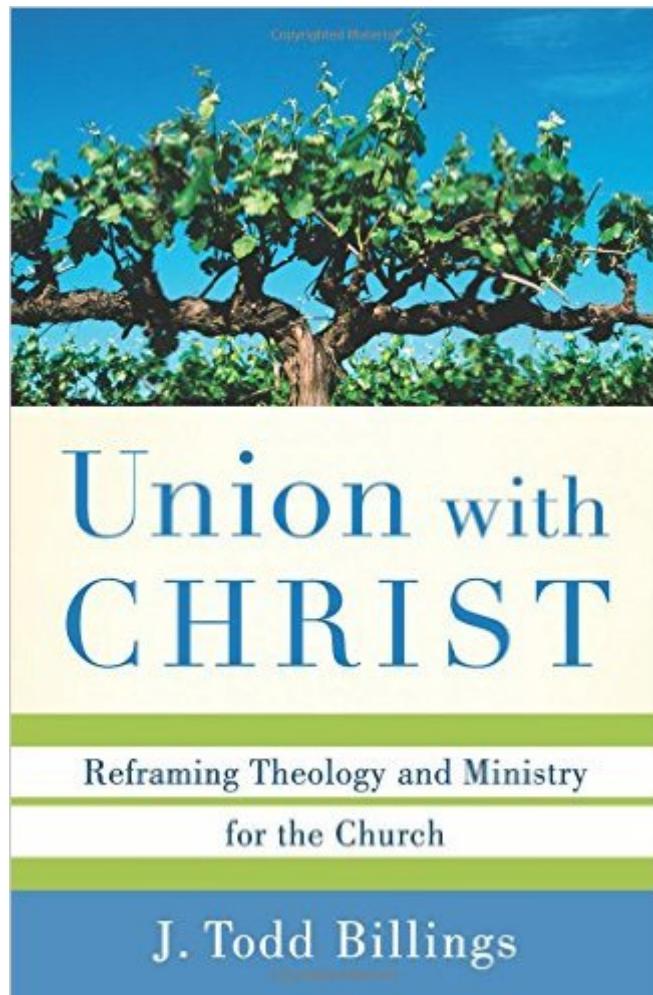


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Union With Christ: Reframing Theology And Ministry For The Church



Synopsis

An accomplished theologian recovers the biblical theme of union with Christ, showing how it affects current theological and ministry issues.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Todd Billings provides a very helpful book on an all too often neglected theological theme. The central premise of the text is that the motif of the Christian's union with Christ is "a central New Testament description of Christian identity, the life of salvation in Christ" (1) and as such, has important implications for ministry in the Church. This text, thus, deals with heavy theological concepts, but it does so always with a practical end in mind. Billings begins his examination of this theme in response to the implicit theology of American teens that Christian Smith has termed, "moralistic therapeutic deism." The popular conception of God, according to Smith's research, is that he is an entity who generally wants people to follow the rules and be happy. This deity ends up being a rather distant fellow who isn't much concerned with the world as long as people are being nice. In contrast, Billings retrieves via John Calvin the notion of a Christians' intimate relationship with a very near God as union with Christ through adoption. This union-through-adoption affords the Christian the "double grace" of justification and sanctification. With the conception of union-through-adoption in place, Billings turns to discuss two perennial issues in theology: the bondage of the fallen will to sin and the possibility of actually interacting with God, who is by nature incomprehensible to humans. On the former Billings' appropriates a Reformed reading of Augustine

that emphasizes the fact that "to be fully human is to be in harmony and obedient communion with God" (60). Thus, the Christian's union with Christ restores the human ability to not sin; that is, "God's action by the Spirit in the human does not threaten the human's own agency but actually enables it" (60).

Early on in *Union with Christ*, J. Todd Billings summarizes his approach in the book: "I seek to help us hear the voices of the past in a way that illuminates Scripture's witness to the reality of our union with Christ, giving us insights for theology, life, and ministry today (p. 3). Once we have "listened receptively to the theologians of the past," we are then able to "assess whether the new exegetical and theological possibilities discovered from this engagement with the past are valid or in error" (p. 5). With this in mind, Billings chooses the Reformation, and specifically Calvin, as the context to retrieve the doctrine of union with Christ because "Calvin also used his theology of justification and union with Christ to configure his account of divine and human agency, the law, and the sacraments" (p. 7). Billings then gives two major factors underlying the need for this book: The functional or lived theologies of salvation in the West have deficiencies in the precise areas where a Reformational theology of union with Christ has strengths. While the ecclesial left tends to identify the gospel with a certain type of ethical action (horizontal) and the ecclesial right tends to emphasize the importance of being right with God (vertical), a theology of union with Christ takes the dualism and polarities that still remain from the fundamentalist-modernist controversy and unites them into a cohesive, holistic account of the gospel (adapted from pp. 8-10). In other words, if you've personally seen a divide between those Christians calling for social justice being the preeminent concern of the Christian and those calling for personal holiness being the preeminent concern, Billings' book is aiming to unite those aims.

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