

Book Review

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Fred Sanders, *Union with Christ and the Life of Faith*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016. 176 pp. \$18.00 (paper).

In recent decades, the theme of *union with Christ* has re-emerged as a central organizing concept within Protestant theology. Particularly among Reformed theologians, scholars have sought to recover the Pauline and patristic intuition that salvation consists not merely in the reception of discrete benefits but in participation in the life of the risen Christ himself. Fred Sanders' *Union with Christ and the Life of Faith* belongs squarely within this broader retrieval movement. Written with characteristic clarity and theological attentiveness, the book offers an accessible yet substantive reflection on how union with Christ shapes the Christian life.

Sanders' central argument is straightforward but theologically significant. Salvation, he contends, must be understood not primarily as a collection of benefits—justification, sanctification, adoption—but as the believer's participation in Christ himself. The various aspects of redemption are intelligible only within the larger reality of union with Christ. Faith, in this framework, functions not merely as intellectual assent or decision but as the means by which believers are united to Christ and share in his life. The Christian life is therefore best described not simply as obedience to Christ but as life lived *in Christ*.

The book unfolds in a series of concise chapters that explore the theological implications of this union. Sanders begins by examining the New Testament foundations of the doctrine, noting the pervasive language of participation in the Pauline epistles. For Paul, believers are not merely forgiven through Christ but incorporated into his death and resurrection. Baptized into Christ, they share in his life and are transformed through participation in him. Sanders repeatedly returns to the apostle's language of being "in Christ," suggesting that this phrase provides one of the most fruitful interpretive keys for understanding the structure of Pauline theology.

From this biblical starting point, Sanders proceeds to examine how union with Christ functions within the broader structure of Christian soteriology. Rather than treating justification, sanctification, and glorification as separate stages or components of salvation, Sanders presents them as dimensions of the believer's participation in Christ. Justification is the declaration that accompanies union with Christ; sanctification is the transformation that flows from it; glorification is its eschatological

fulfillment. Salvation, therefore, appears not as a series of disconnected benefits but as the unfolding consequences of sharing in the life of the Son.

One of the most compelling aspects of Sanders' argument is his insistence that union with Christ provides a necessary corrective to reductionist tendencies within modern evangelical theology. In some contexts, salvation has been narrowed to a purely forensic account of justification or to a moment of personal decision. Sanders' retrieval of participatory soteriology broadens this picture by recovering the relational and ontological dimensions of redemption. Salvation is not simply a change in status but participation in the life of the Son.

From the perspective of Eastern Orthodox theology, this emphasis on participation resonates strongly with the patristic understanding of salvation. The Greek Fathers consistently described redemption in terms of communion with God and participation in the divine life. St. Athanasius's famous dictum—"God became man so that man might become god"—expresses precisely this participatory logic. Salvation is not merely deliverance from guilt but the restoration and transformation of human nature through union with Christ.

Indeed, the patristic tradition repeatedly insists that the incarnation itself must be understood in participatory terms. The Word assumes human nature so that humanity might be restored and brought into communion with the divine life. St. Maximus the Confessor expresses this vision with particular clarity when he writes that the mystery of Christ reveals the divine purpose of uniting created and uncreated reality in communion. For Maximus, salvation involves the healing and transfiguration of the human person through participation in the life of Christ. The Christian life, therefore, unfolds as a process of transformation in which humanity is gradually restored to its proper orientation toward God.

In this sense, Sanders' retrieval of union with Christ reflects a theological intuition deeply embedded within the patristic tradition. His insistence that the benefits of salvation cannot be separated from the person of Christ echoes the Fathers' conviction that redemption consists fundamentally in communion with the incarnate Word. To speak of forgiveness, sanctification, or eternal life apart from participation in Christ would be to fragment the unity of salvation itself.

At this point, Sanders' work may also be fruitfully situated within a broader twentieth-century theological conversation. Georges Florovsky famously argued that the renewal of Christian theology requires a return to the mind of the Fathers in what he called a "neopatristic synthesis." For Florovsky, the patristic vision of salvation as participation in Christ represented not a relic of ancient theology but a permanent dimension of Christian dogma. In this light, the contemporary Protestant recovery of union with Christ may be understood as part of a wider *ressourcement* movement within Western theology—one that is rediscovering themes that were central to the patristic tradition but often muted in later scholastic or confessional developments. Sanders' book, though written within the framework of evangelical theology, participates in this broader retrieval by insisting that the believer's relationship to Christ is not merely juridical but participatory.

Yet, the differences between these theological traditions remain significant. Sanders' account of union with Christ is framed largely within the categories of Protestant soteriology, where faith functions as the primary means of participation in Christ. While this emphasis is understandable within the author's theological context, the ecclesial and sacramental dimensions of union receive relatively limited attention.

Within the Orthodox tradition, union with Christ is not primarily an individual experience of faith but a sacramental reality grounded in the life of the Church. Participation in Christ occurs through incorporation into his Body, the Church, particularly through baptism and the Eucharist. The believer does not simply believe *in* Christ but is mystically united *to* Christ through the sacramental life of the Church. Faith, in this context, is inseparable from the communal and liturgical life through which union with Christ is actualized.

This sacramental dimension of union has been emphasized by modern Orthodox theologians as well. Alexander Schmemmann, for example, repeatedly argued that the Eucharist reveals the deepest meaning of Christian existence as participation in the life of Christ and the life of the coming Kingdom. For Schmemmann, the Church does not merely teach union with Christ; she embodies and actualizes it through the liturgical life in which believers are united to Christ and to one another. The Eucharist, therefore, manifests the eschatological reality of salvation as communion with God.

Similarly, the ecclesiology of John Zizioulas has emphasized that participation in Christ is inseparable from participation in the eucharistic community. For Zizioulas, the Church is not merely an institution that mediates salvation but the very space in which communion with Christ becomes ontologically real. In the eucharistic gathering, the faithful are constituted as the Body of Christ and participate in the life of the triune God. Union with Christ is therefore simultaneously personal and ecclesial, grounded in the communion of the Church and manifested in the liturgical life through which believers are incorporated into Christ.

A related difference concerns the ontological depth of participation. Orthodox theology typically situates union with Christ within the broader framework of *theosis*, the transformation of the human person through participation in the divine energies. The distinction between the divine essence and energies, articulated most fully in the theology of St. Gregory Palamas, provides the metaphysical account of how human beings can truly participate in the life of God while preserving the Creator-creature distinction. Sanders gestures toward participation but does not explore this deeper ontological dimension.

These differences, however, should not obscure the genuine theological value of Sanders' work. One of the most striking features of the book is its ability to articulate participatory soteriology in a way that is both doctrinally careful and pastorally compelling. Sanders writes with the conviction that theology must ultimately illuminate the lived reality of the Christian life. Union with Christ is not merely a speculative doctrine but the living center of Christian existence.

Moreover, Sanders' work reflects a broader shift within Protestant theology toward retrieving pre-modern and patristic themes. Over the past several decades, many

theologians within the Reformed and evangelical traditions have sought to move beyond the narrowly individualistic frameworks that sometimes characterized modern Protestant thought. The renewed interest in union with Christ represents an important part of this movement.

In this respect, Sanders' book participates in a wider ecumenical conversation about the nature of salvation. The recovery of participatory soteriology within Protestant theology creates new possibilities for dialogue between Eastern and Western Christian traditions. While significant theological differences remain—particularly concerning the sacramental life of the Church and the doctrine of theosis—the shared emphasis on participation in Christ suggests an emerging area of convergence.

The book's brevity is both a strength and a limitation. Sanders succeeds admirably in presenting a clear and compelling account of union with Christ in fewer than 200 pages. At the same time, readers seeking a more sustained engagement with historical or systematic theology may find the treatment somewhat concise. The book functions best as an introduction to the topic rather than as a comprehensive theological treatment.

Nevertheless, *Union with Christ and the Life of Faith* is an important contribution to contemporary Christian theology. Sanders offers a persuasive account of why union with Christ should occupy a central place in our understanding of salvation and the Christian life. His work challenges readers to reconsider the nature of redemption not as the reception of isolated benefits but as participation in the life of the incarnate Son.

For Orthodox readers in particular, the book provides an opportunity to engage a growing Protestant retrieval of participatory theology. While Sanders' account remains shaped by the theological assumptions of his own tradition, his emphasis on communion with Christ points toward themes that have long been central to Eastern Christian theology.

Ultimately, Sanders reminds us that the heart of the Christian gospel is not simply forgiveness or moral improvement but the restoration of communion between God and humanity. Salvation consists in sharing the life of Christ himself—a reality that, across the Christian traditions, remains the deepest mystery and the ultimate hope of the Christian faith.

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