

JOHN CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

SCOTT M. MANETSCH*

Abstract: *The theology of the Genevan reformer John Calvin (1509–1564) has frequently caused misunderstanding and elicited caricature and controversy. This is especially true of Calvin's doctrine of the Christian life, which is often presented as authoritarian, legalistic, and severe. This essay describes prominent features of the reformer's understanding of the Christian life, drawn from his commentaries, correspondence, and the Institutes of the Christian Religion (especially Book 3), and argues that, for Calvin, the authentic Christian life is patterned after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, made possible by the believer's union with Christ through faith.*

Key words: *John Calvin, Calvin's Institutes, union with Christ, Christian life, exile, piety, justification, sanctification, self-denial, suffering, vocation*

In his survey of the Reformation, Professor Lewis Spitz of Stanford University once stated, “Calvin was one of those strong and consistent men of history who people either liked or disliked, adored or abhorred.”¹ Indeed, it is virtually impossible to remain neutral about John Calvin, the reformer of Geneva from 1536–1564. Many people have adored Calvin. The nineteenth-century Scottish theologian William Cunningham stated, “Calvin is the man who, next to St. Paul, has done the most good to mankind.”² Ernst Renan, a nineteenth-century French historian described Calvin as “the most Christian man of his age.”³ Philip Schaff, the American historian and founder of the American Society of Church History, said of Calvin: “Taking into account all his failings, he must be reckoned as one of the greatest and best men whom God raised up in the history of Christianity.”⁴ Or again, the famous British preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon once said of Calvin: “The longer I live the clearer does it appear that John Calvin's [theological] system is the nearest to perfection.”⁵

But other people have abhorred John Calvin. In a letter to John Adams, Thomas Jefferson wrote: “I can never join Calvin in addressing his god. . . . If ever a man worshiped a false god, he did. The being described in his five points is not

* Scott Manetsch is Professor of Church History and the History of Christian Thought at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2065 Half Day Road, Deerfield, IL 60015. He can be contacted at smanetsc@tiu.edu.

¹ Lewis W. Spitz, *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements*, vol. 2: *The Reformation* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1987), 412.

² Cited in Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 8 (repr. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 290.

³ Cited in *ibid.*, 834–35.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 834.

⁵ Cited in Ian Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (2nd ed.; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), 79 n. 18.

the God whom you and I acknowledge and adore, the Creator and benevolent governor of the world; but a daemon of malignant spirit.”⁶ The twentieth-century Freudian psychologist Oskar Pfister identified Calvin as a compulsive-neurotic who “transformed the God of Love as experienced and taught by Jesus, into a compulsive character, bearing absolutely diabolical traits in his reprobatory practice.”⁷ So, too, the popular twentieth-century historian Will Durant said of Calvin: “But we shall always find it hard to love the man [Calvin] who darkened the human soul with the most absurd and blasphemous conception of God in all the long and honored history of nonsense.”⁸ The Baptist minister Jimmy Swaggart echoed this negative assessment: “Calvin has, I believe, caused untold millions of souls to be damned.”⁹

Calvin is both adored and abhorred. But whether we regard John Calvin as a religious hero or as some kind of malevolent spirit—whether we toast him or roast him—there’s a good chance that we misunderstand him. Of all the so-called magisterial Reformers—Martin Luther, Philipp Melancthon, Martin Bucer, John Knox, Huldrych Zwingli, Thomas Cranmer—John Calvin may well be the most misunderstood Protestant Reformer of the sixteenth century.

What is to account for this misunderstanding? Why, after five hundred years, does the person of John Calvin still invite such sharp contrasts, caricatures, and controversy? There are no doubt many different factors, but we will briefly mention five. First, there is Calvin’s personality. Calvin was shy, reticent, and private—a man who scrupulously guarded intense emotions beneath a brilliant and disciplined intellect. He did not make friends easily—although the friendships he did have were usually intimate and intensely loyal. When betrayed, Calvin was capable of responding in a harsh and vindictive manner. As a result, many modern readers find Calvin’s personality cold, uninviting, and difficult to understand.

A second reason that Calvin is misunderstood is due to his geographical dislocation. Calvin spent nearly his entire adult life as a religious refugee—a resident alien in Geneva. He was, in effect, a man without a country—condemned as a heretic in his native France yet frequently vilified as a “cursed foreigner” in his adopted city of Geneva. Despite living in Geneva for more than twenty-five years, he was never granted full citizenship. To the present day, Genevans remain deeply conflicted about the person and legacy of John Calvin.

⁶ Cited in Carlos Eire, “Calvinism and the Reform of the Reformation,” in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Reformation* (ed. Peter Marshall; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 110.

⁷ Oskar Pfister, *Christianity and Fear: A Study in History and in the Psychology and Hygiene of Religion* (trans. W. H. Johnson; London: George Allen & Unwin, 1948), 401.

⁸ Will Durant, *The Reformation: A History of European Civilization from Wyclif to Calvin: 1300–1564* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), 490.

⁹ Cited in Michael A. G. Haykin and C. Jeffrey Robinson Sr., *To the Ends of the Earth: Calvin’s Missional Vision and Legacy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 17. Elsewhere, Swaggart states, “Untold millions are in hell presently, and many others on their way to that awful place, simply because they believed a lie [i.e. Calvin’s doctrine of predestination] and were damned.” *Jimmy Swaggart Bible Commentary*, vol. 16: *Ephesians* (Baton Rouge, LA: World Evangelism, 1999), 22.

Moreover, Calvin is misunderstood because of his historical distance from our present age. The things that Calvin cared most about and worked the hardest to promote—the glory of God and the reformation of Christ's church—are things that most moderns care not a whit about. Calvin's biblicism, his passion for right worship, and his commitment to moral discipline strike most modern men and women as curiosities at best, dangerous fanaticism at worst.

Fourth, there is Calvin's complicity in the Servetus affair. Of the thousands of cases of religious violence during the age of the Reformation, the execution of the anti-Trinitarian Michael Servetus in Geneva in the fall of 1553 remains the most notorious. It was not Calvin, but Geneva's civil magistrates who prosecuted Servetus and condemned him to death by burning. Yet, Calvin and the city ministers were certainly accomplices to this brutal act in that they served as theological witnesses to the prosecution and lent their support to capital punishment. As a result of this tragic incident, later Enlightenment philosophes such as Voltaire decried Calvin's bigotry and made him the poster child for religious intolerance and violence.

A fifth reason that Calvin is misunderstood is because his books are rarely read. During his lifetime, Calvin published over one hundred substantial theological writings, including dogmatic works, commentaries on Scripture, ethical treatises, and sermon collections.¹⁰ And yet, the titles of most of these works are recognized today only by specialists. Even Calvin's *magnum opus*, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*—acknowledged as one of the classics of Western literature—is cited far more frequently than it is read. Hence, whether adored or abhorred, the Reformer John Calvin is frequently misunderstood.

One area in which Calvin's theology has been subject to frequent caricature—and regular misunderstanding—is his doctrine of the Christian life. Stereotypes of the dour and austere Calvinist abound. In this representation, Calvin's brand of Christian experience is freighted with pejorative adjectives such as strict, moralistic, legalistic, authoritarian, severe, cold, logical, bigoted, . . . the list goes on. Calvin and his followers, it would seem, rather than subscribing to Four Spiritual Laws, offer us instead the Five Points of Calvinism, with the first point being “God hates you and has a terrible plan for your life.”¹¹ Hardly a promising recommendation for the Reformed faith or Calvin's doctrine of the Christian life!

In this essay, I will unpack several important features of Calvin's doctrine of the Christian life, drawing from his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (especially Book Three) as well as his commentaries, correspondence, and sermons. My goal here is in no way to provide a comprehensive treatment of Calvin's doctrine of sanctification—that would be impossible in the limited space of this article. Moreover, I acknowledge my debt to the significant contributions made on this topic by scholars such as Ronald Wallace, J. Todd Billings, Markus Johnson, Herman Selderhuis,

¹⁰ See Rodolphe Peter and Jean-François Gilmont, *Bibliotheca Calviniana. Les oeuvres de Jean Calvin publiées au XVI^e Siècle*, 3 vols. (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1991–2000).

¹¹ Randall Zachman, “Theologian in the Service of Piety: A New Portrait of Calvin,” *ChrCent* (April 23–30, 1997): 413.

and (most recently) Michael Horton.¹² What this present essay hopes to achieve, in a modest way, is to describe prominent features of Calvin's doctrine of the Christian life and show how they relate to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Specifically, I will show that, for Calvin, the authentic Christian life is one patterned after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, made possible by the believer's union with Christ through faith. It is my hope that this brief foray into the rich substance of Calvin's theology will serve to motivate readers to *tolle lege*—pick up and read—one of the great exegetes and theologians in the Christian tradition.

I. THE SHAPE OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE: PIETY OF THE HEART

During the 1540s, John Calvin began to secure his personal correspondence with a wax seal that included the initials J-C (John Calvin) and a simple picture of an outstretched hand holding a heart. This emblem communicated the Reformer's own fervent piety as he freely offered his heart to the Lord in worship and service.¹³

Calvin's personal emblem—heart in hand, offered to God—belies the common caricature that Calvin was a rationalist, a kind of brain-on-a-stick preoccupied with the abstract and speculative matters of a stern and distant God. Quite the contrary. The Calvin we encounter in his theological writings and biblical commentaries is a religious thinker very much concerned with the believer's heart—with the Christian's relationship of love with God through Christ and the practical piety of worship and service that flows from it. In Book One of his *Institutes*, Calvin states that true knowledge of God involves *religio* and *pietas*. *Religio* is faith, combined with earnest fear of God. *Pietas*, on the other hand, involves reverence and love for God, brought about by a knowledge of his benefits.¹⁴ Elsewhere, Calvin defines *pietas* as “a quickening movement proceeding from the Holy Spirit, when the heart is truly touched and the understanding enlightened.”¹⁵ *Pietas*, then, is not a subjective spirituality disconnected from Christian doctrine; but neither is it a body of propositional truths divorced from spiritual fervor and love for God. From Calvin's perspective, the Christian life always involves both the head and heart, both knowledge and love of God. To know God is to love God. To love God is to know God.

¹² Ronald Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959); J. Todd Billings, “Union with Christ and the Double Grace: Calvin's Theology and Its Early Reception,” in *Calvin's Theology and Its Reception: Disputes, Developments, and New Possibilities* (ed. I. John Hesselink and J. Todd Billings; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 49–71; Herman Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms* (Texts & Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); Marcus Johnson, *One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013); Michael Horton, *Calvin on the Christian Life: Glorifying and Enjoying God Forever* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

¹³ For more on the history of Calvin's seal, see <https://calvin.edu/about/history/calvin-seal.html>.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (ed. and trans. J. T. McNeill and F. L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.2.1–2, pp. 39–43. Hereafter cited as *Institutes*.

¹⁵ Elsie Anne McKee, ed., *John Calvin, Writings of Pastoral Piety* (Classics of Western Spirituality; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2001), 91.

Both shape every dimension of the Christian life. As Calvin notes in his commentary on 1 Tim 4:8: "Godliness (*pietas*) is the beginning, middle, and end of Christian living."¹⁶

Calvin's concern with the believer's volitional and affective response to God—that is, the believer's *heart*—is found throughout his writings. In his first Catechism (1538), Calvin states that the Christian faith is "no bare knowledge of God or understanding of Scripture which rattles around the brain and affects the heart not at all. . . . But it is a firm and staunch confidence of the heart by which we securely repose in God's mercy promised us through the gospel."¹⁷ Two decades later, in his commentary on the Psalms, Calvin described the believer's love for God as "the principal part of godliness; for there is no better way of serving God than to love him." The reformer continued: "But as [God] requires nothing so expressly as to possess all the affections of our heart . . . so there is no sacrifice which he values more than when we are bound fast to him by the chain of a free and spontaneous love."¹⁸

Calvin develops this subject further in Book Three of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Here he insists that the Christian life involves more than understanding and confessing the gospel; it also requires that men and women embrace the gospel message with their hearts and be transformed by it. Right doctrine, Calvin writes, "is not apprehended by the understanding and memory alone . . . but it is received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds a seat and resting place in the inmost affection of the heart."¹⁹ The Holy Spirit alone is capable of seating God's truth in human hearts, and only this kind of experiential knowledge of God's gospel results in a transformed Christian life. As Calvin notes, "But [true doctrine] must enter our heart and pass into our daily living, and so transform us into itself that it may not be unfruitful for us."²⁰ For Calvin, then, Christian fruitfulness and faithfulness are shaped by the believer's heart.

As should be clear by now, John Calvin understood the Christian life as one characterized by both faith and *pietas* whereby believers offer their hearts to the Lord in loving service, gratitude, and reverence. And there is good evidence that Calvin perceived his own Christian experience in similar terms. In 1541, the Reformer faced an excruciating personal dilemma. The Genevan City Council, which had humiliated and banished him three years earlier, was now petitioning the Reformer to return to his pastoral post in the city.²¹ Calvin wanted nothing of the sort:

¹⁶ Comm. 1 Timothy 4:8, in Calvin's *New Testament Commentaries* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 21:109. Hereafter cited as CNTC.

¹⁷ Calvin's Catechism of 1538, in *Calvin's First Catechism. A Commentary* (ed. I. John Hesselink; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 18.

¹⁸ Comm. Psalm 18:1, in Calvin's *Old Testament Commentaries* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 4:260. Hereafter cited as COTC. For more on this theme, see Herman Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms*, 254–56.

¹⁹ *Institutes* 3.7.4 (p. 688).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ For more on this historical event, see Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 121–26.

he was happily stationed in Strasbourg, enjoying the first months of marriage and deriving immense satisfaction from fruitful ministry labors. He remembered all too well the harsh treatment he had suffered at the hands of Geneva's magistrates. In response to a letter from Pierre Viret urging him to return to Geneva, Calvin wrote, "It would be better to die at once than to suffer repeatedly on that torture rack."²² And yet, in obedience to the divine call, Calvin finally resolved in the summer of 1541 to return to Geneva and the work of reform in the city. Writing to his friend Guillaume Farel, Calvin admitted that "had I the choice at my own disposal, nothing would be less agreeable [than to return to Geneva]. But when I remember that I am not my own, *I offer up my heart*, presented as a sacrifice to the Lord."²³ For Calvin, the Christian life is shaped by the knowledge of God, rooted in the most intimate affections of the heart.

II. THE SOURCE OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE: UNION WITH CHRIST

In his recent book on John Calvin's doctrine of the Christian life, Michael Horton describes Calvin's theology of union with Christ as "one of the most enduring treasures of our piety today."²⁴ Throughout his theological and exegetical works, the Genevan Reformer regularly explored the nature and implications of the biblical teaching that Christians are in Christ, or united with Christ, or participate with Christ, or are grafted into Christ. This intimate communion between Christ and the believer informed Calvin's understanding of a variety of theological topics, including the incarnation, the atonement, justification, sanctification, prayer, the church, and the sacraments. For Calvin, the believer's union with Christ, and the graces it communicated, were the source and sustaining power of the believer's Christian experience. Calvin's most extensive discussion of union with Christ appears in the opening paragraphs of Book Three of the *Institutes*, as he turns his attention to the way believers receive the grace of Christ, and how this grace benefits and transforms them. He begins by making this important observation:

First, we must understand that 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 for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us. For this reason, he is called "our Head" (Eph 4:15), and "the first-born among many brethren" (Rom 8:29). We also, in turn, are said to be "engrafted

²² Calvin to Viret, 19 May 1540, in *Selected Works of John Calvin* (ed. H. Beveridge; repr. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1983), 4:187. Hereafter cited as CTS. The Latin text of this letter is found in John Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini opera omnia quae supersunt* (ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss; Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke, 1873), 11:36. Hereafter cited as CO.

²³ Calvin to Farel, August 1541, *CTS* 4:280–81, italics added.

²⁴ Horton, *Calvin on the Christian Life*, 92.

into him" (Rom 11:17), and to "put on Christ" (Gal 3:27); for ... all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him.²⁵

Calvin is clear that faith is the instrument by which sinners receive the benefits of Christ. Moreover, the Holy Spirit is the divine agent who unites the believer to Christ: "To sum up," Calvin notes, "the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself."²⁶

Later in Book Three, Calvin describes the benefits that believers receive by being united with Christ:

Let us sum up: Christ was given to us by God's generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us in faith. By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace (*duplex gratia*): namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.²⁷

For Calvin, then, the supreme gift that believers receive from their union with Christ is Christ himself—the sweet fellowship and intimate communion between savior and forgiven sinner. Moreover, human sinners whom the Holy Spirit unites to Christ through faith receive a double grace (*duplex gratia*) of justification and sanctification. The gift of justification involves pardon for sin and the forensic imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer.²⁸ The gift of sanctification involves the process of internal transformation that the Holy Spirit achieves through the course of a believer's lifetime. Though justification and sanctification are distinct from one another, they are an inseparable gift received through communion with Christ. J. Todd Billings has called attention to the Trinitarian nature of the believer's participation in Christ:

By participation in Christ through faith, believers enter into a Trinitarian drama of encountering a gracious Father who pardons our sins because of Christ's blamelessness (justification) and a powerful Spirit who sanctifies believers for new life (sanctification). Both of these aspects are accessed through participation in Christ.²⁹

Calvin is careful to distinguish his doctrine of union with Christ from other models of spirituality popular in late medieval Catholicism. For one, union with Christ is not simply a human quest to imitate Christ. As Calvin states in his commentary on Romans 6 this "engrafting is not only a conformity of example, but a secret union by which we are joined to him; so that he, reviving us by his Spirit, transfers his own virtue to us."³⁰ Nor is Calvin's doctrine of union with Christ a kind of mystical ascent whereby spiritual pilgrims, through meditation and self-

²⁵ *Institutes* 3.1.1 (p. 537).

²⁶ *Institutes* 3.1.1 (p. 538).

²⁷ *Institutes* 3.11.1 (p. 725).

²⁸ See *Institutes* 3.11.2 (p. 727).

²⁹ Billings, "Union with Christ," 56.

³⁰ Comm. Romans 6:5 (CNTC 19:222).

renunciation, pursue union with the divine will or nature. Quite the contrary. As Michael Horton aptly observes, for Calvin, “union is not the goal . . . but the source of the Christian life.”³¹ Moreover, this spiritual union is God’s work, not our work, achieved as the Holy Spirit applies the benefits of Christ to the man or woman who trusts in him. Calvin makes this point clear in his commentary on John 15 (“I am the vine, you are the branches”). He writes: “But Christ insists chiefly on this, that the vital sap flows from Himself alone. It follows that man’s nature is unfruitful and destitute of all good. For no man has the nature of the vine until he is implanted in [Christ]. But this is given by special grace to the elect alone.”³²

Let us note finally that Calvin’s doctrine of union with Christ silences the common accusation that the Protestant theology of forensic justification is a “legal fiction”—that justification renders Christians “righteous” in status but leaves them unholy in practice. Calvin will have nothing to do with such thinking. To be sure, Calvin affirmed the forensic nature of justification without qualification. As he comments in his *Institutes*, justification “consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.”³³ Justification is the “main hinge on which religion turns.”³⁴ But at the same time, Calvin’s doctrine of the *duplex gratia*—the double grace of justification *and* sanctification—ensures that those who are engrafted into Christ, and receive the Holy Spirit, will necessarily be transformed by Christ’s righteousness. Though justification and sanctification are distinct, they are inseparable. Justification is Christ’s pardon and imputed righteousness; sanctification is Christ’s imparted righteousness, made available through the Holy Spirit. Both are indispensable parts of the Christian life. As Calvin states, “Thus it is clear how true it is that we are justified not without works yet not through works, since in our sharing in Christ, which justifies us, sanctification is just as much included as righteousness.”³⁵ Clearly, for Calvin, the believer’s glorious union with Christ serves as the source and sanctifying power of the Christian life.

III. THE PRINCIPLES OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

So, what does the Christian life look like in practice? What characterizes Christian men and women who are being transformed by God’s Spirit? Calvin addressed these questions in five beautiful chapters (chapters 6 to 10) nestled in the heart of Book Three of the *Institutes*—a brief discourse he entitled “The Life of the Christian Man.” Later in the sixteenth century, these five chapters were excerpted, translated into English and French, and published as stand-alone booklets devoted

³¹ Horton, *Calvin on the Christian Life*, 105.

³² Comm. on John 15:1. In David and Thomas Torrance, eds., *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 93–94.

³³ *Institutes* 3.11.2 (p. 727).

³⁴ *Institutes* 3.11.1 (p. 726).

³⁵ *Institutes* 3.16.1 (p. 798).

to the Christian life. Today, Calvin's so-called *Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life* is widely available in roughly a dozen languages.³⁶

The position of these five chapters in the structure of Calvin's argument in the *Institutes* is important, but not immediately obvious. As we have seen, Book Three of the *Institutes* begins with Calvin's treatment of union with Christ and the double grace. In the chapters that follow, Calvin treats (in order): faith (one chapter)—repentance (one chapter)—the Christian life (five chapters)—and then justification by faith (four chapters). Thereafter Calvin turns his attention to other theological themes, including law-gospel, Christian freedom, prayer, election, and the final resurrection. The fact that Calvin here treats the topic of sanctification *before* justification has long puzzled scholars. Probably the best explanation is that Calvin wants to show the close connection between Christ's atoning work and the believer's daily experience of faith, and along the way to answer criticisms that the Protestant doctrine of justification undermines personal holiness.³⁷ The unusual structure of Book Three also reminds us that Calvin's *Institutes* was never intended to be a work of systematic theology; the Reformer is rather compiling various theological topics or common places (*loci communes*) in a fashion best suited for his rhetorical and polemical purposes.³⁸ Finally, it is important to remember that while Calvin's treatment of the Christian life in chapters 6 to 10 is extensive, it is not intended to be exhaustive. Other essential elements of Christian sanctification—such as prayer, preaching, the sacraments, Christian freedom, and right worship—are found elsewhere in the *Institutes*.

As Calvin begins his treatment of the Christian life in Book Three, chapter 6, his previous discussion of union with Christ remains clearly in view. By virtue of their intimate union with Christ, believers have been reconciled to their heavenly Father, washed in Christ's blood, engrafted into Christ's body, made members of Christ as their Head, dedicated to God as holy temples, destined for heavenly glory—and by virtue of this new identity, Christians are now empowered to live righteous and holy lives. Hence, the universal rule or goal of the Christian life is the believer's sanctification, that is, conformity to the likeness of Jesus Christ. As Calvin notes, "For we have been adopted as sons by the Lord with this one condition: that our life express Christ, the bond of our adoption."³⁹ Thus, "When we hear mention of our union with God, let us remember that holiness must be its bond."⁴⁰ The Reformer recognizes that believers will never achieve perfection on earth; but even so, they must daily strive to grow in personal holiness. Hence, Calvin exhorts his readers: "Let each one of us, then, proceed according to the measure of his

³⁶ For more on the publication history of these five chapters, see David Clyde Jones, "The Curious History of John Calvin's 'Golden Booklet of the Christian Life,'" *Presbyterian* 35.2 (2009): 82–86.

³⁷ For discussions of Calvin's organization of the *Institutes*, see François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of his Religious Thought* (trans. Philip Mairet; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 233–34; Richard Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³⁸ For more on this, see Muller, *Unaccommodated Calvin*, 21–38.

³⁹ *Institutes* 3.6.3 (p. 687).

⁴⁰ *Institutes* 3.6.2 (p. 686).

puny capacity and set out upon the journey we have begun. No one shall set out so inauspiciously as not daily to make some headway. . . . And let us not despair at the slightness of our success; for even though attainment may not correspond to desire, when today outstrips yesterday the effort is not lost.”⁴¹ The Christian life is a life of progressive holiness, guided by the Holy Spirit.

Having explained the source and shape of the Christian life, Calvin proceeds in chapters 7 to 10 to describe important principles of the Christian life. Here we will mention five in particular.

1. *Principle 1: The Christian life demands self-denial.* The Reformer recognizes that self-love and vainglory infect the hearts of all men and women. Indeed, “A world of vices is hidden in the soul of man,” Calvin notes.⁴² As believers submit to the ministry of the Spirit, they are empowered to deny their appetites, their vanities, and their goals for the sake of God’s glory and the good of their neighbor. They begin to submit to God’s sovereignty over their lives; they learn to live as pilgrims in this world, with eyes fixed on their celestial inheritance that cannot perish or pass away.⁴³ For Calvin, self-denial is “the sum of the Christian life,” a necessary consequence of the believer’s union with Christ. In one of the most rhetorically powerful passages found in the *Institutes*, Calvin writes:

We are not our own, let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours.

Conversely, we are God’s: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God’s: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God’s: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal.⁴⁴

For Calvin, self-denial is a central quality of the Christian life.

2. *Principle 2: The Christian life entails suffering.* Contrary to popular misconception, the Genevan reformer firmly rejects any suggestion that worldly success and affluence are signs of God’s election—rather, it is usually the opposite. “The more we are afflicted with adversities,” Calvin states, “the more surely our fellowship with Christ is confirmed.”⁴⁵ God uses the rod of suffering to discipline his children; to shake them out of their spiritual lethargy; to humble their arrogance; to drive them into deeper currents of trust and faithfulness. Pointing to the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:32, Calvin notes that God chastens his children with suffering “so that we may not be condemned along with the world.”⁴⁶ Indeed, when Christians suffer persecution, poverty, exile, or death for the sake of the gospel, they

⁴¹ *Institutes* 3.6.5 (p. 689).

⁴² *Institutes* 3.7.2 (p. 692).

⁴³ *Institutes* 3.7.3 (p. 693).

⁴⁴ *Institutes* 3.7.1 (p. 690).

⁴⁵ *Institutes* 3.8.1 (p. 702).

⁴⁶ *Institutes* 3.8.6 (p. 706).

ought to view such afflictions as “special badges of [their] soldiery.”⁴⁷ At this point Calvin stops and asks a very practical question: how should Christians respond *emotionally* to suffering? Should they endure pain and sorrow with a kind of Stoic indifference—with a stiff upper-lip? Or, perhaps they should laugh at and make light of their trials and troubles? Calvin rejects both approaches. Even as Christ wept at Lazarus’s death, so Christ’s followers will sometimes weep, for emotions are an essential part of our humanity. Calvin notes elsewhere: “The faithful are not logs of wood, nor have they so divested themselves of human feelings as to be unaffected by sorrow, unafraid of danger, unhurt by poverty, and untouched by hard and unbearable persecutions.” And yet, he continues, such sorrow “is so mitigated by faith that [believers] never cease at the same time to rejoice. Thus sorrow does not prevent their joy, but rather gives it place.”⁴⁸ But how exactly does one find joy in the midst of suffering? Calvin believes the answer is found in the believer’s union with Christ. For though in this life Christians share in Christ’s suffering, death, and humiliation, they live in full confidence that they will also participate in Christ’s resurrection life and glorification. The reformer comments: “We share Christ’s sufferings in order that as he has passed from a labyrinth of all evils into heavenly glory, we may in like manner be led through various tribulations to the same glory.”⁴⁹ As the hearts and minds of Christians are conformed to their spiritual Head, the Lord Jesus Christ, they experience God-given joy in the midst of the sorrows and sufferings of this life.

3. *Principle 3: The Christian life requires meditation on heaven.* Believers not only participate with Christ in his suffering and resurrection, they also enjoy fellowship with Christ in his glorious ascension into heaven. For this reason, God’s people are called to renounce the riches, honors, and powers of this world and meditate instead on their future existence with Christ in heaven. For Calvin, the material world is not evil per se but it easily becomes a distraction and temptation for those who desire to follow Christ. Too often the vanities of this ephemeral world beguile men and women, giving them a false sense of immortality, blinding them to the realities of the life to come. Christians must learn, therefore, to hold the material world in contempt, even as they focus on their homeland in heaven. In a famous passage in Book Three, chapter 9, Calvin writes:

For if heaven is our homeland, what else is the earth but our place of exile? If departure from the world is entry into life, what else is the world but a sepulcher? And what else is it for us to remain in life but to be immersed in death? If to be freed from the body is to be released into perfect freedom, what else is the body but a prison? If to enjoy the presence of God is the summit of happiness, is not to be without this misery?⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *Institutes* 3.8.7 (p. 707).

⁴⁸ Comm. 1 Peter 1:6 (CNTC 12:234).

⁴⁹ *Institutes* 3.8.1 (p. 702).

⁵⁰ *Institutes* 3.9.4 (p. 716).

For Calvin, then, the Christian life involves fixing one's mind and heart on the heavenly kingdom. Believers must reject the impulse to cling to this world; instead, they are called to live in joyful anticipation of Christ's second coming, the final resurrection, and the glorious future reality of living in God's presence. These heavenly longings are aroused further as Christians taste the sweetness of God's generosity in this present life, whetting their desire for the fuller revelation of divine blessedness in the life to come. Calvin makes clear, however, that heavenly meditation in no way justifies despising one's physical body or neglecting one's earthly duties. Because God assigns the time of their death, Christians must remain at their posts until God calls them home. In the meantime, the glorious hope of perfect communion with Christ in heaven is what gives Christians comfort as they encounter affliction, and courage as they face death itself. Thus, Calvin concludes, "If it befits us to live and die to the Lord, let us leave to his decision the hour of our death and life, but in such a way that we may both burn with zeal for death, and be constant in meditation."⁵¹

4. *Principle 4: The Christian life enjoys God's earthly blessings.* As we have seen, Calvin believes that contempt of this sinful world is a necessary precondition for meditation on the heavenly life. Such a conclusion certainly lends weight to the popular view that Calvin was *contra mundum*—a prophet of austerity, abstinence, and worldly renunciation. But this is not the whole story. In various places in his literary corpus, Calvin speaks positively of the material world and human enjoyment of it. Thus, for example, in his comments on 1 Tim 4:5, Calvin notes that because God has engrafted us into Jesus Christ, "He constitutes us anew to be lords of the world, that we may lawfully use as our own all the wealth that he gives us."⁵² In a similar way, here in Book Three, chapter 10, of the *Institutes*, Calvin argues that since Christians are co-heirs with Christ by faith, they are now free to use and enjoy the benefits of this world, as long as they do so with moderation and in a spirit of thanksgiving and faith. The beauty of God's handiwork in nature—the delicious aroma of flowers, the rich diversity of colors, the loveliness of precious metal, the delicious taste of good food and drink—all these, Calvin writes, are "gifts of God," intended for human use and enjoyment.⁵³ Calvin exults: "There is not one little blade of grass, there is no color in this world that is not intended to make men rejoice."⁵⁴ Elsewhere, Calvin expands his list of God's material gifts to include the products of human ingenuity and culture: fine sculpture and painting, luxurious fabrics, good books, complex mathematical computations, deep human friendship, and beautiful music. Speaking of music, he writes, "Among other things fit to recreate man and give him pleasure, music is either first or one of the principal; and we must value it as a gift of God."⁵⁵ From Calvin's perspective, then, Christian men and women are

⁵¹ *Institutes* 3.9.4 (p. 716).

⁵² Comm. on 1 Timothy 4:5 (CNTC 21:105).

⁵³ *Institutes* 3.10.2 (p. 721).

⁵⁴ Sermon #10 on 1 Corinthians, cited in William Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 134–35.

⁵⁵ Geneva Service Book (1542), cited in Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, 135.

not only to use the material resources of this world, but also to enjoy them and give thanks to God for them. At the same time, he sets forth several guidelines to protect Christians from the temptations of materialism and idolatry. Believers must employ moderation as they enjoy the material world; they must learn to be content with what they have; they must not forget that one day they will have to render account for their stewardship of the physical world; and, finally, they must strive to serve God in their earthly callings. This last-mentioned duty serves as a fitting climax to Calvin's discussion of the responsible use of the goods of this world.⁵⁶ God has given a vocation—a set of sacred obligations and responsibilities—to every Christian believer, whether they be cobblers or cooks, butchers or blacksmiths, magistrates or citizens. This divine calling infuses the Christian's daily labors with spiritual significance and purpose; it serves as a bridle for ambition, a stimulus for hard work, and a setting in which the Christian can glorify God and serve his or her neighbor. "From this will arise also a singular consolation," Calvin concludes, "that no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight."⁵⁷ This is not Calvin *contra mundum* but Calvin *pro mundum*—a robust affirmation of the beauty of the created order, the benefits of human culture, and the value of human work.⁵⁸

5. *Principle 5: The Christian life involves spiritual exile.* Three words that succinctly capture Calvin's understanding of the Christian life are the terms "pilgrimage," "refugee," and "exile." This language of *dislocation* or *displacement* appears multiple times in the chapters of the *Institutes* we have been studying and run as a kind of *Leitmotif* throughout Calvin's theological writings, commentaries, sermons, and personal correspondence. Four times in chapters 6 through 10, Calvin lists religious exile as one of the calamities that believers encounter on account of their obedience to Christ. On other occasions, Calvin employs this language metaphorically to describe the spiritual dislocation that Christians experience as they live in a world that is hostile to Christ and his righteousness. "If heaven is our homeland, what else is the earth but our place of exile?" Calvin asks.⁵⁹ In another passage, Calvin observes that the apostle Paul "teaches us to travel as pilgrims in this world that our celestial heritage may not perish or pass away."⁶⁰ Yet again, Calvin exhorts his Christian reader to find comfort from the fact that in death "we are recalled from exile to dwell in the ... heavenly fatherland."⁶¹ Of course, the language of exile and pilgrimage appears throughout the pages of Scripture (one thinks, e.g., of Genesis 12,

⁵⁶ For more on Calvin's doctrine of vocation, see Alister McGrath, "Calvin and the Christian Calling," *First Things* 94 (1999): 31–35.

⁵⁷ *Institutes* 3.11.6 (p. 725).

⁵⁸ Note how Ronald Wallace summarizes Calvin's doctrine of the Christian life: "Calvin teaches that the Christian life is predominately one of happiness, assurance and achievement. Though the Christian experiences a constant tension between faith and sight, satisfaction and hope, trembling and assurance, there is a real victory over evil, and constant progress and growth in faith towards a final and inevitable perfection" (*Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, vii).

⁵⁹ *Institutes* 3.9.4 (p. 716).

⁶⁰ *Institutes* 3.7.3 (p. 693).

⁶¹ *Institutes* 3.9.5 (p. 717).

Jeremiah 22, Hebrews 11, and 1 Peter 1–2). Calvin is no doubt alluding to biblical texts like these, as well as drawing from Augustine’s rich use of the pilgrim metaphor in his magisterial *City of God*. But Calvin’s personal experience as a religious refugee also informed his view of the Christian life. Calvin knew the dangers of being displaced and forced to live “on the road”; he knew the sting of suspicion and rejection that came with being a hated foreigner; he knew the ambivalence of being a resident alien, committed to the good of his adopted city of Geneva, while longing to return to his beloved French homeland.⁶² In an unguarded moment, Calvin once admitted: “It is very hard to live far from one’s fatherland.”⁶³ And such is true of the Christian life as well, Calvin believes. Followers of Jesus will invariably feel misunderstood and rejected as they pursue holiness in an ungodly world. Though they will enjoy God’s good creation, they will hold onto these blessings loosely as they travel the arduous path of Christian discipleship. They will fulfill their vocations and serve the common good of their earthly city, yet at the same time remain homesick for the true heavenly city. The historian Heiko A. Oberman has suggested that it was precisely Calvin’s identity as a religious refugee and exile that made the doctrine of God’s providence so important to him. As Calvin once commented, “We have no other refuge than [God’s] providence.”⁶⁴ For Christian pilgrims and exiles—displaced, misunderstood, vulnerable in this world—God’s sovereign protection and presence were their one sure hope as they trekked toward their heavenly homeland. In this regard, Calvin believed that the pilgrim life of the patriarch Abraham was especially instructive, and he frequently drew lessons from the patriarch’s godly example in his commentaries and correspondence. Writing to a French nobleman in 1548 who was considering fleeing his homeland and seeking refuge in Geneva on account of persecution, Calvin wrote:

We have an example in our father Abraham. After God had commanded him to abandon his country, his kindred, and everything else, [God] gave him no indication of any reward, but left that for another time. “Go,” he said, “to the land I will show you.” If it pleases [God] to do the same to us today so that we too must leave our homeland and resettle in an unknown country without knowing what is awaiting us, let us place ourselves in his hands and have him direct our steps. Grant him the honor of trusting him that he will guide us to a safe harbor. Yet you should realize that you will not be coming to a paradise on earth.⁶⁵

Such was the condition of Calvin’s turbulent age. Such is the nature of the Christian life in any age.

⁶² For more on Calvin’s self-identity as a refugee, see Heiko A. Oberman, *John Calvin and the Reformation of the Refugees* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2009); Gordon, *John Calvin*, 42–46, 286, 305, 318, 324, 336.

⁶³ Comm. Jeremiah 22:28 (COTC 10:124).

⁶⁴ 23rd Sermon on 1 Timothy 3:3–5 (CO 53:273a). Cited in Oberman, *Reformation of the Refugees*, 47.

⁶⁵ Calvin to a French *Seigneur*, 18 October 1548 (CTS 5:180).

IV. CONCLUSION

This past summer, my wife Cathy and I returned to the beautiful city of Geneva to visit one of our favorite spots: St. Pierre's cathedral (Calvin's church) in the heart of the old city. To commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, church officials had set up a dozen or so banners in the sanctuary to evoke the paradox and problematic nature of John Calvin's religious legacy. Each banner, emblazoned with a bold caption and illustrated with cartoon figures, poked fun at Geneva's Protestant heritage. Several of the captions read: "The tormented Protestant"; "the cerebral Protestant"; "the individualistic Protestant"; "the austere Protestant"; "the bigoted Protestant"—a perfect caricature of Calvin, it would seem: tormented, cerebral, individualistic, austere, bigoted. Certainly not a flattering description of the Christian life!

By contrast, Calvin's doctrine of the Christian life that we have encountered in his theological writings—and especially in Book Three of the *Institutes*—provides an entirely different perspective. For Calvin, the Christian life finds its source in the intimate spiritual union between Christ and the believing sinner. Through this intimate bond of love and trust, Christian men and women are empowered by the Holy Spirit to put to death their appetites and vanities, submit to God's sovereign will, and make steady progress in holiness. Although Christians will experience trials and suffering in this life, their joy in Christ remains undiminished as they fix their eyes on the heavenly kingdom. To be sure, Christians live as spiritual refugees and exiles in this present world, but this in no way prevents them from enjoying God's good creation and faithfully attending to the work God has called them to do. For Calvin, then, the Christian life is characterized by self-denial, steady faith, undaunted hope, and unflagging joy—all shaped by the bond of love that believers share with Christ. As we have seen, this captivating vision of the Christian life finds visual expression in Calvin's personal seal: heart in hand, outstretched to God. As Calvin put it: "When I remember that I am not my own, *I offer up my heart*, presented as a sacrifice to the Lord."