintain the distinction of the persons this formula must be understood to have a certain limitation on it:

The persons of the Trinity share all their properties in a common divine essence apart from those properties that serve to individuate one of the persons of the Trinity, or express a relation between only two persons of the Trinity.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Christological and Trinitarian relations were described by the Eastern Church Fathers as *perichoresis*, as was the union of the believer with God, as was God's relation to creation and to believers; see H. H. Oliver, *Metaphysics, theology, and self: relational essays* (Mercer University Press, 2006), 65. This observation does not imply that Calvin thought this way, nor that the term can be used as a technical term and be applied usefully to all these relations.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, 66.

<sup>33</sup> O. D. Crisp, 'Problems with perichoresis', *Tyndale Bulletin* 56.1 (2005), 130.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, 139.

This distinction is precisely the one on which Calvin insists in his discussion of the distinctions between the persons.<sup>35</sup>

The notion of *perichoresis* has been applied to the relations of the persons such that each mutually indwells the other. While this is true it is not sufficient to fully express the unity of the persons. Pannenberg argues that theology has appealed to *perichoresis* to ‘express’ a unity established on other grounds (such as the Father’s monarchy or divine self-development).<sup>36</sup> If the term is to be applied to the life of the Trinity it needs to be distinguished from its Christological use. An account of the unity of the persons will also stress that there is a unity of essence.

Relation c), the relation between the incarnate Christ and the Father is one to which fewer writers have given attention though there is far fuller biblical testimony which refers to it. Led by this testimony the best perspective from which to understand the relationship is in terms of the presence and work of the Spirit in the incarnate Christ. The prophetic expectation was that God’s salvation would come through the Spirit equipped servant (Isa 11:1-3; 42:1; 50:4-5) and the Spirit was intimately involved in the life and work of Jesus from his conception and growth (Matt 1:18, 20; Lk 1:35; 2:20), his baptism (Matt 3:10; Lk 3:21-22; Jn 1:33) and ministry (Matt 12:28, 32-33; Mk 3:29; Lk 4:1,14; 10:21; 12:10), his self-offering (Heb 9:14) and resurrection (Rom 1:1-4; 1 Tim 3:16; 1 Peter 3:18).<sup>37</sup>

Horton argues that it is important to recognise the work of Christ as human and divine. He suggests that doing so and avoiding any tendency

<sup>35</sup> *Inst* I.xiii, 18, 142f.

<sup>36</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Volume 1*, G. W. Bromiley (trans), (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 334. He seeks to present an account of God’s unity which does find its focus in ‘the relational nexus of perichoresis’; 320. For Pannenberg this entails finding God’s unity in the ‘concrete relations’ of the actions of Father, Son and Spirit in the economy of salvation. The success of Pannenberg’s proposal depends on his conception of the relation of history and eternity. Given that his proposal is unique in Christian theology we can set it aside and accept his claim that in the tradition perichoresis does not establish the unity of the persons.

<sup>37</sup> See J. Owen, *The Works of John Owen, Volume 3, The Holy Spirit*, W. H. Goold (ed), (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 159-188, and S. B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 35-56.

to monopolyism ‘opens up a wider space for pneumatology, pointing to the Spirit, rather than just the divine nature, as the focus of Jesus’ dependence’ on the Father.<sup>38</sup> This observation suggests that to view the union of Christ with the Father as entirely a matter of *perichoresis* fails to allow for the significance of the humanity of Jesus in salvation and for the mediation of the Spirit in that work. To some degree Jesus’ unity with the Father is the same unity into which believers are brought. We have seen that Calvin’s treatment of John 17 emphasises that this is so.

It is proper to recognise an analogy between the union of the incarnate Christ to the Father by the Spirit and the perichoretic unity of Father and Son. This analogy is recognised in ‘Rahner’s Rule’, that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity.<sup>39</sup> This can be interpreted to make the being of God dependent on the economy of salvation however Rahner himself gives the immanent Trinity an ontological priority over the economic.<sup>40</sup> In the present discussion the importance of this point is that we can recognise that the presence of the Spirit in Christ is patterned on the perichoretic unity of the Son and Father, but is not identical with it. This conclusion underlines the argument of this paper, that while there is coherence between *perichoresis* and human union with God through Christ, even in the case of Christ himself this coherence is not an identity.

It is possible to find examples of each of these three relationships being called *perichoresis*, and because they are related to each other this is not surprising. A careful reflection upon the three relationships shows that their differences must be noted, even if they were to be described with a similar term. (Even calling all three ‘relations’ recognises their similarity).

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<sup>38</sup> M. S. Horton, *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 176.

<sup>39</sup> See K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations* IV, K. Smyth (trans), (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 94.

<sup>40</sup> Rahner writes: ‘... it is a fact of salvation history that we know about the Trinity because the Father’s Word has entered our history and has given us his Spirit’; K. Rahner, *The Trinity* (London, Burns & Oates, 1970), 48; and that ‘the “economic” Trinity is grounded in the “Immanent” Trinity’; Rahner, *Trinity*, 101. LaCugna traces the careful unity-and-distinction of Rahner’s God-in-relation model. C. M. LaCugna ‘Reconceiving the Trinity as the Mystery of Salvation’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38 (1985), 13.

## Conclusion

The claim I have been considering is that Calvin views the union of the believer with Christ as ‘perichoretic’ and that this gives rise to a theme of *theosis* in his soteriology. This claim is flawed at several levels. Calvin does not use the term *perichoresis* and in his discussion of the unity of the persons he does not make use of the concept. He also clearly distinguishes the mystical union of believers from the hypostatic union and the union of the persons. The relation which stands in closest connection to union of the believer with God is that of the union of Christ with God, and this union is not viewed as perichoretic but as Spirit-mediated.

Calvin gives no formal definition of union with Christ. Garcia’s comment accurately reflects what can be gathered from his use of the concept:

Communion with Christ is much more than mental but less than baldly physical or essential. It is real and true but not a miracle of ontological oneness but by the blessing of the Spirit’s work.<sup>41</sup>

For Calvin, union with Christ involves the incarnate Son who is endowed with the Spirit, being present in and to the believer in such a way that although there is no mingling of natures there is an exchange. Horton describes union with Christ as organic, vital, personal and transforming, and this describes Calvin’s view well.<sup>42</sup> Horton also argues that union with Christ is better understood in a covenantal ontology than a participationist one.<sup>43</sup> His argument seems to develop consistently from Calvin, though it makes ontological themes far more explicit than Calvin does. Horton’s proposal, therefore, goes beyond the interest of the focus of this paper, though the conclusions here support Horton’s proposal to the extent that we have seen that Calvin does not construe union with Christ as perichoretic and that to do so would be problematic.

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<sup>41</sup> Garcia, *op. cit.*, 258.

<sup>42</sup> M. S. Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 148.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, 153-215.