

# *Unio cum Christo* and Reformed Complementarity

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## **Abstract**

This article highlights the reticence of the Reformed community toward spirituality, which is devastating in light of our chief end “to glorify God and enjoy him forever” (Westminster Shorter Catechism 1). Reformed spirituality, seemingly short of a lively biblical contemporary expression, needs to be *rekindled* in a way consistent with its heritage. An increased complementarian practice among the Reformed will assist in such a spiritual reanimation, in the form of a corporate Reformed spirituality founded upon union with Christ. An initial trace of a feminine enjoyment of union with Christ demonstrates this proposal, and, in the spirit of *semper reformanda*, a discussion of areas for an improved complementarity in the pastoral care and employment of women and of the absence of Reformed female scholars follows.

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In 1990, Tudur Jones lamented the “deep and prolonged silence about union with Christ”<sup>1</sup> within Protestant theology. Almost twenty years later, we can rejoice that this silence is breaking. Over the last ten years, a number of academic works in historical<sup>2</sup> and contemporary<sup>3</sup> theology, as well as a handful of popular works,<sup>4</sup> have edged the doctrine of union with Christ closer to an appreciation comparative with its siblings, justification and sanctification.<sup>5</sup> Stephen Clark has said that this doctrine is under rehabilitation, in part owing to its recentralization in the works of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, John Murray, and James Packer toward the end of the last century.<sup>6</sup> Yet there is still much work to be done, particularly in the realm of spirituality: too few of these contributions explore the glorious implications of the believer’s union with Christ for the Christian life. For this doctrine lies at “the heart” of Pauline religion, finding its beginning in election and reaching its pinnacle in glorification.<sup>7</sup> The “whole process of salvation has its origin in one phase of union with Christ.”<sup>8</sup> Consequently, this spiritual, organic, and permanent oneness with Christ is also the origin and anchor of the Christian life. And we should certainly not restrict the *unio cum Christo* to its soteriological categories. With its central posture throughout the *Institutes*, it has long been said that the heart of John Calvin’s

<sup>1</sup> Tudur R. Jones, “Union with Christ: The Existential Nerve of Puritan Piety,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 41.2 (1990): 186–208.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Mark A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin’s Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008); Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011); and Dennis E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011); and Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Natalie Brand, *Crazy but True: Connected to Jesus for Life* (Bryntirion: Bryntirion, 2014); Michael Reeves, *Christ Our Life* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2014); Maurice Roberts, *Union and Communion with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008); and Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> See the work resultant from the 2015 Affinity Theological Study Conference presented on the theme of Union with Christ; Stephen Clark and Matthew Evans, eds., *In Christ Alone: Perspectives on Union with Christ* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Clark, “Union with Christ: Towards a Biblical and Systematic Theological Framework for Practical Living,” in Clark and Evans, *Perspectives*, 235–83.

<sup>7</sup> James S. Stewart, *A Man in Christ: The Vital Elements of St. Paul’s Religion* (New York: Harper, 1972), 147; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1939), 447.

<sup>8</sup> John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1961), 161.

theology and spirituality is the *unio mystica* (mystical union).<sup>9</sup> Therefore, a Calvinistic spirituality needs to be reclaimed.

This rediscovery would be of great benefit to the tradition in its current state. We live in a time when spirituality pervades society, from “Hollywood to politics,”<sup>10</sup> and sociologists claim it has (or will) eclipse religion altogether.<sup>11</sup> Yet the Reformed—those who adhere to the Westminster Standards as their confession of faith—possess a rich spiritual heritage of applied dogma that is largely being overlooked. Instead of a rich contemporary expression of spirituality, in line with its historical-theological heritage, the tradition suffers from caricature: the Reformed are portrayed as an overly dogmatic and cerebral community that avoids any meaningful interest in spirituality. Joel Beeke is painfully honest in his diagnosis of a “dry Reformed orthodoxy,” which, he states, “has correct doctrinal teaching but lacks emphasis on vibrant, godly living. The result is that people bow before the doctrine of God without a vital, spiritual union with the God of doctrine.”<sup>12</sup> Michael Raiter has declared that many Evangelicals find the spirituality of their own churches “stultifying, and long for a more experientially satisfying relationship with God through Christ.”<sup>13</sup> Alister McGrath writes, in one work on Reformation spirituality, that there is an unsaid assumption that Reformed Evangelicals do not actually have a spirituality and borrow what they can from other traditions.<sup>14</sup> Might we even go so far as to say that, in its present form, the tradition struggles to excite any significant contemporary expression anchored in Word and Spirit? Could it be that recovering a Calvinistic spirituality based on union with Christ would stimulate a spiritual renewal and reawakening? Douglas Kelly affirms this: “Churches of the West need humbly and earnestly to seek to *experience the full reality of holy life* in an unholy and needy world, *by means of a fresh and constant awareness of our union with Christ in and through the Holy Spirit.*”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> David Cornick, *The Reformed Tradition: Letting God Be God* (London: Longman, Dart & Todd, 2008), 33. Mark Garcia writes, “It has long been appreciated that the Calvin corpus contains numerous passages in which the theological, ecclesiological, and practical significance of union with Christ is prominent” (Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 15).

<sup>10</sup> Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 137.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality, Religion and Spirituality in the Modern World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2006), viii.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Raiter, *Stirrings of the Soul: Evangelicals and the New Spirituality* (Surrey: Good Book, 2003), 29.

<sup>14</sup> Alister McGrath, *Roots That Refresh: A Celebration of Reformation Spirituality* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), 21.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas F. Kelly, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Grounded in Holy Scripture and Understood in the Light of the Church* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2008), 310.

I propose that a distinctively Reformed yet enlivening spirituality might also be encouraged in the improved use of women within the tradition. History demonstrates that celebrated spiritual movements have been particularly stimulated and stirred by the contributions of their women. For example, Bernard McGinn claims the “flowering” of mysticism in the late medieval era birthed from a new freedom of communication between monastic men and women: seemingly the male clerics benefited immensely from the insights and spiritual language of their female counterparts. McGinn documents this significant exchange in his work, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism, 1200–1350*.<sup>16</sup> We have seen something similar in the recent rising popularity of feminist and women’s spiritualities, ensuring that wider society and culture are instilled with a female perspective on the spiritual. Yet this feminine expression is by no means exclusive. McGinn writes,

The fact that some, or even many, women may tend to use language in a certain way, or to adopt distinctive kinds of symbols, or to construct their gender identity and its relation to God according to particular patterns, does not necessarily mean that all women will do so, or that no men can.<sup>17</sup>

We must now ask whether a specifically feminine mode of Reformed spirituality exists? Lyndal Roper denies its existence even since the Reformation: “Not even a distinctive feminine mode of religious experience, such as we see in the Catholic saints and Marian cults, or in the extreme hyperpiety of saintly widows, lived on in early mainstream evangelicalism.” He adds, “Far from endorsing independent spiritual lives for women, the institutionalized Reformation was most successful when it most insisted on a vision of women’s incorporation within the household under the leadership of their husbands.”<sup>18</sup>

Yet, there is no logical or biblical reason why a complementarian view of male leadership (in the home or the church) should prohibit or inhibit a biblically authentic feminine spirituality. In review of popular works, and the few hymns written by contemporary Reformed women, a distinctively Reformed feminine expression can be traced, as can, as we shall now see, a spiritual enjoyment of union with Christ.

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<sup>16</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism, 1200–1350*, vol. 3 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Bernard McGinn, “The Changing Shape of Late Medieval Mysticism,” *Church History* 65.2 (1996): 197–219 (emphasis mine).

<sup>18</sup> Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.

## I. *Female Reformed Spirituality*

A strong emotive drive and desire for intimacy in spiritual life is particularly characteristic of a feminine mode. Historically, Christian feminine spirituality has ostensibly grasped hold of the person of Christ in the symbolism, language, and form of union, apparent in the sexual imagery of the mysticism uttered by Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila, and the bridal mysticism of Mechthild of Magdeburg. Popular feminine forms of Evangelical spirituality representing a “Dear Jesus” sentiment are simplistic contemporary forms comparable to this romanticized perception of Christ. Fundamental features are the feminization of the soul and perception of Christ as spouse, and emotions, beauty, and love are key interrelated experiential features.

These characteristics are all manifest in a Reformed feminine enjoyment of the *unio mystica* as the emotions and affections are aroused by the beauty of Christ as Savior; this is pertinent in light of the contemporary Reformed suspicion of the emotive. Faith Cook expresses an essentially spousal enjoyment of union with Christ in her hymns and words, “Drink of Christ and share his life,” “wrapped up in Him, my one desire.”<sup>19</sup> Linda Dillow, in her popular work *Satisfy My Thirsty Soul*, articulates similarly: “I yearned for a joy unspeakable, for a deeper union and oneness, *for spiritual, bridal union.*”<sup>20</sup> Here the person of Christ is desired above all things, and so the intimacy of union with him is sought.

Reformed feminine spirituality possesses Christ soteriologically and prizes this spiritually with desire and love for his person. In this manner, enjoyment of union with Christ is intrinsic to Reformed feminine spirituality. The believer contemplates her spiritual oneness with her Savior by meditating upon the beauty of Christ in his divine grace, his supremacy and sufficiency, his forgiveness and love, his servanthood and humility, his exaltation, victory, and lordship, and his glorious humanity as the means of union and communion with God. Union with Christ is not disassociated with his person; that is, the union is not enjoyed apart from Christ since enjoyment of the *unio mystica* is essentially enjoyment of Christ and the whole Trinity.<sup>21</sup>

It is significant that the language of both Cook and Dillow fully engages the affections in enjoyment of union with Christ. Yet it is significant that Cook makes use of Samuel Rutherford’s letters, which similarly “throb” with the loveliness of Christ, suggesting that Rutherford’s expressions are kindred to

<sup>19</sup> *Christian Hymns*, 2nd ed. (Bridgend: Evangelical Movement of Wales, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Linda Dillow, *Satisfy My Thirsty Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2007), 19 (emphasis mine).

<sup>21</sup> Natalie Brand, *Complementarian Spirituality: Reformed Women and Union with Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 181.

Cook's and not exclusive to women.<sup>22</sup> These examples can, therefore, be germane to both male and female spirituality. Grounded on the doctrine of union with Christ, they are devoid of senseless sentimentality yet experiential and dynamic. Might these features help quench the “dry orthodoxy” of the Reformed tradition currently shaped by male thinkers?

McGinn's observations and Roper's comments should continue to challenge us, since a “flowering” in contemporary Reformed spirituality is desirable. But at this juncture, perhaps more basically, we turn to the need to align our church practice with complementarian belief further.

## II. *Holes in Our Complementarity*

As the Christian mainstream continues to ordain women and, in the cases of Katherine Jefferts Schori and Libby Lane, consecrate them as bishops, conservative Evangelicals plod on in their conservatism. In the last five years, gender debates on church practice in the ministerial use of women seem to have been somewhat eclipsed in the media by the demands of the LGBTQ+ pressure groups. However, these issues continue to fracture and even rupture church life—frequently to the detriment of unity between those in shared union with Christ.

Within the Reformed community, however, the issue is not generally egalitarian versus complementarian but the impediment of a corporate growth in biblical complementarity. Biblical complementarity has been a lively theological campaign since work began on the Danvers Statement in 1987, operating in the belief that men and women are equal in spiritual responsibility toward God, and in membership in the church.<sup>23</sup> But it is no secret that women are leaving conservative churches because they feel unappreciated and overlooked in their giftings and abilities. Derek Prime writes, “Women's gifts have been, and are, frequently neglected. Some women feel insecure, devastated and robbed of their ministry.”<sup>24</sup> Many Reformed Christians are perhaps sluggish in distinguishing between their traditionalism, culturally imbued through years spent in conservative Christianity, and complementarian doctrine and practice. Pastors in particular might not have considered complementarian theology, or be too fearful

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<sup>22</sup> Faith Cook, *Grace in Winter: Rutherford in Verse* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), 18.

<sup>23</sup> See Danvers Statement: Affirmations 1 and 6, Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, <https://cbmw.org/uncategorized/the-danvers-statement/>.

<sup>24</sup> Derek Prime, *Women in the Church: A Pastoral Approach* (Cambridge: Crossway, 1992), 8, 97.

to teach or implement it. Jay Adams observes that in many churches there is still a leash placed upon women that is unbiblical and spiritually stifling for the community.<sup>25</sup> Mark Johnston elucidates:

Women who have very obvious intellectual and spiritual gifts, who have perhaps been active in missionary work, or in para-church organizations, have struggled with restrictive and even repressive regimes in local evangelical congregations. Situations where the role of the women in practice is little more than tea-maker or cleaner. In some cases where these “evangelical” practices have been questioned by such women, the response they have received has been sufficiently shallow and ungracious to make them wonder even more about what the Bible really says about the worth and usefulness they have as women.<sup>26</sup>

The correct use of the God-given gifts belonging to Reformed women is essential to our affirmation of shared union with Christ and biblical complementarity. The increasing action in women’s ministries, employment of female workers, and—not least—the biblical vision of women actively ministering to women in Titus 2:3–5, suggests that women can have distinct and unique roles in pastoring and teaching other women. The Reformed community must identify more fully the manifold areas of service that are open to women in the church. But as Ligon Duncan and Susan Hunt state, “this will never happen if our approach to discipleship in the church is androgynous—that is, if it refuses to take into account the gender distinctives of the disciple.”<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, it is unreasonable to propose that Reformed spirituality is uniform. Throughout the different schools of thought within the tradition, diversity of expression will be found. For example, the spirituality of American Presbyterians will differ from those within Dutch Reformed churches, rendering Reformed *spiritualities* a fairer term. So also, spiritual expression differs among the sexes. In complementarian belief, we acknowledge both “sameness” and “difference” in God’s creation of male and female. This is well received in our practice of ministries specifically designed for men and women. It is logical that this difference also extends to variety in male and female spirituality.

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<sup>25</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Shepherding God’s Flock: The Pastoral Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 102.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Johnston, “Where Are We Today?,” in *Men, Women and Authority: Serving Together in the Church*, ed. Brian Edwards (Leominster, UK: DayOne, 1996), 4–19.

<sup>27</sup> J. Ligon Duncan and Susan Hunt, *Women’s Ministry in the Local Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 38, 41.

### III. Pastoral Concerns

In considering the rise of female spirituality groups since the nineteenth century, feminist historian Allison Stokes states that such groups existed for members to vent their frustrations with restrictions and neglect in church life in light of the emerging feminist project. As a result, they restructured church by means of shared leadership in full member participation and consensus-based decision making.<sup>28</sup> They sought the spiritual by open communication, mind-body-soul integration, rituals, acceptance, affirmation, and nurture of personal empowerment and creativity. These characteristics are now found in feminist, goddess, wiccan, and sex-spirituality movements, where women continue to look outside institutional religion for effective pastoral care (as well as power). The popularity of these movements alone—especially in the United States—should challenge the Christian church in its care of women. Appropriate and effective pastoral ministry must be offered together with the establishment of a corporate church life that relationally nourishes and supports women in the larger body.

The Reformed church, in its traditional and increasingly unique complementarian stance, has the opportunity to cultivate a church practice that celebrates the distinct spiritual needs and gifting of women as they minister to each other and the community as a whole. Yet the Reformed tradition has severely underestimated the significance of feminine contribution in spiritual, theological, pastoral, and practical spheres. What is left is a historical tradition that confesses a fruitful complementarian theology, founded by the sixteenth-century Reformers, but neglects its application in church life and practice. *Our orthopraxis must reflect our orthodoxy.* Although recent conservative Evangelical discourse has benefited the tradition in maintaining a biblical view of gender and gender distinctions in light of feminist reinterpretation, many churches that are distinctively Reformed in confession and traditional (or conservative) in practice need further reform in the area of women's service and ministry. Instead of avoiding gender-related issues in the church, or relegating "women's ministry" to the sidelines, the Reformed church must encourage women as they contribute to the theological, pastoral, and spiritual life of the body. "The church needs the theological contributions of each individual woman in the lives of other members of the Body, and the church needs the collective participation of women in the spiritual life of the church if it is to remain strong."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Allison Stokes, "Spirituality Groups," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (London: Mowbray, 1996), 272–73.

<sup>29</sup> Carolyn C. James, *When Life and Beliefs Collide: How Knowing God Makes a Difference*

#### IV. *Women Pastoring Women*

One biblically sanctioned ministerial employment of women is in female discipleship, or women pastoring women. In Titus 2, Paul exhorts his protégé to delegate the responsibility for the younger women to the older women. “Paul does not tell Titus to teach the young women. This non-instruction probably reflects Paul’s concern that a young woman perceive her husband as the male who is her primary spiritual instructor.”<sup>30</sup> Also, it is probable that the apostle also has Titus’s own safety in mind, instructing him in a way that does not lead to sexual temptation. Instead, the apostle presents Titus with a comprehensive syllabus in Titus 2:3–5 to pass onto the mature women. Here is a biblical command for the integration of women ministering to women for the benefit of the whole body. Certainly, Paul sees here not the pastor or elder as redundant in pastoral care but full strategic use of the body in mutual edification. A rigorous structuring of a Titus 2 discipleship program into Reformed church life is the biblical solution for both intentional use of women and intentional ministry to women. Reformed pastor and counselor Adams believes that neglect of the Titus 2 model in female-to-female discipleship is a serious deficiency:

Up until now, women (as well as male pastors) have neglected this all-important task. It is high time for conservative pastors to see both the need and the opportunities that this whole untapped area affords.<sup>31</sup>

This ministry should be viewed as indispensable to the life of the church. It should not be executed peripherally to the main body. If the ministry employment and pastoral care of women do not remain integral to the body, women will go elsewhere for a corporate integration that meets their own expression and experiences. If the Reformed tradition can responsibly promote and foster a biblical corporate spirituality that welcomes female expression, then Reformed women will be safeguarded.

What is required, in the recovery of a Calvinistic spirituality based on union with Christ, is a thoroughly churchly or corporate spirituality of the Bride of Christ in union with him.

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(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 203.

<sup>30</sup> R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 328–29, cited in Duncan and Hunt, *Women’s Ministry in the Local Church*, 124.

<sup>31</sup> Adams, *Pastoral*, 102.

## V. A Corporate Spirituality and Union with Christ

Although rooted in the Reformation, the spread of Evangelicalism since the eighteenth century has overemphasized personal faith. This is demonstrated in what Ian Randall calls the “overriding theme” of Evangelical spirituality: “*personal* relationship to Jesus Christ.”<sup>32</sup> In the influence and overlap of Evangelicalism with the Reformed, the former’s individualism and conversionism have robbed the latter of its ideal of corporate life in Christ. Consequently, the recovery of a robust corporate spirituality based on union with Christ would favorably hinder this individualism, which is fueled by the common perception that church is a series of programs to serve the individual. Instead, a biblical ecclesiology might be cultivated wherein the binding of the believer to the “in Christ” community is seen inseparably with the believer’s union with Christ. “Since salvation is only in Christ, there is a sense in which there is no salvation outside the church of Christ, for those whom the Spirit unites to Christ, he unites to all others who are in Christ.”<sup>33</sup>

In sum, a corporate Reformed spirituality built upon the *unio mystica* affirms that the church does not exist apart from Christ and Christ does not exist without the church, which “together with him can be called the one Christ.”<sup>34</sup> Rebecca Jones names it a Spirit-effected marriage: “Christ and the church are the new Adam and Eve, the founding couple for a new humanity. Their union produces offspring for God by the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>35</sup>

It is the Spirit of Christ, who soteriologically binds the Savior to his people, who furnishes this doctrine with transformative, pastoral, and ecclesiastical power. And it is the Holy Spirit himself who is the author of the Christian life, since without him the Christian life cannot exist. He is, as Calvin says, “The root and seed of heavenly life in us.”<sup>36</sup> The Holy Spirit’s work in our union with Christ is the reason it serves as the basis of our corporate and personal spirituality. Sinclair Ferguson agrees: “The model we employ for structuring the Spirit’s ministry should be that of union with

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<sup>32</sup> Ian Randall, *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005), 15 (emphasis mine).

<sup>33</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 57.

<sup>34</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 474.

<sup>35</sup> Rebecca Jones, *Does Christianity Squash Women?* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 134.

<sup>36</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes* 3.1.2 (*Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960], 1:538).

Christ.”<sup>37</sup> It is through this that we find an efficacious unity of Word and Spirit. The Spirit is Christ’s supply to his bride for her sanctification, “by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle” (Eph 5:26–27 esv).<sup>38</sup> It is the Spirit, who inspired the biblical writers and illuminates the Word in the hearts of believers, who makes us holy in Christ.

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior. (Titus 3:4–6)

As he bestows his Spirit on his church (John 14:16–17), convicting her of sin (John 16:8; 1 Thess 1:5) and pouring Christ’s love upon her, he gives her the sacraments as a means of inserting the believer into the whole Christ<sup>39</sup> and as “a bond and pledge of their communion with Him, and with each other, as members of His mystical body.”<sup>40</sup> Here in the sacraments we find the means of grace to corporate enjoyment of union with Christ by the Holy Spirit, the maintenance and sustenance of the corporate bride as she awaits her bridegroom.<sup>41</sup>

The belief that a recovery of the *unio mystica* will actually benefit and shape spiritual life stems from the Reformed principle that theological truth governs the Christian life. The thirteenth-century divorce of theology from spirituality in academia must not impede upon Reformed thought. Instead, by presenting a theological restatement of union with Christ in a Trinitarian and especially pneumatic-christological capacity, we can discern a unique and distinctively corporate spirituality, true to our Reformed confession.

## **VI. The Unquestioned Lacuna: A Call for Reformed Female Scholars**

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel, Sarah Coakley, Frances Young, and Katherine Sonderegger are but a few female theologians who have changed or are changing the male-dominated landscape both in

<sup>37</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, Contours of Christian Theology (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 100.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. 2 Cor 3:18; 6: 6; Gal 3:3–5; 5:22.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas F. Torrance and Robert Bruce, *The Mystery of The Lord’s Supper: Sermons on the Sacrament Preached in the Kirk of Edinburgh*, 2nd ed. (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2005), 71.

<sup>40</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 955.

<sup>41</sup> For further development, see Brand, *Complementarian Spirituality*, 132–42

university and denomination. With these women influencing their own traditions, Reformed theology remains dominated by male contribution. Perhaps more disturbing, however, is the lack of questioning why this is the case. Does not biblical complementarity allow full freedom for women to contribute to doctrine and its praxiological outworking in spirituality? Why are there no female scholars contributing to key areas of Reformed thought: soteriology, Trinitarianism, ecclesiology, missiology, and pastoral studies? Surely this absence is a serious weakness to the community, its doctrinal development, and its place in wider academia. Indeed, the dearth of female Reformed theologians is a serious shortcoming to complementarianism itself. Reformed thought would benefit greatly from female insights and perspectives.

Unfortunately, theological scholarship is not an arena into which Reformed women are encouraged to enter, so we continue to breathe a cultural air that communicates theology to be a male pursuit. This breeds theologically weak women and sentimental spirituality. I suggest that church leaders and scholars take it upon themselves to undo this absence by actively supporting and encouraging women who are theologically able. For those women who are doctrinally intimidated, it is the privilege of the pastor to embolden them. And the improved ministerial employment of women will automatically encourage and give confidence, feasibly stimulating a deeper understanding of doctrine for use in teaching and discipleship. Thus, the advantages of an increased female action in doctrine will be inestimable, benefiting the home, the local body, the wider Reformed community, and society as a whole.

## Conclusion

“In the church—as elsewhere—men and women need each other, and God intends them to be complementary in their gifts and personalities.”<sup>42</sup> Any neglect of women in the Reformed tradition belittles the Christ–church union and enjoyment of shared union with Christ among the elect. Accordingly, if complementarity is not prevalent in Reformed thought *and* practice, then the tradition conflicts with itself.

When women are not included in the conversation, there are blind spots in the church’s ministry—overlooked needs and issues, places where our theology is underdeveloped and detached. In Christ’s body, every member needs all the others—not simply to be there but to contribute.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Prime, *Women*, 29.

<sup>43</sup> James, *Life and Belief*, 59.

Many Reformed Christians need to renew their vision of the church to one more consistent with its life as the bride of Christ, in union with him by the Spirit. This article has done no more than highlight areas of concern, while making some suggestions. Concerning the responsibility of church leaders and presbyteries John Piper recommends “prayer and study and humble obedience to discover the pattern of ministry involvement for men and women that taps the gifts of every Christian and honors the God-given order of leadership by spiritual men.”<sup>44</sup>

May the above self-critical observations encourage action in resolving some of the practical inconsistencies of our complementarian belief and excite man and women alike to deeper joy in Christ.

Yet she on earth hath union  
with God the Three in One,  
and mystic sweet communion  
with those whose rest is won.  
O happy ones and holy!  
Lord, give us grace that we,  
like them, the meek and lowly,  
on high may dwell with thee.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> John Piper, “A Vision of Biblical Complementarity: Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 31–59.

<sup>45</sup> Samuel J. Stone, “The Church’s One Foundation” (1866).