

## CALVIN'S PIETY\*

by Joel R. Beeke

JOHN CALVIN'S INSTITUTES have earned him the title of "the preeminent systematician of the Protestant Reformation." His reputation as an intellectual, however, is often seen apart from the vital spiritual and pastoral context in which he wrote his theology. For Calvin, theological understanding and practical piety, truth and usefulness, are inseparable. Theology first of all deals with knowledge—knowledge of God and of ourselves—but there is no true knowledge where there is no true piety.

Calvin's concept of piety (*pietas*) is rooted in the knowledge of God and includes attitudes and actions that are directed to the adoration and service of God. In addition, his *pietas* includes a host of related themes, such as filial piety in human relationships, and respect and love for the image of God in human beings. Calvin's piety is evident in people who recognize through experiential faith that they have been accepted in Christ and engrafted into his body by the grace of God. In this "mystical union," the Lord claims them as his own in life and in death. They become God's people and members of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. This relationship restores their joy of fellowship with God; it recreates their lives.

The purpose of this essay is to show that Calvin's piety is fundamentally biblical, with an emphasis on the heart more than the mind. Head and heart must work together, but the heart is more important.<sup>1</sup> After an introductory look at the definition and goal of

---

\*This article was first given as an address at Mid-America Reformed Seminary on November 11, 2003.

<sup>1</sup>Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995). Unfortunately, Jones exaggerates Calvin's use of rhetoric in the service of piety.

piety in Calvin's thinking, I will show how his *pietas* affects the theological, ecclesiological, and practical dimensions of his thought.

*The Definition and Importance of Piety*

*Pietas* is one of the major themes of Calvin's theology. His theology is, as John T. McNeill says, "his piety described at length."<sup>2</sup> He is determined to confine theology within the limits of piety.<sup>3</sup> In his preface addressed to King Francis I, Calvin says that the purpose of writing the *Institutes* was "solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness [*pietas*]."<sup>4</sup>

For Calvin, *pietas* designates the right attitude of man towards God. This attitude includes true knowledge, heartfelt worship, saving faith, filial fear, prayerful submission, and reverential love.<sup>5</sup> Knowing who and what God is (theology) embraces right attitudes toward him and doing what he wants (piety). In his first catechism, Calvin writes, "True piety consists in a sincere feeling which loves God as Father as much as it fears and reverences him as Lord, embraces his righteousness, and dreads offending him worse than death."<sup>6</sup> In the *Institutes*, Calvin is more succinct: "I call 'piety' that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his

---

<sup>2</sup>Cited in John Hesselink, "The Development and Purpose of Calvin's Institutes," in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism, vol. 4, Influences upon Calvin and Discussion of the 1559 Institutes*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland, 1992), 215-16.

<sup>3</sup>See Brian A. Gerrish, "Theology within the Limits of Piety Alone: Schleiermacher and Calvin's Doctrine of God" (1981), reprinted in *The Old Protestantism and the New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), chap. 12.

<sup>4</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [hereafter, *Institutes*], ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:9.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Lucien Joseph Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), 100-101; Sou-Young Lee, "Calvin's Understanding of *Pietas*," in *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex*, ed. W.H. Neuser & B.G. Armstrong (Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Studies, 1997), 226-33; H.W. Simpson, "*Pietas* in the *Institutes* of Calvin," *Reformational Tradition: A Rich Heritage and Lasting Vocation* (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1984), 179-91.

<sup>6</sup>Ed. and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary), 2.

benefits induces.<sup>7</sup> This love and reverence for God is a necessary concomitant to any knowledge of him and embraces all of life. As Calvin says, “The whole life of Christians ought to be a sort of practice of godliness.”<sup>8</sup> Or, as the subtitle of the first edition of the *Institutes* states, “Embracing almost the whole sum of piety & whatever is necessary to know of the doctrine of salvation: A work most worthy to be read by all persons zealous for piety.”<sup>9</sup>

Calvin’s commentaries also reflect the importance of *pietas*. For example, he writes on 1 Timothy 4:7-8, “You will do the thing of greatest value, if with all your zeal and ability you devote yourself to godliness [*pietas*] alone. Godliness is the beginning, middle and end of Christian living. Where it is complete, there is nothing lacking.... Thus the conclusion is that we should concentrate exclusively on godliness, for when once we have attained to it, God requires no more of us.”<sup>10</sup> Commenting on 2 Peter 1:3, he says, “As soon as he [Peter] has made mention of life he immediately adds godliness [*pietas*] as if it were the soul of life.”<sup>11</sup>

### *Piety’s Supreme Goal: Soli Deo Gloria*

---

<sup>7</sup>*Institutes*, Book 1, chapter, 2, section 1. Hereafter the format, 1.2.1, will be used.

<sup>8</sup>*Institutes* 3.19.2.

<sup>9</sup>*Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1536 Edition*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). The original Latin title reads: *Christianae religionis institutio total fere pietatis summam et quidquid est in doctrina salutis cognitu necessarium complectens, omnibus pietatis studiosis lectu dignissimum opus ac recens editum (Joannis Calvinii opera selecta, ed. Peter Barth, Wilhelm Niesel, and Dora Scheuner, 5 vols. [Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1926-52], 1:19 [hereafter, OS]).* From 1539 on the titles were simply *Institutio Christianae Religionis*, but the “zeal for piety” continued to be a great goal of Calvin’s work. See Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 106-107.

<sup>10</sup>*Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959-72), *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, trans. Thomas A. Smail (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 243-44. Hereafter, *Commentary* [on text].

<sup>11</sup>For the roots of Calvin’s piety, see William J. Bouwsma, “The Spirituality of John Calvin,” in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 318-33.

The goal of piety, as well as the entire Christian life, is the glory of God—glory that shines in God’s attributes, in the structure of the world, and in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup> Glorifying God supersedes personal salvation for every truly pious person.<sup>13</sup> Calvin writes thus to Cardinal Sadolet: “It is not very sound theology to confine a man’s thought so much to himself, and not to set before him, as the prime motive for his existence, zeal to illustrate the glory of God. . . . I am persuaded that there is no man imbued with true piety who will not consider as insipid that long and labored exhortation to zeal for heavenly life, a zeal which keeps a man entirely devoted to himself and does not, even by one expression, arouse him to sanctify the name of God.”<sup>14</sup>

That God may be glorified in us, the goal of piety, is the purpose of our creation. It thus becomes the yearning of the regenerate to live out the purpose of their original creation.<sup>15</sup> The pious man, according to Calvin, confesses, “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.”<sup>16</sup>

God redeems, adopts, and sanctifies his people that his glory would shine in them and deliver them from impious self-seeking.<sup>17</sup> The pious man’s deepest concern therefore is God himself and the things of God—God’s Word, God’s authority, God’s gospel, God’s truth. He yearns to know more of God and to commune more with him.

But how do we glorify God? As Calvin writes, “God has prescribed for us a way in which he will be glorified by us, namely, piety, which consists in the obedience of his Word. He that exceeds these bounds does not go about to honor God, but rather to dishonor him.”<sup>18</sup> Obedience to God’s Word means taking refuge in

---

<sup>12</sup>*Institutes* 3.2.1; Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Edward Reuss, *Corpus Reformatorum*, vols. 29-87 (Brunsvigae: C.A. Schwetschke and Son, 1863-1900), 43:428, 47:316. Hereafter, *CO*.

<sup>13</sup>*CO* 26:693.

<sup>14</sup>*OS* 1:363-64.

<sup>15</sup>*CO* 24:362.

<sup>16</sup>*Institutes* 3.7.1.

<sup>17</sup>*CO* 26:225; 29:5; 51:147.

<sup>18</sup>*CO* 49:51.

Christ for forgiveness of our sins, knowing him through his Word, serving him with a loving heart, doing good works in gratitude for his goodness, and exercising self-denial to the point of loving our enemies.<sup>19</sup> This response involves total surrender to God himself, his Word, and his will.<sup>20</sup>

Calvin says, "I offer thee my heart, Lord, promptly and sincerely." This is the desire of all who are truly pious. However, this desire can only be realized through communion with Christ and participation in him, for outside of Christ even the most religious person lives for himself. Only in Christ can the pious live as willing servants of their Lord, faithful soldiers of their Commander, and obedient children of their Father.<sup>21</sup>

## Theological Dimensions

### *Piety's Profound Root: Mystical Union*

"Calvin's doctrine of union with Christ is one of the most consistently influential features of his theology and ethics, if not the single most important teaching that animates the whole of his thought and his personal life," writes David Willis-Watkins.<sup>22</sup>

Calvin did not intend to present theology from the viewpoint of a single doctrine. Nonetheless, his sermons, commentaries, and theological works are so permeated with the union-with-Christ doctrine that it becomes his focus for Christian faith and practice.<sup>23</sup> Calvin says as much when he writes, "That joining together of Head

---

<sup>19</sup>CO 26:166, 33:186, 47:377-78, 49:245, 51:21.

<sup>20</sup>CO 6:9-10.

<sup>21</sup>CO 26:439-40.

<sup>22</sup>"The *Unio Mystica* and the Assurance of Faith According to Calvin," in *Calvin Erbe und Auftrag: Festschrift für Wilhelm Heinrich Neuser zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Willem van't Spijker (Kampen: Kok, 1991), 78.

<sup>23</sup>E.g., Charles Partee, "Calvin's Central Dogma Again," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 18, 2 (1987):194. Cf. Otto Gründler, "John Calvin: Ingrafting in Christ," in *The Spirituality of Western Christendom*, ed. Rozanne Elder (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1976), 172-87; Brian G. Armstrong, "The Nature and Structure of Calvin's Thought According to the *Institutes*: Another Look," in *John Calvin's Magnum Opus* (Potchefstroom, South Africa: Institute for Reformational Studies, 1986), 55-82; Guenther Haas, *The Concept of Equity in Calvin's Ethics* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1997).

and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed.”<sup>24</sup>

For Calvin, piety is rooted in the believer’s mystical union (*unio mystica*) with Christ; thus this union must be our starting point.<sup>25</sup> Such a union is possible because Christ took on our human nature, filling it with his virtue. Union with Christ in his humanity is historical, ethical, and personal, but not essential. There is no crass mixture (*crassa mixtura*) of human substances between Christ and us. Nonetheless, Calvin states, “Not only does he cleave to us by an indivisible bond of fellowship, but with a wonderful communion, day by day, he grows more and more into one body with us, until he becomes completely one with us.”<sup>26</sup> This union is one of the gospel’s greatest mysteries.<sup>27</sup> Because of the fountain of Christ’s perfection in our nature, the pious may, by faith, draw whatever they need for their sanctification. The flesh of Christ is the source from which his people derive life and power.<sup>28</sup>

If Christ had died and risen but was not applying his salvation to believers for their regeneration and sanctification, his work would have been ineffectual. Our piety shows that the Spirit of Christ is working in us what has already been accomplished in Christ. Christ administers his sanctification to the church through his royal priesthood so that the church may live piously for him.<sup>29</sup>

*Piety’s Major Theme: Communion and Participation*

---

<sup>24</sup>*Institutes* 3.11.9. Cf. *CO* 15:722.

<sup>25</sup>Howard G. Hageman, “Reformed Spirituality,” in *Protestant Spiritual Traditions*, ed. Frank c. Senn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 61.

<sup>26</sup>*Institutes* 3.2.24.

<sup>27</sup>Dennis Tamburello points out that “at least seven instances occur in the *Institutes* where Calvin uses the word *arcanus* or *incomprehensibilis* to describe union with Christ” (2.12.7; 3.11.5; 4.17.1, 9 31, 33; 4.19.35; *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994], 89, 144). Cf. William Borden Evans, “Imputation and Impartation: The Problem of Union with Christ in Nineteenth-Century American Reformed Theology” (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1996), 6-68.

<sup>28</sup>*Commentary* on John 6:51.

<sup>29</sup>*Institutes* 2.16.16.

The heartbeat of Calvin's practical theology and piety is communion (*communio*) with Christ. This involves participation (*participatio*) in his benefits, which are inseparable from union with Christ.<sup>30</sup> The *Confessio Fidei de Eucharistia* (1537), signed by Calvin, Martin Bucer, and Wolfgang Capito, supported this emphasis.<sup>31</sup> However, Calvin's communion with Christ was not shaped by his doctrine of the Lord's Supper; rather, his emphasis on spiritual communion with Christ helped shape his concept of the sacrament.

Similarly, the concepts of *communio* and *participatio* helped shape Calvin's understanding of regeneration, faith, justification, sanctification, assurance, election, and the church. He could not speak of any doctrine apart from communion with Christ. That is the heart of Calvin's system of theology.

*Piety's Double Bond: The Spirit and Faith*

Communion with Christ is realized only through Spirit-worked faith, Calvin teaches. It is actual communion not because believers participate in the essence of Christ's nature, but because the Spirit of Christ unites believers so intimately to Christ that they become flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone. From God's perspective, the Spirit is the bond between Christ and believers, whereas from our perspective, faith is the bond. These perspectives do not clash with each other, since one of the Spirit's principal operations is to work faith in a sinner.<sup>32</sup>

Only the Spirit can unite Christ in heaven with the believer on earth. Just as the Spirit united heaven and earth in the Incarnation, so in regeneration the Spirit raises the elect from earth to commune with Christ in heaven and brings Christ into the hearts and lives of the elect on earth.<sup>33</sup> Communion with Christ is always the result of the Spirit's work—a work that is astonishing and experiential rather

---

<sup>30</sup>Willem van't Spijker, "Extra nos and in nos by Calvin in a Pneumatological Light," in *Calvin and the Holy Spirit*, ed. Peter DeKlerk (Grand Rapids: Calvin Studies Society, 1989), 39-62; Merwyn S. Johnson, "Calvin's Ethical Legacy," in *The Legacy of John Calvin*, ed. David Foxgrover (Grand Rapids: Calvin Studies Society, 2000), 63-83.

<sup>31</sup>*OS* 1:435-36; Willem van't Spijker, "Extra nos and in nos by Calvin in a Pneumatological Light," 44.

<sup>32</sup>*Institutes* 3.1.4.

<sup>33</sup>*Institutes* 4.17.6; *Commentary* on Acts 15:9.

than comprehensible.<sup>34</sup> The Holy Spirit is thus the link that binds the believer to Christ and the channel through which Christ is communicated to the believer.<sup>35</sup> As Calvin writes to Peter Martyr: “We grow up together with Christ into one body, and he shares his Spirit with us, through whose hidden operation he has become ours. Believers receive this communion with Christ at the same time as their calling. But they grow from day to day more and more in this communion, in proportion to the life of Christ growing within them.”<sup>36</sup>

Calvin moves beyond Luther in this emphasis on communion with Christ. Calvin stresses that, by his Spirit, Christ empowers those who are united with him by faith. Being “engrafted into the death of Christ, we derive from it a secret energy, as the twig does from the root,” he writes. The believer “is animated by the secret power of Christ; so that Christ may be said to live and grow in him; for as the soul enlivens the body, so Christ imparts life to his members.”<sup>37</sup>

Like Luther, Calvin believes that knowledge is fundamental to faith. Such knowledge includes the Word of God as well as the proclamation of the gospel.<sup>38</sup> Since the written Word is exemplified in the living Word, Jesus Christ, faith cannot be separated from Christ, in whom all God’s promises are fulfilled.<sup>39</sup> The work of the Spirit does not supplement or supersede the revelation of Scripture, but authenticates it, Calvin teaches. “Take away the Word, and no faith will remain,” Calvin says.<sup>40</sup>

Faith unites the believer to Christ by means of the Word, enabling the believer to receive Christ as he is clothed in the gospel

---

<sup>34</sup>*Commentary* on Ephesians 5:32.

<sup>35</sup>*Institutes* 3.1.1; 4.17.12.

<sup>36</sup>“Calvinus Vermilio” (#2266, 8 Aug 1555), *CO* 15:723-24.

<sup>37</sup>CR 50:199. Cf. Barbara Pitkin, *What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin’s Doctrine of Faith in Its Exegetical Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>38</sup>*Institutes* 2.9.2; *Commentary* on 1 Peter 1:25. Cf. David Foxgrover, “John Calvin’s Understanding of Conscience” (Ph.D. diss., Claremont, 1978), 407ff.

<sup>39</sup>*The Commentaries of John Calvin on the Old Testament*, 30 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1843-48), on Genesis 15:6. Hereafter, *Commentary* on text. Cf. *Commentary* on Luke 2:21.

<sup>40</sup>*Institutes* 3.2.6.

and graciously offered by the Father.<sup>41</sup> By faith, God also dwells in the believer. Consequently, Calvin says, “We ought not to separate Christ from ourselves or ourselves from him,” but participate in Christ by faith, for this “revives us from death to make us a new creature.”<sup>42</sup>

By faith, the believer possesses Christ and grows in him. What’s more, the degree of his faith exercised through the Word determines his degree of communion with Christ.<sup>43</sup> “Everything which faith should contemplate is exhibited to us in Christ,” Calvin writes.<sup>44</sup> Though Christ remains in heaven, the believer who excels in piety learns to grasp Christ so firmly by faith that Christ dwells within his heart.<sup>45</sup> By faith the pious live by what they find in Christ rather than by what they find in themselves.<sup>46</sup>

Looking to Christ for assurance, therefore, means looking at ourselves in Christ. As David Willis-Watkins writes, “Assurance of salvation is a derivative self-knowledge, whose focus remains on Christ as united to his body, the Church, of which we are members.”<sup>47</sup>

#### *Piety’s Double Cleansing: Justification and Sanctification*

According to Calvin, believers receive from Christ by faith the “double grace” of justification and sanctification, which, together, provide a twofold cleansing.<sup>48</sup> Justification offers imputed purity, and sanctification, actual purity.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>41</sup>*Institutes* 3.2.30-32.

<sup>42</sup>*Institutes* 3.2.24; *Commentary* on 1 John 2:12.

<sup>43</sup>*Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. Arthur Golding (1577; reprint Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 1:17-18. Hereafter, *Sermon* on Ephesians text.

<sup>44</sup>*Commentary* on Ephesians 3:12.

<sup>45</sup>*Sermon* on Ephesians 3:14-19.

<sup>46</sup>*Commentary* on Habakkuk 2:4.

<sup>47</sup>“The Third Part of Christian Freedom Misplaced,” in *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*, ed. W. Fred Graham (Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Journal, 1994), 484-85.

<sup>48</sup>*Institutes* 3.11.1.

<sup>49</sup>*Sermons on Galatians*, trans. Kathy Childress (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 2:17-18. Hereafter, *Sermon* on Galatians text.

Calvin defines justification as “the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men.”<sup>50</sup> He goes on to say that “since God justifies us by the intercession of Christ, he absolves us not by the confirmation of our own innocence but by the imputation of righteousness, so that we who are not righteous in ourselves may be reckoned as such in Christ.”<sup>51</sup> Justification includes the remission of sins and the right to eternal life.

Calvin regards justification as a central doctrine of the Christian faith. He calls it “the principal hinge by which religion is supported,” the soil out of which the Christian life develops, and the substance of piety.<sup>52</sup> Justification not only serves God’s honor by satisfying the conditions for salvation; it also offers the believer’s conscience “peaceful rest and serene tranquility.”<sup>53</sup> As Romans 5:1 says, “Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” This is the heart and soul of piety. Believers do not need to worry about their status with God because they are justified by faith. They can willingly renounce personal glory and daily accept their own life from the hand of their Creator and Redeemer. Daily skirmishes may be lost to the enemy, but Jesus Christ has won the war for them.

Sanctification refers to the process in which the believer increasingly becomes conformed to Christ in heart, conduct, and devotion to God. It is the continual remaking of the believer by the Holy Spirit, the increasing consecration of body and soul to God.<sup>54</sup> In sanctification, the believer offers himself to God as a sacrifice. This does not come without great struggle and slow progress; it requires cleansing from the pollution of the flesh and renouncing the world.<sup>55</sup> It requires repentance, mortification, and daily conversion.

Justification and sanctification are inseparable, Calvin says. To separate one from the other is to tear Christ in pieces,<sup>56</sup> or like trying to separate the sun’s light from the heat that light generates.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup>*Institutes* 3.11.2.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup>*Institutes* 3.11.1; 3.15.7.

<sup>53</sup>*Institutes* 3.13.1.

<sup>54</sup>*Institutes* 1.7.5.

<sup>55</sup>*Commentary* on John 17:17-19.

<sup>56</sup>*Institutes* 3.11.6.

<sup>57</sup>*Sermon* on Galatians 2:17-18.

Believers are justified for the purpose of worshipping God in holiness of life.<sup>58</sup>

## Ecclesiological Dimensions

### *Piety through the Church*

Calvin's *pietas* is not independent of Scripture nor the church; rather, it is rooted in the Word and nurtured in the church. While breaking with the clericalism and absolutism of Rome, Calvin nonetheless maintains a high view of the church. "If we do not prefer the church to all other objects of our interest, we are unworthy of being counted among her members," he writes.

Augustine once said, "He cannot have God for his Father who refuses to have the church for his mother." To that Calvin adds, "For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels." Apart from the church, there is little hope for forgiveness of sins or salvation, Calvin wrote. It is always disastrous to leave the church.<sup>59</sup>

For Calvin, believers are engrafted into Christ and his church, because spiritual growth happens within the church. The church is mother, educator, and nourisher of every believer, for the Holy Spirit acts in her. Believers cultivate piety by the Spirit through the church's teaching ministry, progressing from spiritual infancy to adolescence to full manhood in Christ. They do not graduate from the church until they die.<sup>60</sup> This lifelong education is offered within an atmosphere of genuine piety in which believers love and care for one another under the headship of Christ.<sup>61</sup> It encourages the growth of one another's gifts and love, as it is "constrained to borrow from others."<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup>*Commentary* on Romans 6:2.

<sup>59</sup>*Institutes* 4.1.1, 4.1.3-4; cf. Joel R. Beeke, "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken: The Doctrine of the Church," in *Onward, Christian Soldiers: Protestants Affirm the Church*, ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, Penn.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1999), 23-25.

<sup>60</sup>*Institutes* 4.1.4-5.

<sup>61</sup>*Commentary* on Psalm 20:10.

<sup>62</sup>*Commentary* on Romans 12:6.

Growth in piety is impossible apart from the church, for piety is fostered by the communion of saints. Within the church, believers “cleave to each other in the mutual distribution of gifts.”<sup>63</sup> Each member has his own place and gifts to use within the body.<sup>64</sup> Ideally, the entire body uses these gifts in symmetry and proportion, ever reforming and growing toward perfection.<sup>65</sup>

### *Piety of the Word*

The Word of God is central to the development of Christian piety in the believer. Calvin’s relational model explains how.

True religion is a dialogue between God and man. The part of the dialogue that God initiates is revelation. In this, God comes down to meet us, addresses us, and makes himself known to us in the preaching of the Word. The other part of the dialogue is man’s response to God’s revelation. This response, which includes trust, adoration, and godly fear, is what Calvin calls *pietas*. The preaching of the Word saves us and preserves us as the Spirit enables us to appropriate the blood of Christ and respond to him with reverential love. By the Spirit-empowered preaching of men, “the renewal of the saints is accomplished and the body of Christ is edified,” Calvin says.<sup>66</sup>

Calvin teaches that the preaching of the Word is our spiritual food and our medicine for spiritual health. With the Spirit’s blessing, ministers are spiritual physicians who apply the Word to our souls as earthly physicians apply medicine to our bodies. Using the Word, these spiritual doctors diagnose, prescribe for, and cure spiritual disease in those plagued by sin and death. The preached Word is used as an instrument to heal, cleanse, and make fruitful our disease-prone souls.<sup>67</sup> The Spirit, or the “internal minister,” promotes piety by using the “external minister” to preach the Word. As Calvin says, the external minister “holds forth the vocal word and it is received by the ears,” but the internal minister “truly

---

<sup>63</sup>*Commentary* on 1 Corinthians 12:12.

<sup>64</sup>*Commentary* on 1 Corinthians 4:7.

<sup>65</sup>*Commentary* on Ephesians 4:12.

<sup>66</sup>*Commentary* on Psalm 18:31; 1 Corinthians 13:12; *Institutes* 4.1.5, 4.3.2.

<sup>67</sup>*Sermons of M. John Calvin, on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus*, trans. L.T. (1579; reprint facsimile, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 1 Timothy 1:8-11. Hereafter, *Sermon* on text.

communicates the thing proclaimed . . . that is Christ.”<sup>68</sup> To promote piety, the Spirit not only uses the gospel to work faith deep within the souls of his elect, as we have already seen, but he also uses the law. The law promotes piety in three ways:

1. It restrains sin and promotes righteousness in the church and society, preventing both from lapsing into chaos.
2. It disciplines, educates, and convicts us, driving us out of ourselves to Jesus Christ, the fulfiller and end of the law. The law cannot lead us to a saving knowledge of God in Christ; rather, the Holy Spirit uses it as a mirror to show us our guilt, shut us off from hope, and bring us to repentance. It drives us to the spiritual need out of which faith in Christ is born. This convicting use of the law is critical for the believer’s piety, for it prevents the ungodly self-righteousness that is prone to reassert itself even in the holiest of saints.
3. It becomes the rule of life for the believer. “What is the rule of life which [God] has given us?” Calvin asks in the Genevan Catechism. The answer: “His law.” Later, Calvin says the law “shows the mark at which we ought to aim, the goal towards which we ought to press, that each of us, according to the measure of grace bestowed upon him, may endeavor to frame his life according to the highest rectitude, and, by constant study, continually advance more and more.”<sup>69</sup>

Calvin writes about the third use of the law in the first edition of his *Institutes*, stating, “Believers . . . profit by the law because from it they learn more thoroughly each day what the Lord’s will is like. . . . It is as if some servant, already prepared with complete earnestness of heart to commend himself to his master, must search out and oversee his master’s ways in order to conform and accommodate himself to them. Moreover, however much they may be prompted by the Spirit and eager to obey God, they are still weak

---

<sup>68</sup>*Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 173. Cf. Brian Armstrong, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in Calvin’s Teaching on the Ministry,” *Calvin and the Holy Spirit*, ed. P. DeKlerk (Grand Rapids: Calvin Studies Society, 1989), 99-111.

<sup>69</sup>*Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet (1849; reprint Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 2:56, 69

in the flesh, and would rather serve sin than God. The law is to this flesh like a whip to an idle and balky ass, to goad, stir, arouse it to work.”<sup>70</sup>

In the last edition of the *Institutes* (1559), Calvin is more emphatic about how believers profit from the law. First, he says, “Here is the best instrument for them to learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord’s will to which they aspire, and to confirm them in the understanding of it.” And second, it causes “frequent meditation upon it to be aroused to obedience, be strengthened in it, and be drawn back from the slippery path of transgression.” Saints must press on in this, Calvin concludes. “For what would be less lovable than the law if, with importuning and threatening alone, it troubled souls through fear, and distressed them through fright?”<sup>71</sup>

Viewing the law primarily as an encouragement for the believer to cling to God and obey him is another instance where Calvin differs from Luther. For Luther, the law is primarily negative; it is closely linked with sin, death, or the devil. Luther’s dominant interest is in the second use of the law, even when he considers the law’s role in sanctification. By contrast, Calvin views the law primarily as a positive expression of the will of God. As Hesselink says, “Calvin’s view could be called Deuteronomic, for to him law and love are not antithetical, but are correlates.”<sup>72</sup> The believer follows God’s law not out of compulsory obedience, but out of grateful obedience. Under the tutelage of the Spirit, the law prompts gratitude in the believer, which leads to loving obedience and aversion to sin. In other words, the primary purpose of the law for Luther is to help the believer recognize and confront sin. For

---

<sup>70</sup>*Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1536 Edition*, 36.

<sup>71</sup>*Institutes* 2.7.12. Calvin gleans considerable support for his third use of the law from the Davidic Psalms (cf. *Institutes* 2.7.12 and his *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson, 5 vols. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949]).

<sup>72</sup>“Law—Third use of the law,” in *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 215-16. Cf. Edward A. Dowey, Jr., “Law in Luther and Calvin,” *Theology Today* 41, 2 (1984):146-53; I. John Hesselink, *Calvin’s Concept of the Law* (Allison Park, Penn.: Pickwick, 1992), 251-62.

Calvin, its primary purpose is to direct the believer to serve God out of love.<sup>73</sup>

*Piety in the Sacraments*

Calvin defines the sacraments as testimonies “of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of our piety toward him.”<sup>74</sup> The sacraments are “exercises of piety.” They foster and strengthen our faith, and help us offer ourselves as a living sacrifice to God.

For Calvin, as for Augustine, the sacraments are the visible Word. The preached Word comes through our ears; the visible Word, through our eyes. The sacraments hold forth the same Christ as the preached Word but communicate him through a different mode.

In the sacraments, God accommodates himself to our weakness, Calvin says. When we hear the Word indiscriminately proclaimed, we may wonder: “Is it truly for me? Does it really reach me?” However, in the sacraments God reaches out and touches us individually, and says, “Yes, it’s for *you*. The promise extends to *you*.” The sacraments thus minister to human weakness by personalizing the promises for those who trust Christ for salvation.

God comes to his people in the sacraments, encourages them, enables them to know Christ better, builds them up, and nourishes them in him. Baptism promotes piety as a symbol of how believers are engrafted into Christ, renewed by the Spirit, and adopted into the family of the heavenly Father.<sup>75</sup> Likewise, the Lord’s Supper shows how these adopted children are fed by their loving Father. Calvin loves to refer to the Supper as nourishment for the soul. “The signs are bread and wine which represent for us the invisible

---

<sup>73</sup>Joel Beeke and Ray Lanning, “Glad Obedience: The Third Use of the Law,” in *Trust and Obey: Obedience and the Christian*, ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, Penn.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1996), 154-200; W. Robert Godfrey, “Law and Gospel,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 379.

<sup>74</sup>*Institutes* 4.14.1.

<sup>75</sup>*Institutes* 4.16.9; Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1953), 175-83. Cf. H.O. Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

food that we receive from the flesh and blood of Christ,” he writes. “Christ is the only food of our soul, and therefore our heavenly Father invites us to Christ, that refreshed by partaking of him, we may repeatedly gather strength until we shall have reached heavenly immortality.”<sup>76</sup>

As believers, we need constant nourishment. We never reach a place where we no longer need to hear the Word, to pray, or to be nurtured by the sacraments. We must constantly grow and develop. As we continue to sin because of our old nature, we are in constant need of forgiveness and grace. So the Supper, along with the preaching of the Word, repeatedly reminds us that we need Christ, and we need to be renewed and built up in him. The sacraments promise that Christ is present to receive us, bless us, and renew us.

For Calvin, the word *conversion* doesn’t just mean the initial act of coming to faith; it also means daily renewal and growth in following Christ. The sacraments lead the way to this daily conversion, Calvin says. They tell us that we need the grace of Christ every day. We must draw strength from Christ, particularly through the body that he sacrificed for us on the cross.

As Calvin writes, “For as the eternal Word of God is the fountain of life so his flesh is the channel to pour out to us the life which resides intrinsically in his divinity. For in his flesh was accomplished man’s redemption, in it a sacrifice was offered to atone for sin, and obedience yielded to God to reconcile him to us. It was also filled with the sanctification of the Holy Spirit. Finally having overcome death he was received into the heavenly glory.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, the Spirit sanctified Christ’s body, which Christ offered on the cross to atone for sin. That body was raised from the dead and received up into heaven. At every stage of our redemption, Christ’s body is the pathway to God. In the Supper, then, Christ comes to us and says: “My body is still given for you. By faith you may commune with me and my body and all of its saving benefits.”

Calvin teaches that Christ gives himself to us in the Supper, not just his benefits, just as he gives us himself and his benefits in the preaching of the Word. Christ also makes us part of his body as he gives us himself. Calvin cannot precisely explain how that happens

---

<sup>76</sup>*Institutes* 4.17.8-12.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*

in the Supper, for it is better experienced than explained.<sup>78</sup> However, he does say that Christ does not leave heaven to enter the bread. Rather, in the Holy Supper, we are called to lift up our hearts to heaven, where Christ is, and not cling to the external bread and wine.

We are lifted up through the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. As Calvin writes, “Christ, then, is absent from us in respect of his body, but dwelling in us by his Spirit, he raises us to heaven to himself, transfusing into us the vivifying vigor of his flesh just as the rays of the sun invigorate us by his vital warmth.”<sup>79</sup> Partaking of the flesh of Christ is a spiritual act rather than a carnal act that involves a “transfusion of substance.”<sup>80</sup>

The sacraments can be seen as ladders by which we climb to heaven. “Because we are unable to fly high enough to draw near to God, he has ordained sacraments for us, like ladders,” Calvin says. “If a man wishes to leap on high, he will break his neck in the attempt, but if he has steps, he will be able to proceed with confidence. So also, if we are to reach our God, we must use the means which he has instituted since he knows what is suitable for us. God has then given us this wonderful support and encouragement and strength in our weakness.”<sup>81</sup>

We must never worship the bread because Christ is not *in* the bread, but we find Christ *through* the bread, Calvin says. Just as our mouths receive bread to nourish our physical bodies, so our souls, by faith, receive Christ’s body and blood to nourish our spiritual lives.

When we meet Christ in the sacraments, we grow in grace; that is why they are called a means of grace. The sacraments encourage us in our progress toward heaven. They promote confidence in God’s promises through Christ’s “signified and sealed” redemptive death. Since they are covenants, they contain promises by which “consciences may be roused to an assurance of salvation,” Calvin says.<sup>82</sup> The sacraments offer “peace of conscience” and “a special assurance” when the Spirit enables the believer to “see” the Word

---

<sup>78</sup>*Institutes* 4.17.24, 33.

<sup>79</sup>*Institutes* 4.17.12.

<sup>80</sup>*CO* 9:47, 522.

<sup>81</sup>*Institutes* 4.14.18.

<sup>82</sup>*Commentary* on 1 Corinthians 11:25.

engraved upon the sacraments.<sup>83</sup>

Finally, the sacraments promote piety by prompting us to thank and praise God for his abundant grace. They require us to “attest our piety toward him.” As Calvin says, “The Lord recalls the great bounty of his goodness to our memory and stirs us up to acknowledge it; and at the same time he admonishes us not be ungrateful for such lavish liberality, but rather to proclaim it with fitting praises and to celebrate [the Lord’s Supper] by giving thanks.”<sup>84</sup>

Two things happen in the Supper: the receiving of Christ and the surrender of the believer. The Lord’s Supper is not eucharistic from God’s perspective, Calvin says, for Christ is not offered afresh. Nor is it eucharistic in terms of man’s merit, for we can offer God nothing by way of sacrifice. But it is eucharistic in terms of our thanksgiving.<sup>85</sup> That sacrifice is an indispensable part of the Lord’s Supper which, Calvin says, includes “all the duties of love.”<sup>86</sup> The Eucharist is an *agape* feast in which communicants cherish each other and testify of the bond that they enjoy with each other in the unity of the body of Christ.<sup>87</sup>

We offer this sacrifice of gratitude in response to Christ’s sacrifice for us. We surrender our lives in response to the heavenly banquet God spreads for us in the Supper. By the Spirit’s grace, the Supper enables us as a royal priesthood to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God.<sup>88</sup>

The Lord’s Supper thus prompts both piety of grace and piety of gratitude, as Brian Gerrish has shown.<sup>89</sup> The Father’s liberality and his children’s grateful response are a recurrent theme in Calvin’s theology. “We should so revere such a father with grateful piety and burning love,” Calvin admonishes us, “as to devote ourselves wholly to his obedience and honor him in everything.”<sup>90</sup> The

---

<sup>83</sup>*Commentary* on Matthew 3:11; Acts 2:38; 1 Peter 3:21.

<sup>84</sup>*OS* 1:136, 145.

<sup>85</sup>*Institutes* 4.18.3.

<sup>86</sup>*Institutes* 4.18.17.

<sup>87</sup>*Institutes* 4.17.44.

<sup>88</sup>*Institutes* 4.18.13.

<sup>89</sup>“Calvin’s Eucharistic Piety,” in *The Legacy of John Calvin*, ed. David Foxgrover (Grand Rapids: CRC, 2000), 53.

<sup>90</sup>*OS* 1, 76.

Supper is the liturgical enactment of Calvin's themes of grace and gratitude, which lie at the heart of his piety.<sup>91</sup>

In the Lord's Supper, the human and divine elements of Calvin's piety are held in dynamic tension. In that dynamic interchange, God moves toward the believer while his Spirit consummates the Word-based union. At the same time, the believer moves toward God by contemplating the Savior who refreshes and strengthens him. In this, God is glorified and the believer edified.<sup>92</sup>

### *Piety in the Psalter*

Calvin views the Psalms as the canonical manual of piety. In the preface to his five-volume commentary on the Psalms—his largest exposition of any Bible book—Calvin writes: “There is no other book in which we are more perfectly taught the right manner of praising God, or in which we are more powerfully stirred up to the performance of this exercise of piety.”<sup>93</sup> Calvin's preoccupation with the Psalter was motivated by his belief that the Psalms teach and inspire genuine piety in the following ways:

- ♦ As the revelation from God, the Psalms teach us about God. Because they are theological as well as doxological, they are our sung creed.<sup>94</sup>
- ♦ They clearly teach our need for God. They tell us who we are and why we need God's help.<sup>95</sup>
- ♦ They offer the divine remedy for our needs. They present Christ in his person, offices, sufferings, death, resurrection, and ascension. They announce the way of salvation,

<sup>91</sup>Brian A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 19-20.

<sup>92</sup>Lionel Greve, “Freedom and Discipline in the Theology of John Calvin, William Perkins and John Wesley: An Examination of the Origin and Nature of Pietism” (Ph.D., diss., Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1975), 124-25.

<sup>93</sup>CO 31:19; translation taken from Barbara Pitkin, “Imitation of David: David as a Paradigm for Faith in Calvin's Exegesis of the Psalms,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 24: 4 (1993):847.

<sup>94</sup>James Denney, *The Letters of Principal James Denney to His Family and Friends* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.), 9.

<sup>95</sup>See James Luther Mays, “Calvin's Commentary on the Psalms: The Preface as Introduction,” in *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 201-204.

proclaiming the blessedness of justification by faith alone and the necessity of sanctification by the Spirit with the Word.<sup>96</sup>

- ♦ They demonstrate God's amazing goodness and invite us to meditate on his grace and mercy. They lead us to repentance and to fear God, to trust in his Word, and to hope in his mercy.
- ♦ They teach us to flee to the God of salvation through prayer and show us how to bring our requests to God.<sup>97</sup> They show us how to pray confidently in the midst of adversity.<sup>98</sup>
- ♦ They show us the depth of communion we may enjoy with our covenant-keeping God. They show how the living church is God's bride, God's children, and God's flock.
- ♦ They provide a vehicle for communal worship. Many use first-person plural pronouns ("we," "our") to indicate this communal aspect, but even those with first-person singular pronouns include all who love the Lord and are committed to him. They move us to trust and praise God and to love our neighbors. They prompt reliance on God's promises, zeal for him and his house, and compassion for the suffering.
- ♦ They cover the full range of spiritual experience, including faith and unbelief, joy in God and sorrow over sin, divine presence and divine desertion. As Calvin says, they are "an anatomy of all parts of the soul."<sup>99</sup> We still see our affections and spiritual maladies in the words of the psalmists. When we read about their experiences, we are drawn to self-examination and faith by the grace of the Spirit. The psalms of David, especially, are like a mirror in

---

<sup>96</sup>Allan M. Harman, "The Psalms and Reformed Spirituality," *Reformed Theological Review* 53, 2 (1994), 58.

<sup>97</sup>*Commentary* on the Psalms, 1:xxxvi-xxxix.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*, Psalm 5:11, 118:5.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:xxxix. See James A. De Jong, "An Anatomy of All Parts of the Soul: Insights into Calvin's Spirituality from His Psalms Commentary," in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 1-14.

which we are led to praise God and find rest in his sovereign purposes.<sup>100</sup>

Calvin immersed himself in the Psalms for twenty-five years as a commentator, preacher, biblical scholar, and worship leader.<sup>101</sup> Early on, he began work on metrical versions of the Psalms to be used in public worship. On January 16, 1537, shortly after his arrival in Geneva, Calvin asked his council to introduce the singing of Psalms into church worship. He recruited the talents of other men, such as Clement Marot, Louis Bourgeois, and Theodore Beza, to produce the Genevan Psalter. That work would take twenty-five years to complete. The first collection (1539) contained eighteen Psalms, six of which Calvin put into verse. The rest were done by the French poet, Marot. An expanded version (1542) containing thirty-five Psalms was next, followed by one of forty-nine Psalms (1543). Calvin wrote the preface to both of those, commending the practice of congregational singing. After Marot's death in 1544, Calvin encouraged Beza to put the rest of the Psalms into verse. Two years before his death in 1562, Calvin rejoiced to see the first complete edition of the Genevan Psalter.<sup>102</sup>

The Genevan Psalter is furnished with a remarkable collection of 125 melodies, written specifically for the Psalms by outstanding musicians, of whom Louis Bourgeois is the best known. The tunes are melodic, distinctive, and reverent.<sup>103</sup> They clearly express

---

<sup>100</sup>*Commentary* on the Psalms, 1:xxxix.

<sup>101</sup>John Walchenbach, "The Influence of David and the Psalms on the Life and Thought of John Calvin" (Th.M. thesis, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1969).

<sup>102</sup>More than 30,000 copies of the first complete, 500-page Genevan Psalter were printed by over fifty different French and Swiss publishers in the first year, and at least 27,400 copies were published in Geneva in the first few months (Jeffrey T. VanderWilt, "John Calvin's Theology of Liturgical Song," *Christian Scholar's Review* 25 [1996]:67. Cf. *Le Psautier de Genève, 1562-1685: Images, commentées et essai de bibliographie*, intro. J.D. Candaus (Geneva: Bibliothèque publique et universitaire, 1986), 1:16-18; John Witvliet, "The Spirituality of the Psalter: Metrical Psalms in Liturgy and Life in Calvin's Geneva," in *Calvin's Study Society Papers, 1995-1997*, ed. David Foxgrover (Grand Rapids: CRC, 1998), 93-117.

<sup>103</sup>Unlike Luther, Calvin tried to avoid mixing secular tunes with sacred singing and believed that all Psalm singing must be in the vernacular. The grounds for liturgical psalm singing are found in the

Calvin's convictions that piety is best promoted when priority is given to text over tune, while recognizing that Psalms deserve their own music. Since music should help the reception of the Word, Calvin says, it should be "weighty, dignified, majestic, and modest"—fitting attitudes for a sinful creature in the presence of God.<sup>104</sup> This protects the sovereignty of God in worship and conduces proper conformity between the believer's inward disposition and his outward confession.

Psalm-singing is one of the four principle acts of church worship, Calvin believed. It is an extension of prayer. It is also the most significant vocal contribution of people in the service. Psalms were sung in Sunday morning and Sunday afternoon services. Beginning in 1546, a printed table indicated which Psalms were to be sung on each occasion. Psalters were assigned to each service according to the texts that were preached. By 1562, three Psalms were sung at each service.<sup>105</sup>

Calvin believed that corporate singing subdued the fallen heart and retrained wayward affections in the way of piety. Like preaching and the sacraments, Psalm-singing disciplines the heart's affections in the school of faith and lifts the believer to God. Psalm-singing amplifies the effect of the Word upon the heart and multiplies the spiritual energy of the church. "The Psalms can stimulate us to raise our hearts to God and arouse us to an ardor in invoking as well as in exalting with praises the glory of his name," Calvin writes.<sup>106</sup> With the Spirit's direction, Psalm-singing tunes the hearts of believers for glory.

The Genevan Psalter was an integral part of Calvinist worship for centuries. It set the standard for succeeding French Reformed psalm books as well as those in English, Dutch, German, and Hungarian. As a devotional book, it warmed the hearts of

---

evidence of Scripture and in the practices of the ancient church, Calvin said (VanderWilt, "John Calvin's Theology of Liturgical Song," 72, 74).

<sup>104</sup>Preface to the Genevan Psalter (1562) (Charles Garside, Jr., *The Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music: 1536-1543* [Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1979], 32-33).

<sup>105</sup>I am indebted to Elsie McKee for allowing me to read a manuscript copy of her forthcoming book on Calvin's spirituality to be published by Paulist Press.

<sup>106</sup>CO 10:12; cited in Garside, *The Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music*, 10.

thousands, but the people who sang from it understood that its power was not in the book or its words, but in the Spirit who impressed those words on their hearts.

The Genevan Psalter promoted piety by stimulating a spirituality of the Word that was corporate and liturgical, and that broke down the distinction between liturgy and life. The Calvinists freely sang the Psalms not only in their churches, but also in homes and workplaces, on the streets and in the fields.<sup>107</sup> The singing of Psalms became a “means of Huguenot self-identification.”<sup>108</sup> This pious exercise became a cultural emblem. In short, as T. Hartley Hall writes, “In scriptural or metrical versions, the Psalms, together with the stately tunes to which they were early set, are clearly the heart and soul of Reformed piety.”<sup>109</sup>

### Practical Dimensions

Although Calvin viewed the church as the nursery of piety, he also emphasized the need for personal piety. The Christian strives for piety because he loves righteousness, longs to live to God’s glory, and delights to obey God’s rule of righteousness set forth in Scripture.<sup>110</sup> God himself is the focal point of the Christian life<sup>111</sup>—a life that is therefore carried out in self-denial, particularly expressed in Christ-like cross-bearing.<sup>112</sup>

For Calvin, such piety “is the beginning, middle, and end of Christian living.”<sup>113</sup> It involves numerous practical dimensions for daily Christian living, which are thoroughly explained in Calvin’s *Institutes*, commentaries, sermons, letters, and treatises. Here is a summary of what Calvin says on prayer, repentance, and obedience,

---

<sup>107</sup> Witvliet, “The Spirituality of the Psalter,” 117.

<sup>108</sup>W. Stanford Reid, “The Battle Hymns of the Lord: Calvinist Psalmody of the Sixteenth Century,” in *Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies*, ed. C.S. Meyer (St. Louis: Foundation for Reformation Research, 1971), 2:47.

<sup>109</sup>“The Shape of Reformed Piety,” in Robin Maas and Gabriel O’Donnell, *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 215. Cf. Reid, “The Battle Hymns of the Lord,” 2:36-54.

<sup>110</sup>*Institutes* 3.6.2.

<sup>111</sup>*Institutes* 3.6.3.

<sup>112</sup>*Institutes* 3.7, 3.8.

<sup>113</sup>*Commentary* on 1 Timothy 4:7-8.

as well as on pious Christian living in Chapters 6-10 of Book 3 of the *Institutes* of 1559.<sup>114</sup>

### *Prayer*

Prayer is the principal and perpetual exercise of faith and the chief element of piety, Calvin says.<sup>115</sup> Prayer shows God's grace to the believer even as the believer offers praises to God and asks for his faithfulness. It communicates piety both privately and corporately.<sup>116</sup>

Calvin devoted the second longest chapter of the *Institutes* (Book 3, Chapter 20) to prayer, providing six purposes for it: To fly to God with every need, to set all our petitions before God, to prepare us to receive God's benefits with humble gratitude, to meditate upon God's kindness, to instill the proper spirit of delight for God's answers in prayer, and to confirm his providence.<sup>117</sup>

Two problems are likely to surface with Calvin's doctrine of prayer. First, when the believer obediently submits to God's will, he does not necessarily give up his own will. Rather, through the act of submissive prayer, the believer invokes God's providence to act on his behalf. Thus, man's will, under the Spirit's guidance, and God's will work together in communion.

Second, to the objection that prayer seems superfluous in light of God's omniscience and omnipotence, Calvin responds that God ordained prayer more for man as an exercise of piety than for himself. Providence must be understood in the sense that God

---

<sup>114</sup>This section was first translated into English in 1549 as *The Life and Conversation of a Christian Man* and has been reprinted often as *The Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*.

<sup>115</sup>See R.D. Loggie, "Chief Exercise of Faith: An Exposition of Calvin's Doctrine of Prayer," *Hartford Quarterly* 5 (1965):65-81; H.W. Maurer, "An Examination of Form and Content in John Calvin's Prayers" (Ph.D. diss., Edinburgh, 1960).

<sup>116</sup>Due to space limitations, prayer is considered here in its personal dimension but for Calvin prayer was also of vast importance in its communal aspect. See Elsie McKee for a selection of individual and family prayers Calvin prepared as patterns for Genevan children, adults, and households, as well as a number of prayers from his sermons and biblical lectures. Cf. Thomas A. Lambert, "Preaching, Praying, and Policing the Reform in Sixteenth Century Geneva" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1998), 393-480.

<sup>117</sup>*Institutes* 3.20.3.

ordains the means along with the ends. Prayer is thus a means to receive what God has planned to bestow.<sup>118</sup> Prayer is a way in which believers seek out and receive what God has determined to do for them from eternity.<sup>119</sup>

Calvin treats prayer as a given rather than a problem. Right prayer is governed by rules, he says. These include praying with:

- ♦ a heartfelt sense of reverence
- ♦ a sense of need and repentance
- ♦ a surrender of all confidence in self and a humble plea for pardon
- ♦ a confident hope.

All four rules are repeatedly violated by even the holiest of God's people. Nevertheless, for Christ's sake, God does not desert the pious but has mercy for them.<sup>120</sup>

Despite the shortcomings of believers, prayer is required for the increase of piety, for prayer diminishes self-love and multiplies dependence upon God. As the due exercise of piety, prayer unites God and man—not in substance, but in will and purpose. Like the Lord's Supper, prayer lifts the believer to Christ and renders proper glory to God. That glory is the purpose of the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer as well as other petitions dealing with his creation. Since creation looks to God's glory for its preservation, the entire Lord's Prayer is directed to God's glory.<sup>121</sup>

In the Lord's Prayer, Christ "supplies words to our lips," Calvin says.<sup>122</sup> It shows us how all our prayers must be controlled, formed, and inspired by the Word of God. Only this can provide holy boldness in prayer, "which rightly accords with fear, reverence, and solicitude."<sup>123</sup>

We must be disciplined and steadfast in prayer, for prayer keeps us in fellowship with Christ. We are reassured in prayer of Christ's

<sup>118</sup>*Institutes* 3.20.3.

<sup>119</sup>Charles Partee, "Prayer as the Practice of Predestination," in *Calvinus Servus Christi*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (Budapest: Pressabteilung des Raday-Kollegiums, 1988), 254.

<sup>120</sup>*Institutes* 3.20.4-16.

<sup>121</sup>*Institutes* 3.20.11.

<sup>122</sup>*Institutes* 3.20.34.

<sup>123</sup>*Institutes* 3.20.14; Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), 276-79.

intercessions, without which our prayers would be rejected.<sup>124</sup> Only Christ can turn God's throne of dreadful glory into a throne of grace, to which we can draw near in prayer.<sup>125</sup> Thus, prayer is the channel between God and man. It is the way in which the Christian expresses his praise and adoration of God, and asks for God's help in submissive piety.<sup>126</sup>

### *Repentance*

Repentance is the fruit of faith and prayer. Luther said in his *Ninety-Five Theses* that all of the Christian life should be marked by repentance. Calvin also sees repentance as a lifelong process. He says that repentance is not merely the start of the Christian life; it *is* the Christian life. It involves confession of sin as well as growth in holiness. Repentance is the lifelong response of the believer to the gospel in outward life, mind, heart, attitude, and will.<sup>127</sup>

Repentance begins with turning to God from the heart and proceeds from a pure, earnest fear of God. It involves dying to self and sin (mortification) and coming alive to righteousness (vivification) in Christ.<sup>128</sup> Calvin does not limit repentance to an inward grace, but views it as the redirection of a man's entire being to righteousness. Without a pure, earnest fear of God, a man will not be aware of the heinousness of sin or want to die to it. But mortification is essential because, though sin ceases to reign in the believer, it does not cease to dwell in him. Romans 7:14-25 shows that mortification is a lifelong process. With the Spirit's help, the believer must put sin to death every day through self-denial, cross-bearing, and meditation on the future life.

Repentance is also characterized by newness of life, however. Mortification is the means to vivification, which Calvin defines as "the desire to live in a holy and devoted manner, a desire arising from rebirth; as if it were said that man dies to himself that he may

---

<sup>124</sup>*Commentary* on Hebrews 7:26.

<sup>125</sup>*Institutes* 3.20.17.

<sup>126</sup>Greve, "Freedom and Discipline in the Theology of John Calvin," 143-44. For how Calvin's emphasis on prayer impacted the Reformed tradition, see Diane Karay Tripp, "Daily Prayer in the Reformed Tradition: An Initial Survey," *Studia Liturgica* 21 (1991): 76-107, 190-219.

<sup>127</sup>*Institutes* 3.3.1-2, 6, 18, 20.

<sup>128</sup>*Institutes* 3.3.5, 9.

begin to live to God.”<sup>129</sup> True self-denial results in a life devoted to justice and mercy. The pious both “cease to do evil” and “learn to do well.” Through repentance, they bow in the dust before their holy Judge, then are raised to participate in the life, death, righteousness, and intercession of their Savior. As Calvin writes, “For if we truly partake in his death, ‘our old man is crucified by his power, and the body of sin perishes’ (Rom. 6:6), that the corruption of original nature may no longer thrive. If we share in his resurrection, through it we are raised up into newness of life to correspond with the righteousness of God.”<sup>130</sup>

The words Calvin uses to describe the pious Christian life (*reparatio, regeneratio, reformatio, renovatio, restitutio*) point back to our original state of righteousness. They indicate that a life of *pietas* is restorative in nature. Through Spirit-worked repentance, believers are restored to the image of God.<sup>131</sup>

### *Self-denial*

Self-denial is the sacrificial dimension of *pietas*. The fruit of the believer’s union with Jesus Christ is self-denial, which includes the following:

1. The realization we are not our own but belong to God. We live and die unto him, according to the rule of his Word. Thus, self-denial is not self-centered, as was often the case in medieval monasticism, but God-centered.<sup>132</sup> Our greatest enemy is neither the devil nor the world but ourselves.
2. The desire to seek the things of the Lord throughout our lives. Self-denial leaves no room for pride, lasciviousness, and worldliness. It is the opposite of self-love because it is love for God.<sup>133</sup> The entire orientation of our life must be toward God.

---

<sup>129</sup>*Institutes* 3.3.3; Randall C. Gleason, *John Calvin and John Owen on Mortification: A Comparative Study in Reformed Spirituality* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 61.

<sup>130</sup>*Institutes* 3.3.8-9.

<sup>131</sup>John H. Leith, *John Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 70-74.

<sup>132</sup>*Institutes* 3.7.1.

<sup>133</sup>*Institutes* 3.7.2.

3. The commitment to yield ourselves and everything we own to God as a living sacrifice. We then are prepared to love others and to esteem them better than ourselves—not by viewing them as they are in themselves, but by viewing the image of God in them. This uproots our love of strife and self and replaces it with a spirit of gentleness and helpfulness.<sup>134</sup> Our love for others then flows from the heart, and our only limit to helping them is the limit of our resources.<sup>135</sup>

Believers are encouraged to persevere in self-denial by what the gospel promises about the future consummation of the Kingdom of God. Such promises help us overcome every obstacle that opposes self-renunciation and assist us in bearing adversity.<sup>136</sup>

Furthermore, self-denial helps us find true happiness because it helps us do what we were created for. We were created to love God above all and our neighbor as ourselves. Happiness is the result of having that principle restored. Without self-denial, as Calvin says, we may possess everything without possessing one particle of real happiness.

### *Cross-bearing*

While self-denial focuses on inward conformity to Christ, cross-bearing centers on outward Christlikeness. Those who are in fellowship with Christ must prepare themselves for a hard, toilsome life filled with many kinds of evil, Calvin says. This is not simply due to sin's effect on this fallen world, but is because of the believer's union with Christ. Because his life was a perpetual cross, ours must also include suffering.<sup>137</sup> We not only participate in the benefits of his atoning work on the cross, but we also experience the Spirit's work of transforming us into the image of Christ.<sup>138</sup>

---

<sup>134</sup>*Institutes* 3.7.4-5.

<sup>135</sup>*Institutes* 3.7.7; Merwyn S. Johnson, "Calvin's Ethical Legacy," in *The Legacy of John Calvin*, ed. David Foxgrover (Grand Rapids: CRC 2000), 74.

<sup>136</sup>*Institutes* 3.7.8-10.

<sup>137</sup>Richard C. Gamble, "Calvin and Sixteenth-Century Spirituality," in *Calvin Studies Society Papers*, ed. David Foxgrover (Grand Rapids: CRC, 1998), 34-35.

<sup>138</sup>*Institutes* 3.8.1-2.

Cross-bearing tests piety, Calvin says. Through cross-bearing we are roused to hope, trained in patience, instructed in obedience, and chastened in pride. Cross-bearing is our medicine and our chastisement; it reveals the feebleness of our flesh and teaches us to suffer for the sake of righteousness.<sup>139</sup>

Happily, God promises to be with us in all our sufferings. He even transforms suffering associated with persecution into comfort and blessing.<sup>140</sup>

### *The Present and Future Life*

Through cross-bearing, we learn to have contempt for the present life when compared to the blessings of heaven. This life is nothing compared to what is to come. It is like smoke or a shadow. "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?" Calvin asks.<sup>141</sup> "No one has made progress in the school of Christ who does not joyfully await the day of death and final resurrection," he concludes.<sup>142</sup>

Typically, Calvin uses the *complexio oppositorum* when explaining the Christian's relation to this world, presenting opposites to find a middle way between them. Thus, on the one hand, cross-bearing crucifies us to the world and the world to us. On the other hand, the devout Christian enjoys this present life, albeit with due restraint and moderation, for he is taught to use things in this world for the purpose that God intended them. Calvin was no ascetic; he enjoyed good literature, good food, and the beauties of nature. But he rejected all forms of earthly excess. The believer is called to Christlike moderation, which includes modesty, prudence, avoidance of display, and contentment with our lot,<sup>143</sup> for is the hope of the life to come that gives purpose to and enjoyment in our present life. This life is always straining after a better, heavenly life.<sup>144</sup>

How, then, is it possible for the truly pious Christian to maintain a proper balance, enjoying the gifts that God gives in this

<sup>139</sup>*Institutes* 3.8.3-9.

<sup>140</sup>*Institutes* 3.8.7-8.

<sup>141</sup>*Institutes* 3.9.4.

<sup>142</sup>*Institutes* 3.9.5.

<sup>143</sup>Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 170-95.

<sup>144</sup>*Institutes* 3.9.3.

world while avoiding the snare of over-indulgence? Calvin offers four guiding principles:

1. Recognize that God is the giver of every good and perfect gift. This should restrain our lusts because our gratitude to God for his gifts cannot be expressed by a greedy reception of them.
2. Understand that if we have few possessions, we must bear our poverty patiently lest we be ensnared by inordinate desire.
3. Remember that we are stewards of the world in which God has placed us. Soon we will have to give an account to him of our stewardship.
4. Know that God has called us to himself and to his service. Because of that calling, we strive to fulfill our tasks in his service, for his glory, and under his watchful, benevolent eye.<sup>145</sup>

### *Obedience*

For Calvin, unconditional obedience to God's will is the essence of piety. Piety links love, freedom, and discipline by subjecting all to the will and Word of God.<sup>146</sup> Love is the overarching principle that prevents piety from degenerating into legalism. At the same time, law provides the content for love.

Piety includes rules that govern the believer's response. Privately, those rules take the form of self-denial and cross-bearing; publicly, they are expressed in the exercise of church discipline, as Calvin implemented in Geneva. In either case, the glory of God compels disciplined obedience. For Calvin, the pious Christian is neither weak nor passive but dynamically active in the pursuit of obedience, much like a distance runner, a diligent scholar, or a heroic warrior, submitting to God's will.<sup>147</sup>

In the preface of his commentary on the Psalms, Calvin writes: "Here is the true proof of obedience, where, bidding farewell to our own affections, we subject ourselves to God and allow our lives to be so governed by his will that things most bitter and harsh to us—

---

<sup>145</sup>*Institutes* 3.10.

<sup>146</sup>Greve, "Freedom and Discipline in the Theology of John Calvin," 20.

<sup>147</sup>Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 82-86.

because they come from him—become sweet to us.”<sup>148</sup> “Sweet obedience”—Calvin welcomed such descriptions. According to I. John Hesselink, Calvin described the pious life with words such as *sweet, sweetly, sweetness* hundreds of times in his *Institutes*, commentaries, sermons, and treatises. Calvin writes of the sweetness of the law, the sweetness of Christ, the sweetness of consolation in the midst of adversity and persecution, the sweetness of prayer, the sweetness of the Lord’s Supper, the sweetness of God’s free offer of eternal life in Christ, and the sweetness of eternal glory.<sup>149</sup>

He writes of the sweet fruit of election, too, saying that ultimately this world and all its glories will pass away. What gives us assurance of salvation here and hope for the life to come is that we have been “chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4).<sup>150</sup> “We shall never be clearly persuaded . . . that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God’s free mercy until we come to know the very sweet fruit of God’s eternal election.”<sup>151</sup>

## Conclusion

Calvin strove to live the life of *pietas* himself—theologically, ecclesiastically, and practically. At the end of his *Life of Calvin*, Theodore Beza wrote, “Having been a spectator of his conduct for sixteen years, . . . I can now declare, that in him all men may see a most beautiful example of the Christian character, an example which it is as easy to slander as it is difficult to imitate.”<sup>152</sup>

---

<sup>148</sup>Battles, *The Piety of John Calvin*, 29.

<sup>149</sup>I. John Hesselink, “Calvin, Theologian of Sweetness” (unpublished paper delivered as The Henry Meeter Center for Calvin Studies Spring Lecture, March 9, 2000), 10-16.

<sup>150</sup>For Calvin on assurance, see Randall Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Joel R. Beeke, “Making Sense of Calvin’s Paradoxes on Assurance of Faith,” in *Calvin Studies Society Papers*, ed. David Foxgrover (Grand Rapids: CRC, 1998), 13-30, and *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 39-72.

<sup>151</sup>*Institutes* 3.21.1.

<sup>152</sup>In *Selected Works of Calvin*, ed. and trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 1:c. For piety in Calvin’s own life, see Ford Lewis Battles, *The Piety of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 16-20.

Calvin shows us the piety of a warm-hearted Reformed theologian who speaks from the heart. Having tasted the goodness and grace of God in Jesus Christ, he pursued piety by seeking to know and do God's will every day. He communed with Christ; practiced repentance, self-denial, and cross-bearing; and was involved in vigorous social improvements.<sup>153</sup> His theology worked itself out in heart-felt, Christ-centered piety.<sup>154</sup>

For Calvin and the Reformers of sixteenth-century Europe, doctrine and prayer as well as faith and worship are integrally connected. For Calvin, the Reformation includes the reform of piety (*pietas*), or spirituality, as much as a reform of theology. The spirituality that had been cloistered behind monastery walls for centuries had broken down; medieval spirituality was reduced to a celibate, ascetic, and penitential devotion in the convent or monastery. But Calvin helped Christians understand piety in terms of living and acting every day according to God's will (Rom. 12:1-2) in the midst of human society. Through Calvin's influence, Protestant spirituality focused on how one lived the Christian life in the family, the fields, the workshop, and the marketplace.<sup>155</sup> Calvin helped Protestants change the entire focus of the Christian life.

Calvin's teaching, preaching, and catechizing fostered growth in the relationship between believers and God. Piety means experiencing sanctification as a divine work of renewal expressed in repentance and righteousness, which progresses through conflict and adversity in a Christ-like manner. In such piety, prayer and worship are central, both privately and in the community of believers.

The worship of God is always primary, for one's relationship to God takes precedence over everything else. That worship, however, is expressed in how the believer lives his vocation and how he treats his neighbors, for one's relationship with God is most concretely

---

<sup>153</sup>Merwyn Johnson, "Calvin's Ethical Legacy," 79-83.

<sup>154</sup>Cf. Erroll Hulse, "The Preacher and Piety," in *The Preacher and Preaching*, ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr. (Philippsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 71.

<sup>155</sup>Hughes Oliphant Old, "What is Reformed Spirituality? Played Over Again Lightly," in *Calvin Studies VII*, ed. J.H. Leith (Davidson, N.C.: n.p., 1994), 61.

seen in the transformation of every human relationship. Faith and prayer, because they transform every believer, cannot be hidden. Ultimately, therefore, they must transform the church, the community, and the world.