



John Calvin, practical theologian:

The Reformer's spirituality

An important aspect of the Christian life, as Calvin understood it, is the willingness of the elect to imitate the example of Christ, especially by bearing the cross for his sake. Calvin did not endorse the medieval idea of imitating Christ, because that conceived of it as a meritorious good work that would qualify a person for salvation, and the Reformer knew some features of the Lord's life are impossible to imitate. He taught, nevertheless, that all Christians must be ready to suffer for Christ's sake. Cross-bearing is an essential part of spirituality, so the people of God must be prepared for a *"hard, toilsome, and unquiet life crammed with many and various kinds of evil. It is the heavenly Father's will thus to exercise them so as to put his own children to a definite test."*¹ When suffering occurs the disciples must realize their trials are part of God's plan. They must therefore acknowledge that God's will is *"itself a sufficient reason for everything ... It is wisdom ... to receive gladly whatever God appoints and never to ask why; ... His will is the rule of all justice."*² When called upon to suffer for Christ and the gospel, the saints should remember their election, for that will keep them from despair. *"God's mercy will always remain concealed unless this part is made clear ... that God chose us before we were born and before we could do anything to influence him."*³ Afflictions may be due in some cases to divine displeasure, but still they confer benefits upon humble believers.⁴

In a sermon entitled *Enduring Persecution for Christ*, John Calvin asserted:

*There are two things which cannot be separated — to be members of Christ, and to be tried by many afflictions ... Let men do their utmost; they cannot do worse than murder us! Will not the heavenly life compensate for this?*⁵

In spiritual warfare Christians face trouble, both within and without. Satan, Calvin believed, is a vicious personal enemy, and believers must understand they continue to have natural inclinations that the devil is eager to exploit. At times the elect may feel *"surrounded by death a thousand times over and plunged into the depths of hell."*⁶ The life of godliness is, however, the *"good fight of faith"* (1 Timothy 6:12), and divine grace enables his saints to persevere, as they acknowledge their strength comes from their Lord. As Calvin expressed this truth:

*Let us persevere ... knowing that God has not enlisted us for a short time ... but to live and die in his service. They who are not resolved ... both to live and die setting forth the glory of God do not know what it is to fight.*⁷

In Calvin's judgment, repentance is an essential component of spirituality. In order to succeed in their spiritual warfare, the people of God must make repentance for their sins a lifelong practice. Like Martin Luther, the Reformer of Geneva had a profound sense of sin and its continuing presence in Christians' lives to hinder their piety. In the first of his *Ninety-Five Theses* the great German Reformer declared, *"When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said **repent** (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers be one of repentance."*⁸

As in almost every matter, Calvin concurred with Luther's conclusion, regarding repentance as the fruit of faith, which entails sorrow for sin, mortification of one's sinful propensities, and a dread of judgment. It means a turning to God that leads to a transformation of behavior. Calvin, understanding this, criticized *"that giddy spirit which brings such fruits that it limits to a paltry few days a repentance that for a Christian ought to extend throughout his life."*⁹

The Protestant Reformers, as biblical theologians, portrayed spirituality as a goal to be pursued as long as the pilgrimage to heaven continues, and they urged the saints to remember that they journey together, not alone, and the church is a community of faith within which God has provided the means to make their pilgrimage successful.

Spirituality and the church

Believers enjoy spiritual union with Christ and with one another, and the church is the context within which that occurs. Reflecting upon Paul's reference to the church as the "pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15), Calvin wrote:

*Is not the church the mother of all believers, because she brings them to new birth by the Word of God, educates and nourishes them ... strengthens them and finally leads them to complete perfection?*¹⁰

Union with the Savior is then communal as well as individual because it inducts converted sinners into the church, where Christians are bound together by the Holy Spirit in a fellowship of caring and sharing.¹¹ Within the church the saints have access to the means of grace, which promote the assurance of salvation.

The church proclaims the Word of God and thereby feeds the souls of her members. Where the Word is preached and the sacraments dispensed, Christ ministers to his people.¹² The ministry of Word and sacraments enables Christians to know Christ died for them, and all benefits of his sacrifice apply to them. They need the church and her services for their growth in spirituality.¹³

Calvin understood that the sacraments are ordinances of the church, and, like Augustine of Hippo, he regarded a sacrament as a "*visible form of an invisible grace*" that is, "*an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith.*"¹⁴ Piety advances as Christians seek it vigorously through the means of grace accessible principally through the church, where the sacraments direct attention to Christ and to the believers' union with him. The Word gives the sacraments efficacy, and the Holy Spirit enables those who attend to the Word and sacraments thereby to commune with Christ.¹⁵

In calling the saints to participate in the church, there to avail themselves of the means of grace, the Reformer was directing them to worship God as the Lord himself has prescribed, and to preserve the centrality of the Word in the church, Calvin composed a liturgy in which adoration is the central feature. As one observer commented aptly, "*Calvin wanted to guard worship from becoming a massaging of our feelings.*"¹⁶ The Reformer of Geneva realized spirituality and worship are inseparable, and pastors have the solemn responsibility of leading believers in corporate worship, where they must apply the doctrines of Scripture to daily life. Calvin advocated passionate preaching and warned pastors against lecturing to congregations, for that might lead people to a "*cold and unimpressive knowledge of God in the head.*"¹⁷ Pastors must feed the sheep and repulse the wolves.

Many of Calvin's writings are pastoral in character, evidence of his deep concern for people who experienced conflicts as they sought to live in a godly manner. He advised pastors, not only to preach the Word, but to counsel troubled saints compassionately in order to cultivate their sanctification. Souls in conflict, he believed, do well to seek pastoral aid, even confessing their sins to their spiritual advisors, when private confession to God has not brought them relief. When pastors deal with such people, they must require them to confront personal sins "*because only those afflicted and wounded by the awareness of sins can sincerely invoke God's mercy.*"¹⁸

John Calvin knew his ability to help in the spiritual development of others was due entirely to the work of grace in his own life, so he sympathized with others because he had to contend with the same weaknesses as they. He realized he was a sinner trying to help other sinners.¹⁹

In the struggle to achieve Christlikeness, Calvin stressed the necessity for prayer, a subject to which he devoted seventy pages of his *Institutes*, and admonitions about prayer abound

throughout his writings. The Reformer maintained that Scripture must regulate the prayers of God's children, and therefore reverence for God, admission of need, confession of sin, and hope and confidence in the Lord are essential components. Jesus has made the throne of divine glory a throne of grace, where believers, by their prayers, offer to God their "*sacrifice of praise*" (Hebrews 13:15). Gratitude impels them to do this, without which prayer would be worthless.²⁰

While the primary emphasis in prayer must be adoration, Calvin encouraged Christians to petition God for their own needs and to intercede for others, which is a wholesome privilege for all who comprise the priesthood of all believers.²¹ Whether prayer be an act of worship or a petition for help, it must be accompanied by submission to the will of God, a matter Calvin addressed in his exposition of the epistle to the Romans, where he wrote:

*Learn that what holds first place in prayer is consent with the will of the Lord, whom our wishes by no means hold under obligation. If we ... would have our prayers to be acceptable to God, we must pray that he may regulate them according to his will.*²²

Calvin was convinced God is accessible to believers, so they can always commune with him, and as they pray, he comes to meet them. True spirituality entails gratitude expressed in prayer, even while Christians await God's answers.²³ Prayer must be communal as well as private, for the spiritual health of believers requires their association with the body of Christ, and when they pray together, they promote unity and wholesome growth of the church while contributing to their individual spiritual growth.²⁴ In a statement summarizing the whole matter of prayer, Calvin asserted, "*If prayer is of no account to us, that is a sure sign that we are unbelievers, however much we claim to believe the gospel.*"²⁵

Another index of a professed believer's actual standing with God is his attitude toward the needs of others. Spirituality entails compassion for humans in need, and in such cases, Christians must demonstrate self-denial in order to assist others. Once believers renounce self-centeredness, they are able to love their neighbors as a consequence of their love for God. This extends to loving enemies and giving them all possible help.²⁶ In language almost identical with that of Martin Luther, John Calvin stated, "*Each of us ... was not born for his own sake, and ... is not to live ... for his own profit, but is to share with his neighbors and serve them.*"²⁷ Refusal to discharge this duty is to "*demonstrate that we are not God's children.*"²⁸

Concern for the wellbeing of their neighbors is a hallmark of all true Christians, and they direct their charity toward both the spiritual and material needs of others. With regard to lost souls, Calvin said, "*When we see poor unbelievers wander and go astray from the way of salvation, we must have pity on them and do all we can to reclaim them.*"²⁹ The Reformer knew concern for others is not man's ordinary priority, but Jesus commanded it, so Christians must suppress their natural selfishness to do so. In blunt terms, Calvin exclaimed, "*We shall never love our neighbors with sincerity, according to our Lord's intention, till we have corrected the love of ourselves. The two affections are opposite and contradictory.*"³⁰

As Calvin perceived this matter, love of self is a "*mortal plague*" that Christ's people must "*rip out*" of their lives, for "*all their goods God has given ... on the condition they be distributed to the benefit of others.*" Since believers cannot benefit God in any way, they must care for their neighbors, who bear God's image.³¹ God's people must not insist upon their rights, when exercising those rights conflicts with the needs of others. If the Christian freedom "*does not help our neighbors, then we should forego it.*"³²

Meeting the rigorous duties of the Christian life requires the saints to seek aid from one another through the church, their spiritual mother. Believers need instruction to encourage their spirituality, and the church is a school in which Christians study all their lives, and no one can attain to real spirituality apart from the church. "*God's fatherly favor and the special witness of spiritual life are limited to his flock, so it is always disastrous to leave the church.*"³³ Fond of identifying the church as the *communion of saints*, Calvin emphasized her importance for the spiritual development of her people, when he wrote:

In the very word "communion" there is a wealth of comfort because, while it is determined that whatever the Lord bestows upon his members ... belongs to us, our hope is strengthened by all the benefits they receive.³⁴

Spirituality and the future

John Calvin's objective as a scholar and a churchman was to assist fellow Christians to attain and maintain genuine piety throughout their lives. It would therefore be appropriate to regard him as the *people's theologian*, because, while he could discourse with other intellectuals in the rather esoteric language they employed, he was first and foremost a servant of God's common people. He lived with them and ministered to them every day, as he strove to assist them toward spiritual maturity. To keep them from discouragement, the Reformer urged members of his flock to realize that sanctification is a lifelong development. Although sin no longer holds dominion over them, the saints remain vulnerable to temptation, and at times they do lapse into sin. The Christian life is then a continuous struggle that will not end until death.³⁵ Perfect sanctification, however, awaits believers in eternity. Knowing his own frailty as well as that of his people, Calvin admonished them:

We are not our own; ... 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 ... Let his will rule our actions ... Let all parts of our (lives) accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal.³⁶

This resolution is essential for combat with Satan, so *"anyone who desires that God should approve of his service must prepare himself for battle, for we have an enemy who never gives up."*³⁷ Victory, nevertheless, belongs to the people of God, so let them realize the outcome of their warfare is not in doubt. As Calvin put it, *"We shall have a perfect victory over Satan; ... for God has given all power into the hands of Jesus Christ, who is our head and captain, so that we may be partakers of it."*³⁸

As beleaguered Christians move toward eternity, the Reformer directed them to pause often to meditate about the life to come, and he reminded them that their participation in the heavenly life had already begun.³⁹ While they serve God through caring for the needs of their neighbors, the disciples of Jesus must focus on heaven. In doing so, they will display their willingness to discard their interest in transitory things, as they anticipate eternal glory.

Christians must not fear death. In fact, it would be irrational for them to do so. To people faced with the prospect of martyrdom, Calvin declared with exhilaration:

We will die, but in death even be courageous, not only because through it we shall have a sure passage to a better life, but because we know that our blood will be a seed to propagate the divine truth which men now despise.⁴⁰

As believers persevere in denying themselves and bearing their crosses, while enjoying present union with Christ, and meditating upon heaven, they should maintain a fervent hope for the Savior's return. As Calvin declared, Christ *"will come to us as Redeemer, and rescuing us from this boundless abyss of all evils and miseries, he will lead us into that blessed inheritance of his life and glory."*⁴¹ There is therefore every reason to face death unafraid. Spirituality is a developing experience, and *"no one has progressed in Christ's school except the man who awaits in joy and gaiety the day of death and the final resurrection."*⁴²

Conclusion

John Calvin, a practical theologian, was God's instrument to lead his people in a time of crisis, that is, a period of great danger and wonderful opportunity. With full confidence in God's Word and reliance upon the Holy Spirit, he taught believers of the sixteenth century, and through his writings, he continues to teach the people of God. He understood that scholarship should lead to piety for the scholars themselves and for the people the Lord has called them to serve. The Reformer's prayer at the close of a lecture on Haggai 1:2 well summarizes his concern about spirituality, and is a fitting way to conclude this essay. Let us pray!

*Grant, almighty God that, as we must carry on a warfare in this world, and as it is your will to try us with many contests, Grant that we may never faint, however extreme may be the trials which we may have to endure; and as you have favored us with so great an honor as to make us the framers and builders of your spiritual temple, may everyone of us present and consecrate himself wholly to you; and inasmuch as each of us has received some peculiar gift, may we strive to employ it in building this temple, so that you may be worshiped among us perpetually; and especially may each of us offer himself wholly as a spiritual sacrifice to you, until we shall at length be renewed in your image and be received into a full participation of that glory which has been attained for us by the blood of your only begotten Son. Amen.*⁴³

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¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, III:8-11.

² Calvin, *Grace and Its Fruits*, III.

³ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, III:8, 4.

⁵ John Calvin, "Enduring Persecution for Christ," in *Great Sermons by Great Preachers*, ed. Jesse Lyman Hurlbut (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Company, 1927 rpt. of 1907 ed.), 80, 83.

⁶ Calvin, *Grace and Its Fruits*, 288.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁸ Martin Luther, "Ninety-Five Theses," in *Luther's Works* 31, tr. C.M. Jacobs, rev. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 25.

⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, III:3, 2. Cf. Ford Lewis Battles with John Walchenbach, *An Analysis of the Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 178-79.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, tr. T. A. Small, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 231.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV:1, 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, IV:1, 5; IV:3, 2-4; a substantial treatment of this subject may be found in Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of Christian Life*, 195-210.

¹³ John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, tr. Arthur Golding (Edinburgh; The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987 rpt. of 1583 ed.), 157.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV:14, 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, IV:17, 10.

¹⁶ Howard G. Hageman, "Reformed Spirituality," in *Protestant Spiritual Traditions*, ed. Frank Senn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 68.

¹⁷ Quoted by Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin: Geneva and the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 174.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, III:4, 3.

¹⁹ Wallace, *Calvin: Geneva and Reformation*, 183.

²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, III:20, 9-17; III:20, 28-34.

²¹ *Ibid.*, III:20, 19.

²² Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 314 (on Romans 8:27).

²³ Calvin, *Grace and Its Fruits*, 261-67.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 267-69.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 261.

²⁶ In the *Institutes*, III:20, 3-7 Calvin explained this in some detail.

²⁷ Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Luther's Works*, 31, 333-77. Cf. Paul Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, tr. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 307-09.

²⁸ Calvin, *Grace and Its Fruits*, 207.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁰ Calvin, *Commentaries on Galatians and Ephesians*, 161 (on Galatians 5:14).

³¹ Calvin, *Piety of Calvin*, 59-60.

³² Calvin, *Christian Life*, 45.

³³ *ibid.*, 105.

³⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV:1, 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, III:3, 10.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, III:7, 1.

³⁷ Calvin, *Grace and Its Fruits*, 216.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, III:3, 9.

⁴⁰ John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, tr. Henry Beveridge (Dallas, TX: Protestant Heritage Press, 1995 rpt. of 1844 ed.), 153.

⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, III:9, 5.

⁴² Calvin, *Piety of Calvin*, 77.

⁴³ John Calvin, *Devotions and Prayers of John Calvin*, ed. Charles E. Edwards. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 85.