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Building a Reformed Life: Recovering John Calvin's Theology of the Christian Life for the Church Today

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

BUILDING A REFORMED LIFE:
RECOVERING JOHN CALVIN'S THEOLOGY OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE
FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
NEIL E. TRAINER

NEWBERG, OREGON

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THE REFORMED LIFE

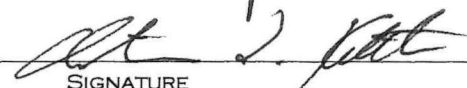
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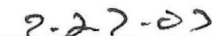
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ABSTRACT

The problem addressed by this dissertation may be stated as follows: *How can members of First Presbyterian Church, and others like it, be assisted in both their understanding of God's plan and their appropriation of God's power for their growth toward maturity in Christ's likeness?* To address the stated problem, *we propose to recover John Calvin's theology of the Christian life, which understands spiritual formation as the necessary and progressive reformation of the deformed image of God after the pattern of Christ through spiritual union with Christ by the process of repentance.* In this light, spiritual formation is viewed as a “(re)formation,” as what was formed holy and whole, but is now deformed by sin, is formed again in Christ.

In chapter one, the ministry problem is described through narrative accounts of church members, and the problem is substantiated by citing the national polling data of recognized research firms. With such, it is demonstrated that many American Christians have adopted a soteriology that fails to capture the essential and unavoidable nature of spiritual formation.

The second chapter will first show that the soteriology of John Calvin was threefold in its emphases. Specifically, salvation was held to include the interrelated (re)formations of our communion with God, our community with others, and our character within us, each of which has been deformed by sin. Chapter 2 will then show that, as an essential part of soteriology, spiritual formation as the (re)formation of character is necessary and includes (1) the restoration of the divine image, (2) through spiritual union with Christ, (3) worked out through repentance. The subsequent chapters

will explore separately each of these three elements of spiritual (re)formation, particularly from the perspective of Calvin. Further, because the problem being addressed inherently includes not only the need for a practical theology but also its effective communication, the metaphor of construction or building a (re)formed life will be used to facilitate understanding.

Chapter 3 establishes the image of God or *imago Dei* as providing both the materials and the blueprint for spiritual formation. It looks first at the *imago Dei* in humanity's Creation and Fall, and then at Christ Jesus as the true *imago Dei* and our model for spiritual (re)formation. In chapter 4, it is shown that, to have the deformed *imago Dei* within us (re)formed, we must be united to the one who is the perfect image of God, Christ. Thus, we see that the foundation upon which one builds a (re)formed life is the spiritual union with Christ or the *unio mystica*. Chapter 5 explores the building process and plans for spiritual (re)formation, namely, repentance and regeneration. Specifically, these include the practices of mortification and vivification, or the dying of the old self and the birth of the new self. The concluding chapter explores the implications of this study for discipleship and evangelism in the local church, and suggests further areas of study.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

Philippians 2:12-13

You have stripped off your old evil nature and all its wicked deeds. In its place you have clothed yourselves with a brand-new nature that is continually being renewed as you learn more and more about Christ, who created this new nature within you.

Colossians 3:9-10 (NLT)

This renewal, indeed, is not accomplished in a moment, a day, or a year, but by uninterrupted, sometimes even by slow progress God abolishes the remains of carnal corruption in his elect, cleanses them from pollution, and consecrates them as his temples, restoring all their inclinations to real purity, so that during their whole lives they may practice repentance, and know that death is the only termination to this warfare.

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*¹

Identifying the Problem

“You aren’t saved yet,” I said.

“What!” came the startled reply as David² stopped dead in his tracks. Other members of the church’s worship team went silent as they listened for what might happen next. David’s startled reaction was understandable. In many ways, he is typical of a large segment of First Presbyterian Church’s membership: married with children and

¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Electronic ed. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1996), 3.3.9.

²Although the events and conversations of this and following narratives are drawn from actual occurrences, the names of individuals and institutions involved have been changed.

grandchildren; retired after a successful professional life; a longtime member of the church and the community; and quite comfortable and content in his Christian faith.

“You aren’t saved yet,” I repeated with a smile, feeling a little guilty for baiting David this way. Still, I trusted our relationship to bear the weight of this contrived confrontation, and I had a point I wanted to make. “Tell me why you think you’re saved,” I continued.

Predictably, with a defensive tone, David spoke quickly of his faith commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, of how he had “asked Jesus into my heart” and received God’s mercy and forgiveness. Like many in the church, David’s theology reflects the mainstream of American evangelicalism. He not only affirms the central tenets of the orthodox Christian faith, but he also firmly believes in the need for Christians to actively proclaim the gospel and call for people to respond in faith. In his roles both as an elder and a worship leader, he had spoken frequently of the pastors’ need to challenge people more boldly with the gospel so that we might see more converts. Recalling our good-natured debates of the past about the need to make disciples and not just converts, I pressed him some more.

“So, God is finished with you?” I said. “You’ve hit perfection, and there isn’t anything more God needs to do with you between now and glory?”

“Of course not!” David answered with nervous laughter. As he looked around at the other worship team members who were now smiling at him, he replied, “I’m still a sinner.”

Needing to end things so we could begin the next worship service, I concluded, “Then you’re not *fully* saved . . . at least not yet.”

Is God finished with any of us? Few, if any, would claim so. Yet among the members of First Presbyterian Church, and likely many other congregations as well, the working out of one's salvation (Phil. 2:12) and the renewal of one's nature (Col. 3:10) described by the Apostle Paul are not widely valued or passionately pursued. For many, they are implicitly viewed as optional. For others, it is the pursuit of only the truly saintly or at least those with more time and inclination than the average white, upper-middle-class, suburban church member.

Our problem, then, may be stated as follows: *How can members of First Presbyterian Church, and others like it, be assisted in both their understanding of God's plan and their appropriation of God's power for their growth toward maturity in Christ's likeness?* How can spiritual formation in Christ be taught or promoted as a priority with a definite pathway to follow? Does the theological home of the church—the historic Reformed tradition, in general, and the vast and influential work of John Calvin (1509-1564), in particular—have a practical theology of the Christian life that is still applicable today?

David's attitude typifies the view of the Christian life ingrained in the congregation. Ask what it means to be a Christian and you will likely hear an underlying soteriology that emphasizes the restoring of broken relationships with God through Christ, the receiving of personal forgiveness, and the removal of guilt—it is about *knowing* Christ because of what the Lord has done *for* us. Further, the focus is individualistic. Neglected in the answer is the restoring of broken people into the image of God in Christ, the receiving of personal wholeness, and the removal of shame—omitted is *being* like Christ because of what the Lord is doing *in* us. The role of the faith

community is minimized. This one-dimensional soteriology effectively reduces expressions of the Christian faith to managing to say “the sinner’s prayer” and then praying to manage sin. In sum, the church holds to and communicates a truncated soteriology that discounts the centrality and essentiality of an individual’s formation in Christ’s likeness within a community of faith.

Matt and Amy, a couple in their late twenties, are typical of others in the upper-middle-class community and church: they are married; they are college educated; and they earn much and spend much. Spiritually speaking, having grown up attending First Presbyterian Church with their families, Matt and Amy have been shaped by another soteriological emphasis in the church, namely, a gospel dominated by a message of God’s love and acceptance almost to the exclusion of all else. Unlike many of their peers who are starting to raise families, however, Amy and Matt have faced a crisis of faith as they have struggled with infertility and repeated miscarriages. As they attended worship services each Sunday, the pastor of the church continually preached that God loves them and has a wonderful plan for their lives. Subjects such as bearing the cross, self-denial, or meditating upon the future life were rarely if ever mentioned from the pulpit. “Why?” ask Matt and Amy with anguish and confusion. “Why then doesn’t God answer our prayers for a baby?”

Karrin, a college student home for her winter break, asked me to meet her for coffee. Like Amy and Matt, she too had grown up attending First Presbyterian Church. As we sat together, our conversation slowly progressed and deepened as we moved from talk about her classes, to her ambivalence over dating a non-Christian man, to her feeling spiritually stagnant and distant from God. She shared about her perceived estrangement

from her Lord and the lack of support from other followers of Christ at her university. As she spoke, the tears forming in the eyes of this often-guarded young woman revealed the intense emotions under the surface. She questioned the reality of God's presence in her life. She questioned the veracity of her knowledge and faith. Albeit indirectly, she also questioned her own salvation. After we talked about the necessary role of spiritual formation within a faith community, and I struggled to assure her that her salvation was not in doubt but only in process, Karrin nearly shouted, "Why don't you preach this?" The intense look in her eyes said she felt shortchanged and even betrayed by her church.

Unfortunately, the educational structures in the church have failed them all. Youth programs have emphasized accepting kids where they are, to the neglect of formation and discipleship. A smorgasbord of adult classes has been offered, but they have focused on gaining knowledge, not on life transformation. The end result for Amy, Matt, and Karrin, these products of the church, is a self-centered rather than God-centered faith, a faith which appeals to God mostly to meet their needs, and which compartmentalizes spirituality into just one more component of their busy lives.

When Kathryn came to visit me, she pinpointed one impact these soteriological emphases are having upon the church. Talking about her frustration that others in the church "don't get it," Kathryn said, "First Pres. is great for new people who are young in the Christian faith or just coming back to church. But mature Christians move on because they are not getting fed." With a reference to another local congregation, Kathryn adds, "First Pres. is a stopover for people moving to Faith Community Church." Indeed, several families had begun attending other congregations in recent years, and the feedback was generally that they were "looking for something more." Unfortunately, some, like Matt

and Amy not only leave the congregation but are also at risk of becoming disenfranchised from the Christian church entirely. Others may believe they have experienced what the Christian faith has to offer, and they have found it wanting; they have “been there and done that.”

On another visit to the local coffee shop, I was invited to join three church members at their table. “Come and join us,” Hannah said with a smile. “We’re solving all the church’s problems!” As I sat down, unable to refuse an offer like that, Stacy explained that they were trying to figure out why our children’s midweek program was at risk of being canceled for the lack of adult leaders. As longtime members, Hannah, Stacy, and Joy have all had children in First Presbyterian Church’s children’s and youth ministries, and all three have demonstrated a personal commitment to their own growth in Christ as well as to serving in the ministries of the church. Consequently, I was eager to hear their thoughts and ideas. As I sought to understand their perspective on the church and some of the challenges before us, I asked the three of them if, in general, they believed spiritual growth was happening at First Presbyterian Church.

After a pause, Hannah replied, “Yes. I see people who are growing.” After another pause, she added with a smirk, “Some more than others, of course! But I think more and more people are starting to come around and get involved. I think people are trying to take their faith seriously.”

Looking at Stacy, I asked the question again. “No,” was her curt reply. “I don’t see it. But for years, I didn’t get it either. It wasn’t until I went to Bible Study Fellowship that I began to see the Bible as something other than an old book. That’s when I started to grow.”

“Joy,” I asked. “What about you? Do you think people are growing?”

With a shrug and a look in her eyes that betrayed how fast her mind was working, Joy sighed, “I don’t know.” Thinking for a moment more, she added, “People need to have an encounter with God. Until they have a personal encounter with God, they’re just going through the motions.”

We continued talking and eventually these three women came to agreement that spiritual growth and maturity in Christ are not prioritized by the majority of people who attend First Presbyterian Church. It is simply not seen as something essential to being a church member or a Christian. Many have equated being a mature or “successful” Christian with being happy, feeling at peace, and having their material needs well met. Not only does the necessity of spiritual formation in the likeness of Christ have to be repeatedly emphasized, they intimated, but our church’s leadership also needs to do a better job of creating realistic expectations of what the process will involve.

It would be naïve, however, to assume that this struggle to help people mature in their spiritual life is unique to First Presbyterian Church. In the congregation’s denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), research indicates that only one-third of members claim to have experienced “much growth” in their faith over the last year. Moreover, of those who claimed to have experienced “much growth,” nearly half indicated that they found it outside their congregation.³

A settling for mediocrity and ambivalence toward spiritual growth are not limited to Presbyterian congregations, but appear to be pervasive among American churches. According to nationwide research conducted by The Barna Group in May 2005, three out

³Research Services, *The U.S. Congregational Life Survey* (Louisville: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2001), A-2.

of four adults who describe themselves as Christian are able to identify an aspect of their spiritual life that they would like to see improve. Unfortunately, the connection between the areas in which people admitted to being “below average” and the likelihood of specifying one of those dimensions as a priority for improvement was statistically weak. The survey showed that people are more likely to ignore their areas of spiritual underdevelopment in favor of continuing to focus on the areas in which they are most comfortable or feel most self-confident.

According to George Barna, who directed the research, “The fact that so few people have thought about how they could intentionally and strategically enhance their spiritual life reminds us that spiritual growth is not a priority to most people. Americans,” Barna explained, “are generally satisfied with being ‘average’ in their spiritual maturity.” Barna went on to conclude, “The research suggests that most people do not feel as if they are learning enough about God, the Christian faith, or their role in the world—and most of them don't seem to care.”⁴

Similar surveys have yielded similar results, prompting Barna to conclude:

The data show that millions of people who are aligned with the Christian faith have not thought very much or very clearly about what spiritual maturity means. Perhaps the outcomes of the survey will encourage church leaders to help people not only prioritize their spiritual development, but also to consider what spiritual transformation looks like in practical terms. The old adage tells us that ‘you get what you measure’ and the survey revealed that most Christians don’t measure much of anything beyond church attendance when it comes to their spiritual maturity.⁵

⁴The Barna Group, “New Survey Shows Areas of Spiritual Life People Feel Most Confident About--and Those They Want Help with the Most,” *The Barna Update*, September 27, 2005, <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=200> (accessed December 11, 2006).

⁵The Barna Group, “Christians Say They Do Best at Relationships, Worst in Bible Knowledge,” *The Barna Update*, June 14 2005, <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=190> (accessed October 2, 2006).

Numerous Christian teachers, scholars, and writers are coming to the same conclusions.⁶ The cause of our present state of spiritual lethargy is sometimes ascribed to various personal and cultural factors (e.g., the glorification of superficial values or post-Enlightenment rationalism). Yet, many are taking aim at the theology that lies behind the decline of the spiritual life to the point where the faith professed by the average church member has little bearing or impact on the whole of life. While this situation is not unique to our time, we have reached a point where the common Christian message has, in many places, become so narrow that our ordinary life and day-to-day existence are included only marginally, if at all. According Dallas Willard:

When we examine the broad spectrum of Christian proclamation and practice, we see that the only thing made essential on the right wing of theology is forgiveness of the individual's sins. On the left it is removal of social or structural evils. The current gospel then becomes a 'gospel of sin management.' Transformation of life and character is *no* part of the redemptive message. Moment-to-moment human reality in its depths is not the arena of faith and eternal living.⁷

With Willard and others, we agree that the apathy toward spiritual formation and the acceptance of mediocrity in spiritual maturity, what has been measured by Barna and observed in numerous congregations like First Presbyterian Church, are the result of holding to a poor and incomplete doctrine of salvation and its bearing on the Christian life. This is a painful reality that must be confronted directly. Christian pastors, teachers, and other leaders must recognize that the results that they see are largely the natural

⁶For examples from the Reformed tradition, see Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 11-14; Robert H. Ramey, Jr. and Ben Campbell Johnson, *Living the Christian Life: A Guide to Reformed Spirituality* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 9, 15-16; Howard L. Rice, *Reformed Spirituality: An Introduction for Believers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 7-11; Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 1-5.

⁷Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 41.

outcome of how their message is received. In order to address the problem of assisting Christians in their understanding of God's plan and their appropriation of God's power for their growth toward spiritual maturity, the underlying theology of the current message of the church must be evaluated and adjusted as needed.

Too many people in the Protestant church today have only a speculative rather than an experiential knowledge of the truth of faith. The cause, according to Donald Bloesch, is a failure in our theology to perceive and proclaim the integral relationship between the life of devotion and salvation in Christ. Bloesch contends, "Doctrinal theology (*theologia dogmatica*) should be held in balance with a theology of spiritual life or devotion (*theologia vitae spiritualis*)."⁸ This balance will require walking a narrow path between two pitfalls. On the one side, we must move from current soteriological leanings that completely separate the Christian life from salvation altogether, viewing it almost exclusively as a *transaction* by Christ with no *transformation in* Christ. Such an approach, often criticized by Catholicism, fails to do justice to the biblical witness to the changed humanity of those in Christ. At that same time, we must not fall off the other side by making the Christian life the foundation or cornerstone of our salvation. Such an approach, soundly rejected by the Reformers, leads to a place where salvation in Christ is no longer *sola gratia*, but is now a kind of synergism in which God's grace is coupled with and even increased by human works.⁹

⁸Donald G. Bloesch, *The Crisis of Piety: Essays Towards a Theology of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1968), 16.

⁹Donald G. Bloesch, *The Christian Life and Salvation* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1967), 13-15; Trevor A. Hart, "Humankind in Christ and Christ in Humankind: Salvation as Participation in Our Substitute in the Theology of John Calvin," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 42, no. 1 (1989): 67-69.

Unfortunately, those churches that trace their theological roots to the Reformation have slowly lost the interconnectedness of conversion with spirituality that was taught by the likes of John Calvin. Howard Hageman observes:

American Reformed Christianity has shifted the basis of spirituality from that held by Calvin. For him it was the saving act of God in Christ, signed and sealed by the sacrament of baptism. For a large number in the Reformed Churches today, it is the sign of the decision of the converted person. That shift has had all kinds of consequences for understanding church and sacraments and is fundamental for the concept of the Christian life.¹⁰

It is indicative of its current theological underpinnings that so much of evangelical Christianity today emphasizes “the decision of faith,” in some cases to the apparent neglect of all else. For many, to be a Christian means to have prayed “to receive Christ,” and modern evangelistic efforts concentrate on challenging individuals to make a decision for Christ.¹¹ In contrast, Bloesch argues:

The moment of decision or the decision of faith must be understood not simply as one decision but as a life decision. The experience of salvation is not merely one specific experience in the life of the Christian; rather, it consists in an abiding with Christ that is strengthened and deepened through life. Faith entails not simply the acceptance of Christ but daily repentance and obedience. . . . It is not a single experience of conversion but a life of conversion that is decisive for our salvation.¹²

Intentionally communicated or not, the message heard by many churchgoers today is one of “instant salvation” or “instant Christianity,” a message that is quite attractive to Americans who are preconditioned to instant gratification by our rapid cultural changes, our ever-increasing technological innovations, and our furious pace of

¹⁰Howard G. Hageman, “Reformed Spirituality,” in *Protestant Spiritual Traditions*, ed. Frank C. Senn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 62.

¹¹It is perhaps emblematic that the flagship magazine of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association is entitled *Decision*.

¹²Bloesch, *The Christian Life and Salvation*, 66.

life. We have become accustomed to timesaving techniques, shortcuts, and quick fixes, and the church's message has accommodated our short attention spans.

It is not difficult in such a world to get a person interested in the message of the gospel; it is terrifically difficult to sustain the interest. Millions of people in our culture make decisions for Christ, but there is a dreadful attrition rate. Many claim to have been born again, but the evidence for mature Christian discipleship is slim. In our kind of culture anything, even news about God, can be sold if it is packaged freshly; but when it loses its novelty, it goes on the garbage heap. There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness.¹³

The hunger for genuine religious experience is not to be dismissed out of hand, however.

Joy's observation in the coffee shop, that until they have a personal encounter with God people are just going through the motions, is accurate. What must be avoided are the pursuit of experience for its own sake, and the exploration of spiritual experiences that are devoid of any foundation in biblical truth. Such a gap between the content and the emotions of faith is a vacuum that "tends to produce shallow and rootless followers of Jesus Christ whose only guide is their own feelings."¹⁴

What is needed, then, is a theology of salvation that effectively and accurately demonstrates the ways in which this life matters. Bloesch vividly argues:

The Christian life is the arena or theater of our redemption and not simply an effect or sign of this redemption. It is the battleground on which our salvation is continually fought for and recovered. The Christian cannot earn his salvation, but he is called to retain and defend it. The Christian life is not the basis or source of our salvation, but it is an integral element in our salvation.¹⁵

¹³Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 12.

¹⁴Tom Schwanda, "Closing the Gap: Recovering the Experiential Nature of Reformed Spirituality," *Reformed Review* 49 (1995): 109.

¹⁵Bloesch, *The Christian Life and Salvation*, 16-17.

Moreover, salvation must be understood as both relational and ontological. Salvation in the deepest and most complete sense refers to both a) the restoring of broken relationships with God through Christ, the receiving of personal forgiveness, and the removal of guilt; and b) the restoring of broken people into the image of God in Christ, the receiving of personal wholeness, and the removal of shame. Despite the high levels of ignorance and apathy that surround it in American churches, our transformation or our spiritual formation in Christ's likeness is not optional but essential.

Proposing a Solution: A Practical Theology of Spiritual (Re)Formation

What are we to make of these assessments of our current situation, not only in the congregation of First Presbyterian Church, but also in the church's denominational home of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its theological home in American evangelical Christianity? How do we respond to Barna's conclusion that most people do not feel as if they are learning enough about God, the Christian faith, or their role in the world? In a way faithful to First Presbyterian Church's Reformed heritage in the theology of John Calvin, can we lay down a coherent framework of knowledge and practical direction adequate to personal transformation? As Tom Schwanda has declared, "The recovering of a healthy, balanced experience of Reformed spirituality could breathe new life into our churches and souls."¹⁶

This must be done, however, without falling into the trap, as some Reformed commentators have done, of allowing a focus on the outward and corporate actions of the Christian faith to lead to an implicit demeaning of the inward and personal works of discipleship. With their behavioral focus, they ignore the historical Reformed teaching

¹⁶Schwanda, "Closing the Gap," 115.

that does emphasize the individual and interior dimension of spirituality. For example, T. Hartley Hall articulates a Reformed understanding of “piety” in terms of “duties and obligations inherent to religion.” He adds, “While piety or spirituality must surely include becoming a certain sort of person, for Presbyterians its primary focus is always upon a manner of living that is consonant with and responsible in relation to one’s religious commitments.”¹⁷ By contrast, John Calvin defines piety as “that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces.”¹⁸ Piety or spirituality for Calvin was not just “a manner of living”; it was an experiential relationship with God that combined the understanding of the mind with the devotional intimacy of the heart. “The truth is that from its beginning the Reformed heritage has sought to be intentional about integrating the head and heart.”¹⁹ According to Calvin, “A true knowledge of God is not, as they say, imaginary, but is ever connected with a right feeling.”²⁰ Furthermore, as we will see, the “becoming a certain sort of person,” which Hall downplays, is in fact taught clearly by Calvin to be an essential element of our salvation.

To address the stated problem, *I propose recovering John Calvin’s theology of the Christian life that understands spiritual formation as the necessary and progressive reformation of the deformed image of God after the pattern of Christ through spiritual union with Christ by the process of repentance.* In this light, spiritual formation is viewed

¹⁷T. Hartley Hall, “The Shape of Reformed Piety,” in *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 202.

¹⁸John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1.2.1. All subsequent references to Calvin’s *Institutes* are from Battles’ translation unless otherwise noted.

¹⁹Schwanda, “Closing the Gap,” 110.

²⁰John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah*, trans. John Owen, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 24:7.

as a “(re)formation” in that what was formed holy and whole, but is now deformed by sin, is formed again in Christ.

To elaborate on what follows, chapter 2 will first show that the soteriology of John Calvin was threefold in its emphases. Specifically, salvation was held to include the interrelated (re)formations of our communion with God, our community with others, and our character within us, each of which has been deformed by sin. This chapter is not a critique or modification of historic Reformed soteriology so much as it is a fresh expression of its doctrines and a reformulation of its presentation. Chapter 2 will then show that, as an essential part of soteriology, spiritual formation as the (re)formation of our character is necessary and includes (1) the restoration of the divine image, (2) through our union with Christ, (3) worked out by our regeneration.

The subsequent chapters will explore separately each of these three elements of spiritual (re)formation, particularly from the perspective of Calvin. Further, since the problem we are addressing inherently includes not only the need for a practical theology but also its effective communication, we will use the metaphor of construction or building a (re)formed life to facilitate understanding. It must be readily acknowledged, however, that the building metaphor is not Calvin’s but mine. Hence, chapter 3 establishes the image of God or *imago Dei* as providing both the materials and the blueprint for spiritual formation. It looks first at the *imago Dei* in humanity’s Creation and Fall, and then at Christ Jesus as the true *imago Dei* and our model for spiritual (re)formation. In chapter 4 we show that to have the deformed *imago Dei* within us (re)formed, we must be united to the one who is the perfect image of God, Christ. Thus, we see that the foundation upon which one builds a (re)formed life is the spiritual union

with Christ or the *unio mystica*. Chapter 5 explores the building process and plans for spiritual (re)formation, namely, repentance and regeneration. Specifically, this includes the practices of mortification and vivification, or the dying of the old self and the birth of the new self. The concluding chapter explores the implications of this study for evangelism and discipleship in the local church, and suggests ways to communicate this practical theology of spiritual formation so that people may be assisted in both their understanding of God's plan and their appropriation of God's power for their growth toward maturity in Christ's likeness.

Underlying this proposed solution is the premise that the church needs to change its message. The dearth of progress we experience in spiritual renewal is due, at least in part, to our failure to communicate a more complete and convincing theology of the Christian life. As Willard argues, "To counteract this we must develop a straightforward presentation, in word and life, of the reality of life now under God's rule, through reliance upon the word and person of Jesus."²¹ It should be acknowledged, however, that the problem, as documented by Barna, also has roots in blatant apathy toward growth in Christ's likeness. Possibly the biggest hurdle in promoting spiritual formation among American Christians today is, to use Barna's phrase, "most of them don't seem to care." People may be ignorant, but we can educate them. People may be isolated, but we can provide opportunities for community and connections. People may be inundated, but we can help them slow down and simplify. People may feel life is incoherent, but we can help them make some sense of life in light of God's eternal and ongoing work in the world. But when people are indifferent, how do we help them become passionate about

²¹Willard, 58.

spiritual formation? Ultimately, this is work that only the Holy Spirit can do. One cannot manufacture feelings in others without being manipulative or even abusive in the process. The complacency observed in our churches is probably the most frustrating part of trying to develop an adequate strategy for discipleship. Admittedly, this is because it is the part of the process over which we have the least control. Yet it calls attention to a much needed but often overlooked piece of the church's discipleship ministries: prayer. Particularly among the church's leaders, we need to pray regularly for the Spirit to be working in the lives of our people. We also must not assume to know best how the Spirit should work, but we must instead trust that he is at work even in ways we cannot see.

Other factors may also be at work inhibiting progress in spiritual formation. For many, it may also be a hamartiological problem, as besetting sins prohibit people from growing in Christ's likeness. For others, it may be an affective problem as intense feelings of fear or guilt stunt their growth. In addition, the attempt to isolate a specific weakness in the presentation of a Reformed theology of spiritual formation may bring to the surface related questions. For instance, has Reformed theology's emphasis on God's sovereignty in every area of life mitigated against the Reformed Christian's working out of salvation? Similarly, how has the Reformation's emphasis on justification by grace alone apart from works impacted the Reformed understanding of sanctification and works of faith? However, such questions are beyond the scope of this project.

CHAPTER 2

THE NEED FOR A (RE)FORMED LIFE:

THE NECESSITY AND PROGRESSIVE NATURE

OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN JOHN CALVIN’S SOTERIOLOGY

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

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*¹

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From Thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Save from wrath and make me pure.

Augustus M. Toplady²

Mention the Reformed tradition within many Christian circles and most people think in terms of a theology rather than a spirituality. The Reformed tradition, in general, and John Calvin, in particular, are often associated with the high doctrines of the sovereignty of God and predestination and perhaps with worship that is done “decently and in order.” Few today, however, would conjure up the intimate language of “mystical union with Christ” or a passionate commitment to a rich devotional life.³ Yet, Calvin, as

¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1.

²Quoted in Robert J. Morgan, *Then Sings My Soul* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 74-75. Morgan adds that Augustus Toplady (1740-1779) was a staunch Calvinist and originally penned this poem that became the hymn, “Rock of Ages,” as a response to Wesley’s Arminian theology.

³“The spirituality of Calvin was by no means accepted in the entire Reformed tradition. Coming, as it did, into a situation already dominated by Zwinglian piety, Calvinist spirituality was never as widely accepted as Calvinist theology or church order.” Hageman, “Reformed Spirituality,” 72.

well as his sixteenth century contemporaries in the Reformed tradition, had much to contribute to the pursuit of Christian spirituality that, over recent centuries, has unfortunately been neglected at least in praxis if not in profession.

In this chapter we begin to address the first part of our problem—the need for church members to understand better God’s plan for growth toward maturity in Christ’s likeness—by presenting historic Reformed soteriology in a manner more accessible to American church members. What follows is not a critique or modification of the soteriological teaching of Calvin; rather, it is an attempt to give a summation and fresh expression to his insights and emphases. It will not be a modification of essential doctrinal content so much as a modification of its organization and presentation. In section one, then, we will present an understanding of human salvation as “(re)formation”; we will see how three essential dimensions of our humanity, which were formed by God at Creation and deformed by sin at the Fall, are (re)formed by God in Christ. This will naturally lead us to section two where we will see that spiritual formation is the necessary and progressive (re)formation of our character in Christ’s likeness.

Salvation as Relational and Ontological

The foundation for both sections is an understanding that the saving work of God in Christ is both relational and ontological. The fullness of God’s gracious gift of salvation encompasses both knowing and being. With regard to the former, God is *love* (1 John 4:8)—the triune God is inherently relational as Father, Son, and Spirit commune

together in perfect love through all eternity.⁴ Consequently, human beings are inherently relational as well. We were created to know and be known by God and others in righteousness. We are designed to love the Lord our God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love others as ourselves (Mark 12:30-31). With regard to the latter, God is *holy*⁵ (Lev. 19:2)—the eternal God is wholly other, perfect in every attribute, true and just in every action. Accordingly, human beings are meant for holiness as well. We were created pure and whole, conformed to the image of God. We were designed so that in the whole nature of humankind no imperfection could be found.

The problem of sin is both relational and ontological. Sin radically affects our knowing and infects our being. Calling it humanity's double plight, Jonathan Rainbow believes that Calvin traces the human disaster back to Adam and finds that it has two aspects: guilt and corruption.⁶ In this same vein, Cornelius Plantinga offers the following definition of sin: "Let us say that *a* sin is any act—any thought, desire, emotion, word, or deed—or its particular absence, that displeases God and deserves blame. Let us add that the disposition to commit sins also displeases God and deserves blame, and let us

⁴For more on the historic Reformed understanding of the doctrine of the trinity, see Calvin's *Institutes*, 1.13, and *The Second Helvetic Confession*, Chap. III. For a helpful summary of Calvin's thought, see Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (London: Lutterworth Press, 1956), 54-60.

⁵According to Thomas Oden, "The great variety of moral qualities attributed to God by Scripture hinges particularly upon two—*holiness* and *love*." However, Oden acknowledges their close relationship, adding, "God's holiness is not an unloving holiness, and God's love is not an unholy love (Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8-16)." Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God*, Systematic Theology, vol. 1 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987), 98.

⁶Jonathan H. Rainbow, "Double Grace: John Calvin's View of the Relationship of Justification and Sanctification," *Ex auditu* 5 (1989): 100. Rainbow adds, "Fallen humanity then stands before God with two distinct but connected problems, legal liability and the moral corruption of human nature. Humanity has a legal problem and a personal problem, which together constitute the sin problem."

therefore use the word *sin* to refer to such instances of both act and disposition.”⁷ On the relational side, then, we are sinful in our actions as we rebel against God (1 John 3:4). As a result, we experience guilt, and we are enslaved to sin (John 8:34-35). On the ontological side, we are sinful in our disposition or nature as we are polluted and corrupted so that we cannot please God (Rom. 8:8; Gal. 5:17). As a result, we experience shame,⁸ and we are dead in sin (Eph. 2:1).

Consequently, the saving work of God in Christ must be both relational and ontological, dealing with both the acts and disposition of sin. In Christ, God shows what Calvin termed “a double grace” (*duplex gratia*).⁹ Relationally we are, in Calvin’s words, “reconciled to God through Christ’s blamelessness.” Under this heading we may group the New Testament’s relational language that in Christ we are “reconciled” (καταλλάσσω - Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:18-19), “forgiven” (ἀφίημι - Matt. 26:28; 1 John 1:9), “redeemed” (ἐξαγοράζω - Gal. 3:13), “ransomed” (ἀπολύτρωσις - Eph. 1:7, 14), and “freed” (ἐλευθερώω - Rom. 6:18). Ontologically we are “sanctified by Christ’s spirit [that] we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.” Here we locate the biblical language of being “born again” (ἀναγεννάω - 1 Pet. 1:3), “purified” (ἀγιάζω - John 17:19; Eph. 5:26), “made alive” (συνζωοποιέω - Eph. 2:5; Col. 2:13), and made “new creations” (καινὴ κτίσις - Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17). In sum, we receive for our sin what Augustus

⁷Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 13.

⁸According to Lewis Smedes, “Shame is a very heavy feeling. It is a feeling that we do not measure up and maybe never will measure up to the sorts of persons we are meant to be.” He also adds this helpful distinction between guilt and shame: “We feel guilty for what we *do*. We feel shame for what we *are*. A person feels guilty because he *did* something wrong. A person feels shame because he *is* something wrong.” Lewis B. Smedes, *Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don't Deserve* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 5, 9.

⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1.

Toplady termed “the double cure” in that we are saved from the wrath of God that characterizes our relationship with God apart from Christ, and we are made pure from the stain of sin that covers all our being.

This twofold or double grace is a consistent feature of Calvin’s soteriology.

Unlike those today who emphasize the relational work of Christ to the point of preaching what Willard called “the gospel of sin management,” Calvin grasped that atonement deals not only in the payment of a debt and the removal of guilt but also in the reformation of humanity. “Sanctification is not for Calvin an afterthought, or a problem, or an implication, or a psychological human response to justification. Sanctification is *salvation*, just as much as justification is *salvation*. It is grace. It is not optional, or dispensable [*sic*], but necessary and inevitable.”¹⁰ Calvin contends, “Let therefore the man who seeks to be justified through Christ, by God’s unmerited goodness, consider that this cannot be attained without his taking him at the same time for sanctification, or, in other words, being renewed to innocence and purity of life.”¹¹ Salvation, the blessing of redemption, consists of two things: remission of sins and spiritual regeneration.¹²

In affirming this double grace, Calvin uses various terms interchangeably to expound upon these doctrines. There are, according to Pete Wilcox, “several pairs of words which Calvin uses to refer to this two-fold grace. ‘Justification and sanctification’, ‘reconciliation and regeneration’, and ‘forgiveness of sins and repentance’ are

¹⁰Rainbow, “Double Grace,” 104.

¹¹John Calvin, *The Commentaries of John Calvin on the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 20 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 1:30.

¹²John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians*, trans. John Pringle, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 21 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 1:22.

synonymous pairs for him; each serves to comprehend the grace of Christ and to summarise [*sic*] the message of the gospel.”¹³ This double salvific emphasis in Calvin’s work is captured well by Pierre Marcel:

[God] is at once both righteous and holy. Because He is righteous, God desires that all His creatures should be found in a relation of righteousness with Him—that relation in which He originally placed them, without any question of guilt or penalty. Because He is holy, God demands that they should appear before His face pure and free from all sin.

For this reason the first man, created in God’s image, in righteousness and holiness, had no need either of justification or of sanctification in the sense which we are concerned with. But sin has made man guilty and unclean in God’s sight. In order to be completely delivered from sin, he must therefore be freed from all guilt and cleansed from its defilement. This takes place in justification and sanctification. Both are equally necessary, and are proclaimed in the Scripture with equal emphasis.¹⁴

Although a full exposition of Calvin’s understanding of the relationship between justification and sanctification is well beyond the scope of this work, two points must be briefly added here.¹⁵ First, these two aspects of God’s grace in Christ, what we have termed relational and ontological, are never to be separated from each other. “As Christ cannot be torn into parts,” writes Calvin, “so these two which we perceive in him together and conjointly are inseparable—namely, righteousness and sanctification.”¹⁶ Second, while they are not to be separated, neither should the qualities of each aspect of

¹³Pete Wilcox, “Conversion in the Thought and Experience of John Calvin,” *Anvil* 14, no. 2 (1997): 116. See also Niesel, 126-139.

¹⁴Pierre C. Marcel, “Relation between Justification and Sanctification in Calvin’s Thought,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 27 II-S (1955): 133.

¹⁵In addition to Marcel, for more on Calvin’s understanding of the relationship between justification and sanctification see the following: Hageman, “Reformed Spirituality,” 63; Rainbow, “Double Grace,” 99-105; Lucien Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), 107-108; William M. Thompson, “Viewing Justification through Calvin’s Eyes: An Ecumenical Experiment,” *Theological Studies* 57, no. 3 (1996): 447-462; Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 23-27.

¹⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.6. See also Calvin, *Commentary on Colossians*, 1:22.

grace be confused. “If the brightness of the sun cannot be separated from its heat,” Calvin asks rhetorically, “shall we therefore say that the earth is warmed by its light, or lighted by its heat? . . . To be justified means something different from being made new creatures.”¹⁷ Some may suggest that it is at this latter point that Reformed soteriology begins to sever itself from spiritual formation. To do so, however, is to neglect the former point, namely, that “Christ justifies no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify” so that “these benefits are joined together by an everlasting and indissoluble bond.”¹⁸

Historic Reformed Soteriology as a Threefold (Re)Formation

Now we can understand the nature of the fruits of repentance: the duties of piety toward God, of charity toward men, and in the whole of life, holiness and purity.

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*¹⁹

Q. 32. What benefits do they that are effectually called partake of in this life?

A. They that are effectually called do in this life partake of justification, adoption, sanctification, and the several benefits which, in this life, do either accompany or flow from them.

*Westminster Shorter Catechism*²⁰

In this section, we will present an understanding of the work of God in human salvation as a threefold (re)formation. We will examine separately three essential dimensions of our humanity that need to be reformed: our *communion* with God, our *community* with others, and our *character*. Communion and community center on relationships or knowing; character deals with ontology or being. Each of these was

¹⁷Calvin, *Institutes*.

¹⁸Ibid., 3.16.1.

¹⁹Ibid., 3.3.16.

²⁰*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, The Book of Confessions (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 1994), 7.032.

formed by God at Creation, was deformed by sin at the Fall, and is reformed by God in Christ. Once again, we will not be modifying the essential teaching of Calvin and his contemporaries so much as modifying the organization and presentation of their doctrinal formulations so that the church today may better understand and appropriate them. To this end it must be readily acknowledged that Calvin does not use the terminology of “communion,” “community,” and “character.” He does, however, list the fruits of repentance as threefold: “piety toward God” (communion), “charity toward men” (community), and “in the whole of life, holiness and purity” (character).²¹

In addition, as we will see, because Calvin did not view salvation in the predominantly individualistic way that so many Western Christians do today, he presumed that each person could receive God’s saving grace in Christ only as a participant in Christ’s body, the church. Elsie McKee notes of Calvin:

Even his own very personal conviction of his relationship with God was, in his understanding, predicated on his being engrafted into Christ’s body, for he was convinced that no Christian is a Christian apart from the rest of the body. Spirituality for Calvin was therefore never individualistic. It was personal, without question, but it was personal in the context of the community of faith.²²

In our terms, Calvin was led by both his theology and his cultural environment to assume that the (re)formation of our communion with God and the (re)formation of our character would always occur alongside or within the context of the (re)formation of our community with others.

It is worth noting, however, that as Reformation thought progressed from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, those following in the theological tradition of Calvin

²¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.16.

²²Elsie Anne McKee, ed., *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 4.

would capture and express God's saving work in a threefold design. The Westminster Divines in particular contended that the elect who were called by God's grace into union with Christ by the Holy Spirit would partake of justification, adoption, and sanctification. To this, we can again apply our terminology. In justification, communion with God is (re)formed as sins are pardoned and sinners are accepted as righteous in God's sight. In adoption, community with others is (re)formed as the believer is received into the number of God's children with all the accompanying privileges. In sanctification, character is (re)formed as the image of God is renewed in the whole person who is enabled more and more to die to sin and live unto righteousness.²³

As with our previous examination of Calvin's view of justification and sanctification, it must again be acknowledged that the three saving (re)formations of communion, community, and character are interrelated. They should be neither fully separated nor confused. They are examined separately here, to borrow Calvin's phrase, "in order that God's manifold grace may better appear to us."²⁴ In addition, each will be explained through a three-part schema as we see the communion with God, community with others, and character within as they were in the beginning at Creation, in the meantime after the Fall, and in Christ who brings (re)formation.

²³ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 7.032-7.035.

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.6.

(Re)Formed Communion with God—Justification

In the Beginning

Humanity was formed for communion with God. Our Creator is the triune God who is inherently relational as Father, Son, and Spirit commune together in perfect love from all eternity. Unique among all of God's creation, humanity was created to live in intimate fellowship with our Creator. *The Heidelberg Catechism* (1562) affirms, "God created man good and in his image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might rightly know God his Creator, love him with his whole heart, and live with him in eternal blessedness, praising and glorifying him."²⁵ It is our spiritual communion with God that separates human beings from the animals of God's creation. We were designed to know and be known by the God who loves us and who wants to be in a personal and ongoing relationship with each of us. Yet this knowledge of God was not just to be intellectual, but experiential and relational. Knowledge of God was to reside in both the brain (*cerebrum*) and the heart (*cor*). Calvin writes:

We ought to observe that we are called to a knowledge of God, not that knowledge which, content with empty speculation, merely flits in the brain, but that which will be sound and fruitful if we duly perceive it, and if it takes root in the heart. For the Lord manifests himself by his powers, the force of which we feel within ourselves and the benefits of which we enjoy.²⁶

Knowledge of God's transcendence is available to all. God's essence is indeed incomprehensible, surpassing human thought and perception. Nonetheless, Calvin argued, "upon his individual works he has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory, so clear and so prominent that even unlettered and stupid folk cannot plead the excuse of

²⁵*The Heidelberg Catechism*, The Book of Confessions (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1994), 4.006.

²⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.9. See also 3.2.36.

ignorance. . . . Ever since the creation of the universe he brought forth those insignia whereby he shows his glory to us, whenever and wherever we cast our gaze.”²⁷ Yet, knowledge of God’s immanence is also available to each one. God is not only apprehended from without, but also from within our own souls, “for each one undoubtedly feels within the heavenly grace that quickens him.”²⁸ According to Calvin, “There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself, has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty.”²⁹ Still, while even the blind may feel their way toward God and find him (Acts 17:27), the deep, personal, and experiential knowledge of God for which we were created only flows out of reverence and love for God, what Calvin understood to be true piety.³⁰ One cannot live in communion with God if one does not also fear and love God.

In the Meantime

The communion with God for which we were formed has become deformed. As a violation of divine love, sin affects our relationship with God. We are sinful in our actions (1 John 3:4); we are sinners because we sin. However, sin is not just the breaking of God’s laws but the breaking of relationship with God; “unfaithfulness was the root of

²⁷Ibid., 1.5.1.

²⁸Ibid., 1.5.3.

²⁹Ibid., 1.3.1.

³⁰Ibid., 1.2.1.

the Fall.”³¹ As a consequence, we experience feelings of guilt, and our deformed state is one of enslavement to sin (John 8:34-35; Rom. 6:16, 20). We become separated from God, estranged and hostile toward our Creator (Col. 1:21). In the words of the prophet, “Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear” (Isa. 59:2). On this, Calvin writes, “We are told that sin is division between man and God, the turning of God’s face away from the sinner; and it cannot happen otherwise, seeing that it is foreign to his righteousness to have any dealings with sin.”³²

With Adam’s transgression, *The Scots Confession* (1560) proclaims, “He and his children became by nature hostile to God, slaves to Satan, and servants of sin.”³³ In presenting a hypothetical case of a man becoming aware of the scriptural teaching on sin’s relational effects, Calvin catalogs what he would learn: “He was estranged from God through sin, is an heir of wrath, subject to the curse of eternal death, excluded from all hope of salvation, beyond every blessing of God, the slave of Satan, captive under the yoke of sin, destined finally for a dreadful destruction and already involved in it.”³⁴ Elsewhere, he writes, “Previously, direct communication with God was the source of life to Adam; but, from the moment in which he became alienated from God, it was necessary that he should recover life by the death of Christ, by whose life he then lived.”³⁵

³¹Ibid., 2.1.4.

³²Ibid., 3.11.21.

³³*The Scots Confession*, The Book of Confessions (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1994), 3.03.

³⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.2.

³⁵John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 3:22.

In Christ

The communion with God for which we were formed, which was so deformed by sin, is reformed in Christ. Although we displease God and are guilty in his sight, God still looks upon us with love. “However much we may be sinners by our own fault, we nevertheless remain his creatures. However much we have brought death upon ourselves, yet he has created us unto life. Thus he is moved by pure and freely given love of us to receive us into grace.”³⁶ Consequently, as the Apostle Paul affirms, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them. . . . He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:19, 21 NASB). The one who is justified by faith and for whom communion with God is restored, Calvin contends, “appears in God’s sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man. Therefore, we explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.”³⁷ In Christ, our communion with God is (re)formed, our guilt is removed, and our sins are forgiven.

(Re)Formed Community with Others—Adoption

In the Beginning

Humanity was formed for community with others. The triune God created us not only to be in relationship with our Creator but in relationship with our fellow human

³⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.3.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 3.11.2.

beings. Stan Grenz and John Frank contend, “Only in the community can we truly show what God is like, for God is the community of love, the eternal relational dynamic enjoyed by the three persons of the Trinity.”³⁸ At Creation, “The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him’” (Gen. 2:18). In commenting on this, Calvin writes:

Man was formed to be a social animal. . . . Although God pronounced, concerning Adam, that it would not be profitable for him to be alone, yet I do not restrict the declaration to his person alone, but rather regard it as a common law of man’s vocation, so that every one ought to receive it as said to himself, that solitude is not good, excepting only him whom God exempts as by a special privilege.³⁹

The wisdom of Ecclesiastes likewise affirms, “two are better than one” (4:9), and even Jesus may have demonstrated the innate human desire for community with others through his gathering of the Twelve (Mark 3:16-19) and especially his investment in Peter, James, and John (Mark 5:37; 9:2; 14:33).

Perhaps our natural need for relationships with others can be illustrated best by asking the question, “What are the two most severe punishments given to criminals?” Certainly, our first impulse is to answer “death”—it is hard to argue with the severity and finality of capital punishment. The second most severe sentence must surely be isolation. Not only is the offender incarcerated, kept from all regular contact with friends and loved ones, but he or she is also placed in solitary confinement where *all* relational contact is cut off. This is a harsh punishment precisely because it is denial of an essential element of our humanity: the need for community with others.

³⁸Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 201.

³⁹Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 2:18. See also *Institutes* 2.2.13.

In the Meantime

The community with others for which we were formed has become deformed. In the first chapter of Genesis, the first man and woman are united and have become one flesh. By the end of the third chapter, their relationship is characterized by finger pointing, blame, and power struggles. By the end of the fourth, relationships have turned violent and brother has murdered brother.

From the dawn of the human race, says Genesis 4, human beings have clashed over their differences—not just their differences of opinion but, much more profoundly, their differences of wealth, status, race, gender, social acceptance, intelligence, physical attractiveness, achievement, and general flourishing. . . . Using short, terrible strokes, the biblical narrator hammers out the first piece of this bloody history, a tale of blessing and cursing and envy and killing and the banishing of a marked man.⁴⁰

Far from being an isolated incident, the story of Cain and Abel becomes paradigmatic of broken community. By the end of the primeval prologue in the eleventh chapter of Genesis, unity has been replaced by confusion and humanity is scattered. The Apostle Paul summarizes it famously in Romans 1:29-31 (NLT):

Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, fighting, deception, malicious behavior, and gossip. They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud, and boastful. They are forever inventing new ways of sinning and are disobedient to their parents. They refuse to understand, break their promises, and are heartless and unforgiving.

In Christ

The community with others for which we were formed, which was so deformed by sin, is reformed in Christ. *The Second Helvetic Confession* (1561) affirms, “Because God from the beginning would have men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4), it is altogether necessary that there always should have been, and

⁴⁰Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, 159-160.

should be now, and to the end of the world, a Church.”⁴¹ The church, the assembly of the faithful who are called and gathered out of the world, that which is traditionally labeled “the communion of saints,” is the harbinger of (re)formed community with others in Christ.⁴² Because of God’s great love, “his unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. And this gave him great pleasure” (Eph. 1:5 NLT). In coming as true God and true man to be our mediator, Christ’s task, according to Calvin, “was so to restore us to God’s grace as to make of the children of men, children of God; of the heirs of Gehenna, heirs of the Heavenly Kingdom”⁴³ (Heb. 2:14-15). Now, in Christ Jesus we may be children of God through faith (Gal. 3:26; 1 John 3:1); and if we are children of God, then we are also heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17). As God’s children we might together call upon him as “Our Father” (Mt. 6:9). “From this fact,” Calvin concludes, “we are warned how great a feeling of brotherly love ought to be among us, since by the same right of mercy and free liberality we are equally children of such a father.”⁴⁴

So important is the church or the (re)formed community with others that, according to Calvin, it may rightly be called our Mother.

⁴¹*The Second Helvetic Confession*, The Book of Confessions (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1994), 5.124.

⁴²“God’s goal for humankind, in turn, is that we represent God by reflecting the divine nature (love) and thereby the *imago Dei*, which is our divinely intended destiny. According to the New Testament, the focus of this image-bearing function is humans-in-relationship but, more specifically, the church as the foretaste of the new humanity. Hence, the divine design for Christ’s community is that we be a people who, because we share in the Holy Spirit and thereby participate in the eternal love of God, represent God in the midst of the fallenness of the present through relationships that reflect God’s own loving character.” Grenz and Franke, 201.

⁴³Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.12.2.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 3.20.38.

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 (Matt. 22:30). Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives. Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation.⁴⁵

As mentioned previously, this vital role of the church cannot be overemphasized against the backdrop of our highly individualistic culture. Howard Hageman observes, “In Calvin’s thinking the Church precedes the individual and not the other way around as has become so popular in contemporary spirituality. . . . Our common view of spirituality often suggests the lonely pious individual striving to become more like Christ. That image has little or no place in the spirituality of Calvin.”⁴⁶

(Re)Formed Character—Sanctification

In the Beginning

Humanity was formed perfect in character. God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. . . . So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:26-27 NRSV). “Humankind was created pure and whole, conformed to the image of God,”⁴⁷ and was given “wisdom, lordship, justice, free will, and self-consciousness, so that in the whole nature of man no imperfection could be found.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵Ibid., 4.1.4. See also *The Second Helvetic Confession*, 5.136.

⁴⁶Hageman, “Reformed Spirituality,” 64-65.

⁴⁷*The French Confession of 1559*, (Louisville: The Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1998), IX.

⁴⁸*The Scots Confession*, 3.02.

On the one hand, the *imago Dei* or image of God in which we were created is inherently tied to our relationship with God and others, to our communion with God and our community with others.⁴⁹ Calvin acknowledges at one point that “the image of God comprises in itself the knowledge of him who is the chief good.”⁵⁰ However, on the other hand, Calvin also focused his understanding of the *imago Dei* on the soul, heart, and mind of a person.

For although God’s glory shines forth in the outer man, yet there is no doubt that the proper seat of his image is in the soul. . . .
 . . . Therefore, although the soul is not man, yet it is not absurd for man, in respect to his soul, to be called God’s image; even though . . . that likeness of God extends to the whole excellence by which man’s nature towers over all the kinds of living creatures. Accordingly, the integrity with which Adam was endowed is expressed by this word, when he had full possession of right understanding, when he had his affections kept within the bounds of reason, all his senses tempered in right order, and he truly referred his excellence to exceptional gifts bestowed upon him by his Maker. And although the primary seat of the divine image was in the mind and heart, or in the soul and its powers, yet there was no part of man, not even the body itself, in which some spark did not glow.⁵¹

We have been given the gifts of consciousness and cognition, of thoughts, emotions, and will. While corporeal, we are also self-aware spiritual beings. We are each formed after the character of God. This understanding of the *imago Dei* will be explored further in the next chapter.

⁴⁹“Because God is ultimately none other than the divine trinitarian person-in-relationship, a relationship characterized by a mutuality that can only be described as love, the *imago Dei* is ultimately human persons-in-loving-relationship as well.” Grenz and Franke, 228.

⁵⁰Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 2:9. *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 4.006, similarly states, “God created man good and in his image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might rightly know God his Creator, love him with his whole heart, and live with him in eternal blessedness, praising and glorifying him.” See also Thomas Forsyth Torrance, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Man* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1957), 57.

⁵¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.3.

In the Meantime

The character of God that was formed within us has become deformed. With the entrance of sin into the world in Genesis 3, not only were Adam and Eve relationally separated from God and from one another, the *imago Dei* within them was also utterly defaced. “As it was the spiritual life of Adam to remain united and bound to his Maker, so estrangement from him was the death of his soul,”⁵² the seat of the divine image. “Therefore,” writes Calvin, “even though we grant that God’s image was not totally annihilated and destroyed in him, yet it was so corrupted that whatever remains is frightful deformity.”⁵³

Moreover, this deformity of the divine image is universal; no one save Christ Jesus has been exempt. Calvin argues, “This is the inherited corruption, which the church fathers termed ‘original sin,’ meaning by the word ‘sin’ the depravation of a nature previously good and pure.”⁵⁴ *The Second Helvetic Confession* expands upon this teaching as follows:

By sin we understand that innate corruption of man which has been derived or propagated in us all from our first parents, by which we, immersed in perverse desires and averse to all good, are included to all evil. Full of all wickedness, distrust, contempt and hatred of God, we are unable to do or even to think anything good of ourselves. Moreover, even as we grow older, so by wicked thoughts, words and deeds committed against God’s law, we bring forth corrupt fruit worthy of an evil tree (Matt. 12:33 ff.).⁵⁵

⁵²Ibid., 2.1.5.

⁵³Ibid., 1.15.4.

⁵⁴Ibid., 2.1.5. See also 2.1.8-9.

⁵⁵*The Second Helvetic Confession*, 5.037.

The bad news is that sin has infected our being, making us sinful by nature and dead in our trespasses. The good news of the gospel is that what has been deformed in our character may be reformed in Christ.

In Christ

The character of God in which we were formed, which was so deformed by sin, is reformed in Christ. The relational requirements of salvation are met in Christ as believers' communion with God is (re)formed through justification and their community with others is (re)formed through adoption; so too the essential ontological dimension of salvation is also addressed through Christ's work of sanctification.

We confess that while through the intercession of Christ's righteousness God reconciles us to himself, and by free remission of sins accounts us righteous, his beneficence is at the same time joined with such a mercy that through his Holy Spirit he dwells in us and by his power the lusts of our flesh are each day more and more mortified; we are indeed sanctified, that is, consecrated to the Lord in true purity of life.⁵⁶

Moreover, the Apostle Paul writes that Christ is our sanctification; Christ became our holiness for us (1 Cor. 1:30). In commenting on Paul's statement, Calvin writes:

He calls him our *sanctification*, by which he means, that we who are otherwise unholy by nature, are by his Spirit renewed unto holiness, that we may serve God. From this, also, we infer, that we cannot be justified freely through faith alone without at the same time living holily. For these fruits of grace are connected together, as it were, by an indissoluble tie, so that he who attempts to sever them does in a manner tear Christ to pieces. Let therefore the man who seeks to be justified through Christ, by God's unmerited goodness, consider that this cannot be attained without his taking him at the same time for *sanctification*, or, in other words, being renewed to innocence and purity of life.⁵⁷

⁵⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.14.9.

⁵⁷Calvin, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, 1:30. See also *Institutes* 3.16.1.

The objective work of God's grace in sanctification, then, is the radical transformation of our being. It is an ontological (re)formation through the restoration of broken people, the removal of shame, and the receiving of wholeness. It is putting to death the power of death within us, and the bringing forth of new life. Being "born again" is not just the correction of one part, but the reformation and renovation of the whole person and each part of the person; it is not just spiritual, but is a renewal of the whole nature.⁵⁸ Genuine conversion works from the inside out; it starts in the mind and then in the heart, and only then passes on to outward works.⁵⁹ It is the cleansing of sin's corruptive stain upon the *imago Dei* and the progressive restoration of the person after the likeness of God's image revealed in Christ Jesus. Believers experience the reformation of character through sanctification only as they are united with Christ, participating in his perfection, partaking of his purity, and sharing in his holiness.⁶⁰

The subjective experience of sanctification flows out of this union with Christ, a subject to be explored in depth in chapter 4. The (re)formation of character is not something believers might do for themselves, but it is solely the work of God. Yet, this is not to say that the individual is entirely passive. Calvin was clear to teach that faith alone is sufficient for justification; however, he was equally quick to add that the faith that justifies does not stand alone but is conjoined with the Spirit of regeneration.⁶¹ "Hence it

⁵⁸John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. William Pringle, Calvin's Commentaries, vol. 17 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 3:3. See also Hart, "Humankind in Christ and Christ in Humankind," 73.

⁵⁹John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Daniel*, trans. Thomas Myers, Calvin's Commentaries, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 4:27.

⁶⁰Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 17:19.

⁶¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.19-20; John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians*, trans. William Pringle, Calvin's Commentaries, vol. 21 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House,

follows,” he writes, “that, on the part of God, our salvation is completed, while the full enjoyment of it is delayed till the end of our warfare.”⁶² Because believers have been united with Christ, they are no longer to live as slaves to sin and its reign within them, but instead they are to give their lives completely to God that they might reap the benefits of holiness (Rom. 6). They are to work out their salvation continually even as God continues to work within them until his work is complete (Phil. 1:6; 2:12-13). One’s character (re)formation, then, includes a paradoxical synergy between divine and human action. Being (re)formed happens as the believer is shaped by God’s power and according to God’s purposes (2 Pet. 1:3-4). Nonetheless, the believer is necessarily active amidst God’s (re)forming work through the process of what Calvin termed “repentance” and its accompanying practices as modeled by Christ. One cannot be a disciple of Jesus without practicing the disciplines of Jesus. In chapter 5, we will see that it is through the practices of repentance that individuals open their lives to the reforming work of the Holy Spirit, who unites them to Christ and continually works to (re)form them to be like Christ—activity that all falls under the traditional label of “spiritual formation.”

2005), 5:6. See also Marcel, “Relation between Justification and Sanctification in Calvin’s Thought,” 139-140.

⁶²John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle to Titus*, trans. William Pringle, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 21 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 3:5. Bloesch seeks to carve out a similar position in his distinction as believers are “truly saved” but not yet “fully saved.” He writes, “The man who repents and believes has present salvation. The man who at the end attains perfection in love has full or final salvation.” In between, obedience in faith in sanctification is required. Bloesch, *The Christian Life and Salvation*, 25-28.

Spiritual Formation as the Progressive Process of Character (Re)Formation

Just as we are now like Adam, the man of the earth, so we will someday be like Christ, the man from heaven.

1 Corinthians 15:49 (NLT)

And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him and reflect his glory even more.

2 Corinthians 3:18 (NLT)

And indeed, this restoration does not take place in one moment or one day or one year; but through continual and sometimes even slow advances God wipes out in his elect the corruptions of the flesh, cleanses them of guilt, consecrates them to himself as temples renewing all their minds to true purity that they may practice repentance throughout their lives and know that this warfare will end only at death.

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*⁶³

In this brief section we will show that Calvin viewed the (re)formation of character as a process rather than a onetime event. Moreover, spiritual formation in Christ's likeness is a process in which we can and should make progress.

For those who are in Christ, the reformation of their character has truly begun; yet, the regeneration and sanctification are not fully complete. Spiritual formation is the gradual process over the course of time in which the whole concrete life of the believer is being conformed to Christ.⁶⁴ The image of God in which we were formed is slowly restored. As Calvin notes, "This restoration does not take place in one moment or one day or one year; but through continual and sometimes even slow advances."⁶⁵ Elsewhere Calvin writes, "It is certain that no one turns to God in such a manner that he puts off all

⁶³Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.9.

⁶⁴Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin*, 105; Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 24-25; Wilcox, "Conversion in the Thought and Experience of John Calvin," 118-120.

⁶⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.9.

the affections of the flesh, that he is renewed at once in God's image, so that he is freed from every stain. Such a conversion is never found in man."⁶⁶ As we have noted, there is no such thing as "instant salvation" or "instant Christianity," which would be more attractive to Westerners conditioned toward immediate gratification.

The Apostle Paul, for his part, says that just as we have worn or borne the image of the man of dust or earth, Adam, so we will in the future fully bear the image of the man of heaven, Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 15:49). Calvin gives his own paraphrase of what Paul means here:

As the *animal nature*, which has the precedency in us, is the image of Adam, so we shall be conformed to Christ in the *heavenly nature*; and this will be the completion of our restoration. For we *now* begin to bear the image of Christ, and are every day more and more transformed into it; but that image consists in spiritual regeneration. But *then* it will be fully restored both in body and in soul, and what is now begun will be perfected, and accordingly we will obtain in reality what we as yet only hope for.⁶⁷

While our process of regeneration in Christ's likeness will not be fully complete until death is passed through and we are fully united with Christ, we nonetheless must make progress in our spiritual (re)formation in this life. Calvin comments that the transformation into Christ's likeness is "not accomplished in us in one moment, but we must be constantly making progress both in the knowledge of God, and in conformity to His image."⁶⁸

⁶⁶Calvin, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, 24:7.

⁶⁷Calvin, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, 15:49. Elsewhere, Calvin writes similarly, "Observe, that the design of the gospel is this, that the image of God, which had been effaced by sin, may be stamped anew upon us, and that the advancement of this restoration may be continually going forward in us during our whole life, because God makes his glory shine forth in us by little and little." John Calvin, *The Commentaries of John Calvin on the Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle, Calvin's Commentaries, vol. 20 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 3:18.

⁶⁸Calvin, *Commentary on Second Corinthians*, 3:18. Elsewhere Calvin comments on Jesus' prayer that his disciples be pure and holy, "We ought to infer from Christ's words, that *sanctification* is not instantly completed in us on the first day, but that we make progress in it through the whole course of our

This is not to say, however, that progress in spiritual formation comes without pain or toil. It is a battle as each day we take up the cross to follow Christ (Luke 9:23), a warfare that will end only at death. Against the “frenzied excess” of “certain Anabaptists” of his day who claimed to have already been restored to a state of innocence, Calvin argued that the fight for God’s purity was neither easy nor over. “We are purged by his sanctification in such a way that we are besieged by many vices and much weakness so long as we are encumbered with our body. Thus it comes about that, far removed from perfection, we must move steadily forward, and though entangled in vices, daily fight against them.”⁶⁹ To claim otherwise, suggests Calvin, is to claim to have made greater progress than the Apostle Paul, who was harassed (2 Cor. 12:7) and who struggled with the division between his own flesh and spirit (Rom. 7:7-25).

Conclusion

In this section, we have seen that God’s plan of salvation addresses both the relational and the ontological crises created by sin. Three soteriological streams are found in the theology of Calvin and his Reformation contemporaries in which three essential dimensions of our humanity that are deformed by sin are reformed in Christ. First, communion with God is (re)formed as the believer is justified by grace through faith. Second, community with others is (re)formed as the believer is adopted into God’s family, the church. Third, the character within the believer is (re)formed as he or she is

life, till at length God, having taken away from us the garment of the flesh, fills us with his righteousness.” Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 17:17. See also John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Thessalonians*, trans. John Pringle, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 21 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 5:23. For a more detailed examination of Calvin’s view, see the chapter “Progress Toward Perfection” in Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 321-332.

⁶⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.14.

sanctified and renewed after the image of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Each of these actions is necessary for salvation to be complete, for a person to be “fully saved.”

With particular regard to the (re)formation of our character, we have contended that we must be actively involved through the work of spiritual formation. Spiritual formation is the process of the (re)formation of one’s character into the image of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, the visible image of the invisible God in all its original purity (Col. 1:15). This (re)formation of character must happen in concert with, rather than in isolation from, the (re)formation of relationships with God and others. Moreover, spiritual formation must be understood as an essential part of God’s salvific work; it is not optional or only for the more saintly (Rom. 12:2; Gal. 4:19-20; Heb. 5:12-13). Believers have been predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:29), and they experience the fullness of salvation only as they are united with Christ (Col. 2:9-10). Spiritual formation, again, is the process of becoming more and more like Christ (1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:18). Further, it is a process in which the believer is expected to make progress.

CHAPTER 3

THE *IMAGO DEI*:

THE MATERIALS AND BLUEPRINT FOR BUILDING A (RE)FORMED LIFE

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. . . .” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:26-27 (NRSV)

Our happiness lies in having the image of God restored and formed anew in us, which was defaced by sin.

John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*¹

Because the Father has reconciled us to himself in Christ, therefore he commands us to be conformed to Christ as to our pattern.

John Calvin, *The Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*²

As we saw in the previous chapter, humankind was formed in the image of God; our character was created in the likeness of our Creator. In the first section of this chapter, we will examine the biblical material relevant to the *imago Dei* in humanity’s Creation and Fall as well as the interpretations given to these passages by John Calvin. To use our guiding metaphor, the divine image provides the materials from which the (re)formed life is built. In the second section, we will consider how the divine image was revealed and fulfilled in Jesus Christ, again appraising both the pertinent biblical material as well as the observations of Calvin. The third and final section will begin to link the first two; we will contend that in Jesus Christ we find the model for the (re)formation of

¹Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 17:3.

²John Calvin, *The Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*, trans. Henry J. Van Andel (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1952), 18.

our character in the image of God. We must agree with John Leith who notes, “The reconstruction of the image of God is the achievement of the process we call Christian life and is one of the most frequent notes in Calvin’s theology. The renewal of life or regeneration of the spirit is nothing else than the restoration of the divine image.”³ Following our metaphor, Jesus Christ is the blueprint for building the (re)formed life.

The Materials: The *Imago Dei* in Humanity’s Creation and Fall

Many Christians today speak frequently of “spiritually maturing” or “growing in Christ,” or that as followers of Christ we should be built up in our faith. Yet it is far less common to hear details of what a person who is mature, grown, or built up in Christ might look like. Contemporary authors on Reformed spirituality are often no different, some stating that we are called “to become the persons God intended us to be,”⁴ but giving no further explanation of what God intends for us. In contrast, Calvin and his contemporaries found a blueprint for spiritual maturity in the *imago Dei*, the image of God. According to Calvin, “We cannot have a clear and complete knowledge of God unless it is accompanied by a corresponding knowledge of ourselves. This knowledge of ourselves is twofold: namely, to know what we were like when we were created and what our condition became like after the fall of Adam.”⁵ This section will follow Calvin’s twofold demarcation, examining first the *imago Dei* at Creation then looking at the effects of the Fall on the divine image.

³John H. Leith, *John Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 70-71.

⁴Ramey and Johnson, *Living the Christian Life*. 21.

⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.1.

The Image of God at Creation

The poetic account of Creation in the first chapter of the scriptures records God's final actions on the sixth day in these famous words (Gen. 1:26-27 NRSV):

Then God said, "Let us make humankind [אָדָם] in our image [בְּצַלְמֵנוּ], according to our likeness [כְּדְמוּתֵנוּךְ]; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image [בְּצַלְמוֹ],
in the image [בְּצֶלֶם] of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

Two key observations can be made immediately regarding this passage. First, the progressive nature of God's creative work reveals that humankind, as the last of God's creatures to be brought into existence, is the crown of creation with dominion over the rest of creation.⁶ Second, human beings, both male and female, are unique among all of God's creatures in that men and women alone are created in the image of God.

The Language of "Image" and "Likeness"

Before examining these concepts in greater detail, brief mention of the terminology of Genesis 1:26 must be made. The text says that God created אָדָם ('*adam*) in his image. This Hebrew word is translated "man" in reference to a single human being, or "Adam" when used for the first man. However, it is clear from the context that Genesis 1:26-27 uses אָדָם in a third and more comprehensive sense, traditionally "mankind,"⁷ referring to both male and female human beings. In this regard, Calvin affirms that both

⁶Cf. Psalm 8:4-8.

⁷When possible to do so without compromising clarity or altering meaning, I have sought to avoid gender-specific language. However, for the sake of accuracy, I have kept the term "mankind" in citing many older commentaries and translations.

sexes were created in the image of God, equally innocent and holy.⁸ Bruce Birch et al. go further in suggesting that, because the likeness of God applies not only to what male and female have in common but also to what remains distinctive, this provides the basis for use of both male and female images for God in the Old Testament. They write, “While male images predominate, female images, especially those of motherhood, are used, particularly in those tests and times where themes of divine closeness and comfort seem called for (e.g., Deut 32:18; Isa. 42:14; 66:13).”⁹

Other than the Creation story, the description of humankind as the “image” (צֶלֶם) of God appears only in Genesis 9:6 where this fact is ground for the prohibition against murder and the prescription of capital punishment. The Hebrew term צֶלֶם (*tselem*) generally denotes resemblance or likeness, and it carries connotations of representation. It is helpful to note that the Septuagint uses εἰκών (*eikōn*) to render the term. In Greek thought, an image is not completely separate from the reality of what it represents, but instead it shares or participates in the essence of its counterpart.¹⁰ As will be noted below, these notions have profound bearing upon the meaning of humankind being created in image of God.

Along with the concept of “image” (צֶלֶם), Genesis 1:26 also states that humankind was to be created in God’s “likeness” (דְּמוּת). The latter Hebrew term denotes that which

⁸Calvin, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, 11:7. See also Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 18-23.

⁹Bruce C. Birch and others, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 43-44.

¹⁰Otto Flender, “Image, Idol, Imprint, Example: εἰκών,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 4 vols., ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 2.287; Stanley J. Grenz, “Jesus as the *Imago Dei*: Image-of-God Christology and the Non-Linear Linearity of Theology,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 4 (2004): 619.

has similarity or comparison to something else. In the echo of the Creation account in Genesis 5:1, we read only, “When God created man, he made him in the likeness (בְּדְמוּת) of God.” The term דְּמוּת is not used. Significantly, the Septuagint uses εἰκὼν to render the term here, indicating a parallelism between the two Hebrew expressions.

Calvin acknowledged that, even in his day, there was “no slight quarrel” over the proper interpretation of these terms, specifically whether “likeness” is to be distinguished from “image” or if it was simply added by way of repetition and explanation. Again, the Creation account is helpful. While both terms are used with God’s announcement of his creative intentions in 1:26, the fulfillment of those intentions in 1:27 uses only “image,” suggesting that the previous combination of “image” and “likeness” is meant to convey one concept rather than two. That the terms are used synonymously is also supported by the textual echo of 1:27 in Genesis 5:1 that uses “likeness” in the place of “image.” For his part, Calvin denies that the image of God differs from his likeness.¹¹ He contends that any difference in the concepts behind the two terms is nonexistent. With this background, we can now turn our attention to what constitutes the *imago Dei*.

The Meaning of “Image of God”

In the ancient world, images were believed to represent and even mediate the presence of one who is not physically present.¹² Egyptian kings were occasionally referred to as the divine image when they needed to support their right to rule the people.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.3; Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 1:26. See also Geoffrey William Bromiley, “Image of God,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 803; Hughes, *The True Image*, 7-9.

¹² Birch and others, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 43; D. J. A. Clines, “Image of God,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 427; John Goldingay, *Israel’s Gospel*, Old Testament Theology, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 99-100; Grenz, “Jesus as the *Imago Dei*,” 621-622.

Similarly, Assyrian kings would erect statues of themselves in conquered territories to represent their presence in the land, and so closely was the image associated with the king that an act against the image was considered treasonous. By contrast, the Hebrew scripture claims that all of humanity bears the image of God, not just the king or even a chosen tribe or nation. “The result is that all interhuman [*sic*] hierarchical understandings are set aside; all human beings of whatever station in life stand together as the image of God.”¹³

More than kings, however, images were especially associated with deities, and they served as a means of controlling or at least influencing the god. So close was the union between the deity and its image that its spirit was believed to indwell the image so that the deity became visible and present in the human world. Grenz notes, “The intent of these images was not necessarily that of portraying what the corresponding god looked like, for they were occasionally not actually pictorial portrayals but unhewn lumps of rock or other objects.”¹⁴ Again, by contrast, the Hebrew scripture reveals that only human beings may be called the image of God.

In what respect, then, may human beings be said to possess the divine image or reflect God’s likeness? Several options may be considered. First, any physical resemblance is ruled out for God is spirit (John 4:24), and representing the LORD God in physical or material form is expressly forbidden (Exod. 20:4; Deut. 5:8). However, Genesis 5:3—where Adam has a son “in his own likeness (בְּקִמְיוֹ), in his own image (צִלְמוֹ)”¹⁵—reveals that “the transmission of the divine likeness is thought of in terms of

¹³Birch and others, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 43.

¹⁴Grenz, “Jesus as the *Imago Dei*,” 622.

the physical sequence of generations and therefore obviously in a physical sense.”¹⁵

While the *imago Dei* bestowed upon Adam was not physical in itself, it was nonetheless passed on to Adam’s physical descendants.

Another possible source of meaning of the *imago Dei* is found in God’s resolve to let humankind “rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Gen. 1:26). Since this resolution is linked to the *image* and *likeness* decree, the conclusion is drawn that the divine image is seen in humankind’s dominion over nature. This is reinforced by the divinely appointed task that follows in Genesis 1:28-30 that includes the charge to “fill the earth and subdue it” and to rule over the other creatures.¹⁶ An additional merit of this view is that it lends a dynamic element to understanding the *imago Dei* because the world God created is a dynamic, not a static reality. Birch et al. argue:

This responsibility assigned to the human has not simply to do with maintenance and preservation, but with intercreational [*sic*] development—bringing the world along toward its fullest possible potential. God intends from the beginning that things not stay just as they were initially created. God creates not a static state of affairs but a highly dynamic world in which the future lies open to various possibilities, and human beings are given a key role to play in developing them.¹⁷

Aspects of this dynamic perspective will be seen in Calvin’s view of the *imago Dei*.

However, limiting our understanding of the image of God to such a perspective is unduly

¹⁵Gerhard von Rad, “εἰκὼν: The Divine Likeness in the Old Testament,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey William Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 2.391.

¹⁶See also Ps. 8:6-8.

¹⁷Birch and others, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 44. See also Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 48-50.

narrow and does not account for the way in which the Genesis text portrays humankind's rule over creation as a consequence rather than as a definition of the divine image.¹⁸

A third option emphasizes the capacity for relationship with God that is unique among human beings. As seen in chapter 2, the triune God is a personal God. Thus, Hughes argues, "In creating man God was creating a *personal* being who, in a manner impossible for other animate creatures, is capable of personal fellowship with and personal response to his personal Creator. . . . The fact that man is person from Person explains his ability to interact as person to Person."¹⁹ The divine image, then, is the capacity that human beings have for relationship with God.

After reviewing these options, Grenz returns to the use of images in the ancient world with its notion of representation to propose, "The *imago Dei* delimits the role of humankind as that of mediating within creation the presence of the transcendent Creator."²⁰ Human beings, as those alone among God's creatures that bear the image of God, are to live as God's representatives within creation. This divinely mandated vocation may, in turn, be seen to encompass understandings of the divine image in terms of physicality, dominion, and capacity for divine-human relationship.

Elements of each of these views of the *imago Dei* are seen in Calvin's theology. As a starting point, however, Calvin sees it as "a settled principle" that the image of God is spiritual. "For although God's glory shines forth in the outer man," writes Calvin, "yet there is no doubt that the proper seat of his image is in the soul."²¹ Unfortunately, modern

¹⁸Bromiley, "Image of God," 803-804; Grenz, "Jesus as the *Imago Dei*," 621.

¹⁹Hughes, *The True Image*, 5.

²⁰Grenz, "Jesus as the *Imago Dei*," 622.

²¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.3.

life not only separates and isolates our roles and activities into categories such as work, church, hobbies, family, and such, it also fails to see and appreciate the connections between thoughts, emotions, will, and soul.²² Calvin, however, was not one to compartmentalize human life as we often do today. Although spiritual, the *imago Dei* touches all of our humanity. The soul is not disconnected from the thoughts we think, the passions we feel, the decisions we make, and even the uses we make of our bodies. By God's design, we are an integrated whole. Accordingly, Calvin gives the following description of God's "image":

The integrity with which Adam was endowed is expressed by this word, when he had full possession of right understanding, when he had his affections kept within the bounds of reason, all his senses tempered in right order, and he truly referred his excellence to exceptional gifts bestowed upon him by his Maker. And although the primary seat of the divine image was in the mind and heart, or in the soul and its powers, yet there was not part of man, not even the body itself, in which some sparks did not glow.²³

All parts of our humanity were created well ordered, and as such they reflected the beauty and glory of their Creator and partook in the divine order.²⁴ *The Scots Confession* similarly emphasizes that the perfection of the image of God at Creation extended to the entire person. "We confess and acknowledge that our God has created man, i.e., our first father, Adam, after his own image and likeness, to whom he gave wisdom, lordship, justice, free will, and self-consciousness, so that in the whole nature of man no imperfection could be found."²⁵

²²For an insightful discussion of the aspects of human life and their interrelationships, see Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 27-44.

²³Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.3.

²⁴Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 1:26. See also Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, 59-60.

²⁵*The Scots Confession*, 3.02.

As alluded to previously, the divine image is what separates humanity from other creatures. Only humankind was created in the image of God. Consequently, Calvin says, “the likeness of God extends to the whole excellence by which man’s nature towers over all the kinds of living creatures.”²⁶ Yet, the *imago Dei* should not be an excuse for the sin of pride. Although Genesis 1 tells us that we were created in the image of God, Genesis 2 reminds us that we also came from the dust of the earth. Our advantage was adventitious.²⁷ Further, with the divine image comes a greater necessity for a response of gratitude toward the Creator. According to T.F. Torrance:

The thought of Calvin is that in distinction from the animals man has been created with far greater endowments than they, and therefore with greater attestations of God’s grace, and that he has been made to be conscious of the grace of God not through mere intelligence and reason but by means of a living communication in which he is brought into close relation with God, so that as man is under far deeper obligation to God than the other creatures, he is bound to yield to God a response of gratitude for His grace in a far deeper way, that is, by *imago*—it is for that very purpose that he has been created, and that response is his very life.²⁸

The divine image, then, is not possessed by humankind apart from God. The *imago Dei* is not an independent quality of our humanity.²⁹ Adam bore God’s image only insofar as he was joined to God. “It is not without significance that man is described as having been created *in* the image of God, and not as being himself that image; for if he were himself the image it would be pointless to speak of him as a creature constituted in or according to the divine image.”³⁰

²⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.3. See also 2.12.6; Hughes, *The True Image*, 6.

²⁷Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 2:7. Similarly, Willard refers to “the two sides of the great human contradiction, dust and divinity.” Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 52.

²⁸Torrance, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Man*, 46.

²⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.12.6.

³⁰Hughes, *The True Image*, 15.

While Calvin sees the “proper seat” of the divine image *in* the soul, he does not suggest that the divine image *is* the soul. Instead of the *imago Dei* being a natural and innate property of human beings, we are more accurately said to reflect God’s image. Calvin contends, “Our definition of the image seems not to be complete until it appears more clearly what the faculties are in which man excels, and in which he is to be regarded *as a mirror of the divine glory*” (emphasis mine).³¹ Again, Torrance writes:

There is no doubt that Calvin always thinks of the *imago* in terms of a *mirror*. Only while the mirror actually reflects an object does it have the image of that object. There is no such thing in Calvin’s thought as an *imago* dissociated from the act of reflecting. He does use such expressions as *engrave* and *sculptured*, but only in a metaphorical sense and never dissociated from the idea of mirror.³²

It is important that both aspects of this analogy be kept intact. On the one hand, the mirror itself is significant; there can be no reflection without the mirror. Calvin maintained that by “image” was designated “the perfection of our whole nature.”³³ Further, a broken, warped, or deformed mirror will not provide an accurate reflection. Therefore, as we will soon see, for the *imago Dei* to be reformed fully in us, the deformed mirror of the divine image within us must be reformed. On the other hand, the purpose of a mirror is to provide a reflection; it does not exist for itself. Moreover, strictly speaking, there can be no image if there is no one beholding it, for the mirror simply reflects the one looking into it. In humankind, asserted Calvin, “the Creator himself willed that his

³¹Calvin, *Institutes*, trans. Beveridge, 1.15.4. See also 2.12.6; Torrance, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Man*, 53.

³²Torrance, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Man*, 36. See also Philip Walker Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response: Calvin’s Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 67.

³³Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 1:26.

own glory be seen as in a mirror.”³⁴ It may be said, then, that God images himself within his human creation with his ever-present and steady gaze upon men and women. From this, two additional conclusions regarding the divine image may be drawn.

First, we must acknowledge that the *imago Dei* is intrinsically related to the knowledge of God. As we saw in chapter 2, the character of God within us is interconnected with our communion with God as well as our community with others. As those created in the divine image, human beings are capable of a personal, interactive relationship with the Creator in a manner impossible for other creatures. By implication, Calvin asserts that human life is but an empty image if we do not actively remain in obedient fellowship with God. As we are dead in our trespasses and sins, “our ordinary life, as men, is nothing more than an empty image of life, not only because it quickly passes, but also because, while we live, our souls, not keeping close to God, are dead.”³⁵ B. A. Gerrish summarizes, “In Calvin’s view, the image of God in man denotes not an endowment only, but also a relationship. That is to say, he does not seek to define the image solely by what man possesses as his ‘nature,’ but also by the manner in which he orients himself to God.”³⁶

Second and related, the *imago Dei* is not a static property but is necessarily dynamic as the reflection of the living and active God. It is not a dead but a living image, mirroring God’s glory. “We are not therefore to think of the image of God as in any sense

³⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.12.6.

³⁵John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 21 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 4:18.

³⁶B. A. Gerrish, “The Mirror of God’s Goodness: A Key Metaphor in Calvin’s View of Man,” in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 154.

a static reflection of the Being of God, but a dynamic reflection by way of active response to the Will of God and to the Word of God.”³⁷ According to Grenz and Franke:

This dynamic conception of the *imago dei* arising out of the relational model launches us on the road toward an understanding of the self that can speak within the postmodern context. At the heart of the divine image is human destiny as designed by God. Human beings are the image of God insofar as we have received, are now fulfilling, and one day will fully actualize the divine design for human existence, which is our destiny.³⁸

The Image of God after the Fall

The state of perfection in which humanity was formed did not last. Our character became deformed. *The Second Helvetic Confession* states:

In the beginning, man was made according to the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness, good and upright. But when at the instigation of the serpent and by his own fault he abandoned goodness and righteousness, he became subject to sin, death and various calamities. And what he became by the fall, that is, subject to sin, death and various calamities, so are all those who have descended from him.³⁹

As the Apostle Paul argued, “Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Rom. 5:12 NASB). All have sinned (Rom. 3:23); all are dead in sin (Eph. 2:1); all are controlled by a sinful nature (Rom. 8:8; Gal. 5:17).

The divine image is deformed in all of us so that no person accurately mirrors God’s glory. At Creation, human beings were created a little lower than God and crowned with glory and majesty (Ps. 8:5). Yet, comments Calvin:

By the fall of Adam, all mankind fell from their primeval state of integrity, for by this the image of God was almost entirely effaced from us, and we were also

³⁷Torrance, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Man*, 64.

³⁸Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 199.

³⁹*The Second Helvetic Confession*, 5.036.

divested of those distinguishing gifts by which we would have been, as it were, elevated to the condition of demigods; in short, from a state of the highest excellence, we were reduced to a condition of wretched and shameful destitution.⁴⁰

While sin was not part of our original nature, it is now our natural state. Now, we are polluted and poisoned by sin, calloused and corrupted to the core, and no longer the way we were designed to be. As the divine image was said to be seated in the soul but touched all parts of our humanity, so the impact of our inherited corruption or original sin touches all that we are. The deformation of our character is spread into “all parts of the soul,” so that “the whole man is overwhelmed—as by a deluge—from head to foot, so that no part is immune from sin and all that proceeds from him is to be imputed to sin.”⁴¹ Every part of our being needs a full (re)formation and radical renovation.

It is important to add that Calvin and his contemporaries did not contend that the corruption of our character was complete. Calvin, for instance, granted that “God’s image was not totally annihilated and destroyed”⁴² but that “some obscure lineaments of that image are found remaining in us,”⁴³ thus leaving room for the deformed image to be (re)formed by and in Christ.

Were anyone to object and say, that the image of God in human nature has been blotted out by the sin of Adam; we must, indeed, confess that it has been miserably deformed, but in such a way that some of its lineaments still appear. Righteousness and rectitude, and the freedom of choosing what is good, have

⁴⁰John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 8:5. See also *Institutes* 2.1.5.

⁴¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.9. See also *Commentary on Genesis*, 1:26.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 1.15.4. See also 3.3.9.

⁴³Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 1:26.

been lost; but many excellent endowments, by which we excel the brutes, still remain.⁴⁴

However deformed the divine image may be in humankind, God still keeps in view his original end for creation. “God’s children are pleasing and lovable to him, since he sees in them the marks and features of his own countenance. . . . Regeneration is a renewal of the divine image in us.”⁴⁵ Still, the corruption is so complete that we can do nothing on our own to (re)form our character and bring salvation to ourselves. As the Reformers insisted, it is by grace alone (*sola gratia*) that anyone is saved (Eph. 2:8-9).

In the end, the dynamic image of God, which was formed to mirror God’s glory, is so deformed by sin that we can only know what it was meant to be by looking at the person and work of Christ and the (re)formation of the *imago Dei* that he brings. Creation and redemption are thus indissolubly connected to each other. We can best know how we were formed by seeing how we are being (re)formed. “Since the image of God has been destroyed in us by the fall,” Calvin commented, “we may judge from its restoration what it originally had been.”⁴⁶ He elsewhere observed, “We do not have a full definition of ‘image’ if we do not see more plainly those faculties in which man excels, and in which he ought to be thought the reflection of God’s glory. That, indeed, can be nowhere better recognized than from the restoration of his corrupted nature.”⁴⁷ To understand the divine image—the dynamic reflection of God’s glory in the human heart, mind, and soul—we

⁴⁴John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of James*, trans. John Owen, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 22 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 3:9.

⁴⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.17.5. See also Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 9:6.

⁴⁶Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 1:26.

⁴⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.4.

must look at the One who is the image of God; we must look at the heart, mind, and soul of Christ Jesus.

Jesus Christ as the *Imago Dei*

In Scripture, and so subsequently in Calvin's theology, the concept of the divine image is frequently also applied to Jesus Christ. Randall Zachman suggests that "Jesus Christ as the image of the Father is the central theme of Calvin's Christology, unifying his discussion of the person, office, and work of Christ."⁴⁸ In his own words in the *Institutes*, Calvin writes:

God would remain far off, concealed from us, were we not irradiated by the brightness of Christ. All that the Father had, he deposited with his only begotten Son, in order that he might manifest himself in him, and thus by the communication of blessings express the true image of his glory. . . . [T]he invisible Father is to be sought nowhere but in this image.⁴⁹

To understand best Calvin's grasp of how Christ is the *imago Dei*, several key biblical texts must be examined.

Key Biblical Texts

Colossians 1:15 and 2 Corinthians 4:4

The Apostle Paul twice refers to Christ as the "image of God" (εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ), in Colossians 1:15 and in 2 Corinthians 4:4. In the former, "He is the image of the invisible God" (ὃς ἐστὶν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου). F. F. Bruce suggests that Paul is writing autobiographically here of his own experience in encountering the risen Christ.

⁴⁸Randall C. Zachman, "Jesus Christ as the Image of God in Calvin's Theology," *Calvin Theological Journal* 25, no. 1 (1990): 46. See also Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response*, 55-58.

⁴⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, trans. Beveridge, 3.2.1.

As the prophet Ezekiel had a vision of “a figure like that of a man” (Ezek. 1:26), on the Damascus road Paul recognized Jesus not only as the Son of God but also as the image of God.⁵⁰ Christ, Paul saw, is the visible image of the invisible God. Regardless, Paul is certainly alluding to the statement of Genesis 1:26-27. It was shown previously that εἰκών, used in the Greek translation of that text, denotes an image that is not completely separate from the reality it represents, but instead shares its essence. The emphasis is on equality with the original so that “there is no difference here between the image and the essence of the invisible God.”⁵¹ Therefore, Christ who is visible shares and perfectly reveals the nature and being of God who is invisible. As the image of God, Christ is not just a copy of the original; he himself is the original.⁵² In Christ, Paul will add, all the fullness of deity dwells (Col. 1:19; 2:9).

In this context, Paul’s primary emphasis in his use of the phrase, “image of God,” is on manifestation or revelation. Calvin comments on the meaning of Paul’s phrase as follows:

God in himself, that is, in his naked majesty, is *invisible*, and that not to the eyes of the body merely, but also the understandings of men, and that he is revealed to us in Christ alone, that we may behold him as in a mirror. For in Christ he shews [*sic*] us his righteousness, goodness, wisdom, power, in short, his entire self. We must, therefore, beware of seeking him elsewhere, for everything that would set itself off as a representation of God, apart from Christ, will be an idol.⁵³

⁵⁰F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 57.

⁵¹Flender, 288. See also Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 57-58; Gerhard Kittel, “εἰκών: The Metaphorical Use of Image in the NT,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 395.

⁵²Bromiley, “Image of God,” 805.

⁵³Calvin, *Commentary on Colossians*, 1:15. See also Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.1.

No one has ever seen God, but the Son of God has made him known (John 1:18) because the Son shows us the Father (John 14:9).

Calvin understands the apostle's use of the phrase in 2 Corinthians 4:4 in similar functional terms. Christ is called "image of God" because "he represents the Father to us. The Father himself is represented as *invisible*, because he is himself not apprehended by the human understanding. He exhibits himself, however, to us by his Son, and makes himself in a manner visible."⁵⁴ That Paul's use of εἰκών in 2 Corinthians 4:4 carries connotations of something being manifest is bolstered by the pericope's recurring theme of revelation and of seeing "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (4:4). In 4:2, Paul speaks of the manifestation of the truth (τῇ φανερώσει τῆς ἀληθείας), and in 4:11 of the life of Jesus being made manifest (ἡ ζωὴ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ φανερωθῇ). This leads Ralph Martin to conclude, "Εἰκών here, in these Christological texts, means that Christ is not only the full representation of God, but the coming-to-expression of the nature of God, the making visible (here are links with φανερόω—φάνερωσις, 'revelation' words in this context) of who God is in himself."⁵⁵

Our understanding of the phrase, εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ, can also be informed by our previous discussion of the divine image in humankind's creation. In Christ, the *imago Dei* has an element of physicality as the Word becomes flesh (John 1:14) and the invisible God is made visible. In Christ, the image of God reveals dominion over the created order as Paul follows the descriptor with the explanation, "For by him all things

⁵⁴Calvin, *Commentary on Second Corinthians*, 4:4.

⁵⁵Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 40 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986), 79.

were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him” (Col. 1:16). In Christ, the divine image reveals relational capacity as Jesus and the Father are one, all that the Father has is his, and eternal life consists in knowing them both (John 10:30; 16:15; 17:3). In Christ, sinful and temporal human beings receive one who mediates the presence of the holy and transcendent Creator: “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). Jesus is the fullness and perfection of the *imago Dei*.

Hebrews 1:3

The writer of Hebrews uses a somewhat different phrase, referring to Christ as the exact imprint or representation of God’s nature or being (1:3; χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ). The Greek term χαρακτήρ (*charaktēr*) first denoted “die” (a tool used in minting coins), and then further senses, such as “image,” “impress,” “stamp,” “seal,” or “sign.”⁵⁶ The term is linked in Hebrews 1:3 with God’s glory; thus, the writer of Hebrews reveals that God’s glory has been stamped or imprinted on Christ who is its reflection and image. Christ not only contains God’s glory but also discloses it to the world.⁵⁷ According to Bruce, “He is the very image of the essence of God—the impress of his being. . . . The Greek word *charaktēr*, occurring only here in the New Testament, expresses this truth even more emphatically than *eikōn*, which is used elsewhere to denote Christ as the

⁵⁶Ulrich Wilckens, “χαρακτήρ,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey William Bromiley, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 9.418.

⁵⁷J. Gess, “Image, Idol, Imprint, Example: χαρακτήρ,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 4 vols., ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 2.288-289; Wilckens, “χαρακτήρ,” 9.422.

‘image’ of God.”⁵⁸ Again, however, Calvin sees in this an emphasis on the way in which the Son reveals the Father. “He is called the impress of his substance, because the majesty of the Father is hidden until it shews [*sic*] itself impressed as it were on his image.”⁵⁹

Summarizing Calvin on Christ as *Imago Dei*

Christ, according to Calvin, is “the lively image of the Father.”⁶⁰ He is the image of God because he is the divine Word of God incarnate. Yet, Christ must also bear the *imago Dei* as one who was also truly human. “Calvin thought of Christ as bearing the image of God in virtue of His human nature in addition to the fact that He was the image of God in the sense of the eternal Word.”⁶¹ In Christ, the divine image as designed by God at Creation for all human beings still shines forth without being deformed by sin. “If Christ has become the ‘old man’ in order to be put to death for us, so too he is the ‘new man’ who has recreated our broken and fallen humanity, taking it up into a life of obedient and loving sonship, living out this life in our stead, sanctifying our flesh, and offering it to the Father for us.”⁶² Thus, Christ can be our blueprint for the (re)formed life. Jesus did not come to show us how to live as gods, but how to live truly and fully as

⁵⁸F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Hebrews*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee, Rev. ed., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 48.

⁵⁹John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, trans. John Owen, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 22 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 1:3.

⁶⁰Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 14:1. See also Torrance, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Man*, 42, 56.

⁶¹Torrance, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Man*, 60. See also Hart, “Humankind in Christ and Christ in Humankind,” 73-74; Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 107-109; Zachman: 51-52.

⁶²Hart, “Humankind in Christ and Christ in Humankind,” 76. See also Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.9.

human beings (John 13:15-17; 14:6). After the Scripture teaches “that we have degenerated from the true origin and condition of our creation,” Calvin said, “it also adds that Christ, through whom we return into favor with God, has been set before us as an example, whose pattern we ought to express in our life.”⁶³ To know what it means to be fully and truly human and to live accordingly, we cannot look to others or ourselves because all have been deformed by sin. We must look to Christ alone who, as *The Nicene Creed* reminds us, is both “true God from true God” and “truly human.” To see the *imago Dei* in humanity we must look to Jesus.

Regrettably, much of evangelical theology today assumes that a sufficient and even complete understanding of the *imago Dei* can be discerned by examining God’s act of creation. Yet, as Grenz argues, the full significance of humankind’s creation in the divine image can only be grasped when understood from a Christological perspective, that is, from the vantage point of Christ and (re)formed humanity in Christ.

When the nature of the human person is assumed to emerge solely from creation—i.e. apart from Christ—and when Christ is cast as, above all, the divine antidote to human sin, not only is anthropology cut loose from any Christological grounding, but Christology is also made dependent on anthropology. . . . Creation becomes the background or stage for the drama of the fall and subsequent restoration of humankind, rather than the arena in which Christ is Lord and as Lord completes the human vocation to be the *imago Dei*.⁶⁴

In such a theological setting, Calvin’s emphasis on Christ as the true and full image of God may provide a much-needed corrective.

⁶³Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.6.3.

⁶⁴Grenz, “Jesus as the *Imago Dei*,” 626.

The Blueprint: Christ as Our Pattern for the (Re)Formed Life

“Now we see how Christ is the most perfect image of God,” wrote Calvin, “if we are conformed to it, we are so restored that with true piety, righteousness, purity, and intelligence we bear God’s image.”⁶⁵ Unfortunately, as Richard Prins observed, “In *The Institutes* there is a whole chapter devoted to the image and soul as created, but there is no section allotted to the image in his discussions of restoration. Rather, Calvin discusses salvation, placing the image inside the larger whole and subservient to it.”⁶⁶ As a result, to begin to understand better Calvin’s grasp of Christ as our pattern or blueprint for the divine image and a reformed life, it will again be useful to review his interpretation of several key biblical texts.

Key Biblical Texts

Romans 8:29

Not only is God’s Son the image of God (Col. 1:15; 2 Cor. 4:4), but according to the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:29 believers are to be conformed to “the image of his son” (τῆς εἰκόνης τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ). In the eighth chapter of Romans, Paul has been focusing on God’s sure redemptive work through history and the hope provided for the future. As he remarks on the Christian’s destiny, he turns to the divine image. James Dunn suggests, “Christ is the image of God which Adam was intended to be, the Son as the pattern of God’s finished product. . . . It should be noted that Paul has in view the *risen* Christ, the

⁶⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.4.

⁶⁶Richard Prins, “Image of God in Adam and the Restoration of Man in Jesus Christ: A Study in Calvin,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 25 (1972): 32.

exalted Christ of the last age, not Jesus as he was on earth; the end of God's creative purpose is resurrection, not incarnation."⁶⁷

As Calvin comments on this text, he claims that Paul does not state that we are to be conformed to Christ but to *the image of Christ*, "that he might teach us that there is in Christ a living and conspicuous exemplar, which is exhibited to God's children for imitation." Calvin adds, "No one can be an heir of heaven without being conformed to the image of the only-begotten Son of God."⁶⁸ Being conformed to the image of the Son was purposed by God from the beginning. The redemptive plan of God has always been that fallen human beings be conformed to the image of the Son who is himself the image of God. This is, to use Grenz's phrase, "the Christological intent of God's foreordination."⁶⁹ Romans 8:29 reveals not that God's elect were not predestined to be transferred from one setting (this earthly life) to another setting (the heavenly life to come), but instead that they are to be transformed from one creation (Adam) to another creation (Christ). The creation of Adam was not the fulfillment of God's intent for humankind as the *imago Dei*; Christ reveals the fullness of humanity that has been God's design for humankind from the beginning. According to Hughes, "From eternity to eternity Christiformity is God's purpose for his creature, man. And because it is the end willed by God it cannot fail of fulfillment."⁷⁰ Thus, the deformed *imago Dei* is to be (re)formed.

⁶⁷James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 38 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), 8:29.

⁶⁸John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen, Calvin's Commentaries, vol. 19 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 8:29.

⁶⁹Grenz, "Jesus as the *Imago Dei*," 623.

⁷⁰Hughes, *The True Image*, 27.

1 Corinthians 15:45-49

The connection and contrast between Adam and Christ in Paul's theology is more explicit in 1 Corinthians 15:45-49. In this pericope, located in a chapter of Paul's letter focusing on the nature and extent of the resurrection to come with Christ's return, the apostle includes a comparison between the first Adam who is from the earth and the last Adam who is from heaven. Also included is a promise in 15:49, "And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven" (καὶ καθὼς ἐφορέσαμεν τὴν εἰκόνα τοῦ χοϊκοῦ, φορέσομεν⁷¹ καὶ τὴν εἰκόνα τοῦ ἐπουρανίου). At present, mortal men and women, even those who are in Christ, wear the image of Adam, the man created from dust (Gen. 2:7); yet, at the resurrection, those who are in Christ will wear the image of Christ that is already being (re)formed inwardly within them.

According to Calvin, the meaning of the text is as follows:

As the *animal nature*, which has the *precedency* in us, is the image of Adam, so we shall be conformed to Christ in the *heavenly nature*; and this will be the completion of our restoration. For we now begin to bear the image of Christ, and are every day more and more transformed into it; but that image consists in spiritual regeneration. But *then* it will be fully restored both in body and in soul, and what is now begun will be perfected, and *accordingly* we will obtain in reality what we as yet only hope for.⁷²

2 Corinthians 3:17-18

The inward transformation into the image of Christ is touched upon in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians where he writes that, as we behold the glory of the Lord

⁷¹There is a textual variant of φορέσωμεν ("let us bear"); however, this aorist subjunctive is to be rejected in favor of the future indicative, as the context requires a promise of what is to come rather than an exhortation.

⁷²Calvin, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, 15:49.

as in a mirror, we “are being transformed into his likeness” (τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα μεταμορφούμεθα). Paul does not simply equate being in Christ with bearing the image of Christ; rather, he declares that those who behold the glory of the Lord share together in a process of metamorphosis that is gradual and progressive, and that is complete only at the resurrection.⁷³ “Observe,” comments Calvin, “that the design of the gospel is this—that the image of God, which had been effaced by sin, may be stamped anew upon us, and that the advancement of this restoration may be continually going forward in us during our whole life, because God makes his glory shine forth in us by little and little.”⁷⁴ Calvin insisted that this work of the Spirit “from glory to glory” meant that we were to be constantly making progress. Further, Paul’s use of the passive tense of μεταμορφώω (*metamorphóō*) emphasizes that this is ultimately a work of the Spirit and not of the believer.

Colossians 3:9-10 and Ephesians 4:20-24

In Colossians 3 and Ephesians 4, the (re)formation of the divine image in the believer is conjoined with the need for accompanying ethical action. Those who are being renewed in the *imago Dei* must live accordingly. In the first text, Paul reminded the Colossians that they had not only stripped off the old self but put on the new, the one being renewed in knowledge “in the image of its Creator” (κατ’ εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν). Such a renewal in the image of the Creator is a renewal in the image of Christ

⁷³Grenz, “Jesus as the *Imago Dei*,” 624.

⁷⁴Calvin, *Commentary on Second Corinthians*, 3:18.

who is the visible image of the invisible God and by whom all things were created (Col. 1:15-16).

The old person, the one bearing the deformed image of God in his or her earthly nature, is characterized by sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed, anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, and lies (Col. 3:5-9). Now, however, the new person, the one being (re)formed in the image of God in Christ, must become in practical day-to-day reality what he or she is already in fact. Arthur Patzia observes, “To express this process the Greek uses a present passive participle (*anakainoumenon*) to indicate that renewal is continuous (the present) and that it has an outside source (the passive).”⁷⁵ One consequence of putting on the new self, according to Paul, is a new knowledge. Bruce comments, “The ‘knowledge’ (*gnōsis*) that was held out to the Colossians was a distorted and imperfect thing in comparison with the true knowledge accessible to those who, through their union with Christ, had been transformed by the renewing of their minds.”⁷⁶

While Paul’s reference to knowledge may lead some to see this in relational terms as the believer comes to deeper and fuller knowledge of God,⁷⁷ Calvin equates Paul’s use of being “renewed in knowledge” with “transforming the whole man.” Regarding Paul’s reference to the divine image, Calvin strikes a familiar refrain:

Now, the image of God resides in the whole of the soul, inasmuch as it is not the reason merely that is rectified, but also the will. Hence, too, we learn, on the one hand, what is the end of our regeneration, that is, that we may be made like God, and that his glory may shine forth in us; and, on the other hand, what is the image of God, of which mention is made by Moses in Genesis 9:6, the rectitude and integrity of the whole soul, so that man reflects, like a mirror, the wisdom,

⁷⁵Arthur G. Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*, New International Biblical Commentary Series, vol. 10 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1990), 76.

⁷⁶Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 148.

⁷⁷See Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*, 76-77.

righteousness, and goodness of God. . . . Paul, at the same time, teaches, that there is nothing more excellent at which the Colossians can aspire, inasmuch as this is our highest perfection and blessedness—to bear the image of God.⁷⁸

The language of Ephesians 4:20-24 differs somewhat, but Calvin sees the meaning as being the same. Again, we find an encouragement to put off the old self, to be renewed in the mind, and to put on “the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (τὸν καινὸν ἄνθρωπον τὸν κατὰ θεὸν κτισθέντα ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ καὶ ὁσιότητι τῆς ἀληθείας). Calvin sees the reference to “creation” (κτίζω) as possibly referring to either the first creation of humankind or the second creation brought about by Christ’s grace.

Adam was at first created after the image of God, and reflected, as in a mirror, the Divine righteousness; but that image, having been defaced by sin, must now be restored in Christ. The regeneration of the godly is indeed . . . nothing else than the formation anew of the image of God in them. There is, no doubt, a far more rich and powerful manifestation of Divine grace in this second creation than in the first; but our highest perfection is uniformly represented in Scripture as consisting in our conformity and resemblance to God. Adam lost the image which he had originally received, and therefore it becomes necessary that it shall be restored to us by Christ. The design contemplated by regeneration is to recall us from our wanderings to that end for which we were created.⁷⁹

2 Peter 1:4

A final passage to consider comes from 2 Peter in which we are told that through the promises of God, “you may participate in the divine nature” (γένησθε θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως). In the context of the book, the emphasis is on a future prospect and not on a present experience.⁸⁰ Calvin remarks on this passage, “Let us then mark, that the end of

⁷⁸Calvin, *Commentary on Colossians*, 3.10.

⁷⁹Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians*, 4:24.

⁸⁰Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 50 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 181-182.

the gospel is, to render us eventually conformable to God, and, if we may so speak, to Deify us.” However, he immediately adds, “the word *nature* is not here essence but *quality*.” Moreover, he contends that the Apostle only means to say that, “When divested of all the vices of the flesh, we shall be partakers of divine and blessed immortality and glory, so as to be as it were one with God as far as our capacities will allow.” Consequently, Calvin argues, we ought to be satisfied with this one thing: “the image of God in holiness and righteousness is restored to us for this end, that we may at length be partakers of eternal life and glory as far as it will be necessary for our complete felicity.”⁸¹

Reforming Our Character According to the Divine Image in Christ

Clearly, we may best see what the divine image is in Christ, who is the perfect and living image of God; and we are to be transformed into that image. Ronald Wallace refers to this as the most important aspect of Calvin’s conception of the Christian life.⁸² The (re)formation of our character in the *imago Dei* is where our deliverance starts. In *The Institutes*, Calvin says:

Even though we grant that God’s image was not totally annihilated and destroyed in [Adam], yet it was so corrupted that whatever remains is frightful deformity. Consequently, *the beginning of our recovery of salvation is in that restoration which we obtain through Christ*, who also is called the Second Adam for the reason that he restores us to true and complete integrity. For even though Paul, contrasting the life-giving spirit that the believers receive from Christ with the living soul in which Adam was created (1 Cor. 15:45), commends the richer measure of grace in regeneration, yet he does not remove that other principal

⁸¹John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Second Epistle of Peter*, trans. John Owen, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 22 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 1:4.

⁸²Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 107.

point, that *the end of regeneration is that Christ should reform us to God's image* [emphasis mine].⁸³

Thus, not only is the (re)formation of our character the beginning of our salvation but also the end. Calvin later adds:

Therefore, in a word, I interpret repentance as regeneration, whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God that has been disfigured and all but obliterated through Adam's transgression. . . . Accordingly, we are restored by this regeneration through the benefit of Christ into the righteousness of God; from which we had fallen through Adam. In this way it pleases the Lord fully to restore whomsoever he adopts into the inheritance of life.⁸⁴

Consequently, at both the beginning and the end of salvation, Calvin sees the (re)formation of our character after the image of God revealed in Christ as essential. It is not optional. It is not to be minimized. "The Lord has adopted us to be his children on this condition," Calvin argues, "that we reveal an imitation of Christ who is the mediator of our adoption."⁸⁵

Christ's likeness, the blueprint for the (re)formation of our character, must not be seen as something foreign to our humanity. It is who we were created to be. The theme of "becoming who I'm meant to be" resonates deeply with our common human experience, so much so that it is even popular in Hollywood and the storylines of major motion pictures. Next to "good versus evil" and "finding true love," the most popular theme in movies may be the notion of someone discovering and living into their true identity. If you like old musicals, recall the character Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*. If you like science fiction, think of Neo in *The Matrix*. If you like drama, think of Seabiscuit going from dog food to derby winner. If you like animated features, it is Buzz Lightyear in *Toy*

⁸³Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.4.

⁸⁴Ibid., 3.3.9.

⁸⁵Calvin, *The Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*, 19.

Story discovering that he is a toy, and Fiona in *Shrek* discovering that being an ogre is beautiful. If you like fantasy, recall Harry Potter realizing he's not a muggle, or think of Aragorn assuming his role as king in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

It must be noted, however, that our transformation into the *imago Dei* includes a change *to* our essential nature but not a change *of* our essential nature. "And when Paul discusses the restoration of the image," contends Calvin, "it is clear that we should infer from his words that man is made to conform to God, not by an inflowing of substance, but by the grace and power of the Spirit . . . who surely works in us without rendering us consubstantial with God."⁸⁶ Our character (re)formation, with its process of putting off the old self and putting on the new self created in God's likeness (Eph. 4:22-24; Col 3:9-10), is the process of becoming who we truly are. John Leith finds evidence of this even in Calvin's vocabulary.

The words Calvin used to describe the Christian life point back to some previous state. *Reparatio*, *regeneratio*, *instauratio*, *reformatio*, *renovatio*, and *restitutio* all indicate that the Christian life is a redoing of something that has been done. On occasions, this work of repairing, renewal, restoration is spoken of as creation. At first sight this is something of a contradiction, but on closer examination the word "creation" does not indicate a complete break in the continuity of the old person and the new person. Redemption is renewal, not the substitution of one person for another. The word "creation" underscores the fact that this work is of God and not of humans. Because repentance is a kind of second creation, it follows that it is not in human power. The point is that the grace of repentance does not create a new person but renews a person who has been broken by sin.⁸⁷

The renewed or (re)formed person, the new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), must necessarily involve all fundamental aspects of our humanity. We saw previously that the *imago Dei* is essentially spiritual, but it is worked out through every area of human life so

⁸⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.5. See also Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 108.

⁸⁷Leith, 71.

that “there was no part of man, not even the body itself, in which some sparks did not glow.”⁸⁸ Consequently, God’s (re)formation of our character must be essentially spiritual, but it must also be worked out through every area of life. It will involve mind and heart, body and soul. “The salvation wrought in Christ, Calvin believes, involves a total renewing and remaking of human nature, such that it can be described as a ‘rebirth,’ a description which must not be given a purely spiritual reference.”⁸⁹ The phrase “born again” refers not to “the correction of one part, but the renovation of the whole nature.”⁹⁰ This may beg the question of whether the (re)formation of the divine image is only a restoration of what was present in Adam, or if it includes a level of advancement. As Leith states the question, “At its completion, is the redeemed person further along than Adam was at the beginning? The answer is yes, for Calvin did regard the condition of the regenerate person as superior to that of Adam. There is a far richer and more powerful manifestation of divine grace in redemption than in the first creation.”⁹¹

As the (re)formation of the divine image extends to all aspects of our humanity, so it also extends across time.

And indeed this restoration does not take place in one moment or one day or one year; but through continual and sometimes even slow advances God wipes out in his elect the corruptions of the flesh, cleanses them of guilt, consecrates them to himself as temples renewing all their minds to true purity that they may practice

⁸⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.4.

⁸⁹Hart, “Humankind in Christ and Christ in Humankind,” 73.

⁹⁰Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 3:3. See also *Institutes*, 3.3.5-6. Contra Torrance, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Man*, 55. He writes, “It is essentially a ‘heavenly image’ or a ‘celestial image’.” Calvin does speak of it as a quality, but it is quite clear that he does not mean any heightening of our physical existence. Eventually, man will receive an entirely new nature, but until then he possesses that only in faith. Meantime, however, the renewal of the believer does partly restore him to his true and substantial *integrity*, *rectitude* and *temperature*, which were deformed by the loss of the spiritual image, and it does that because it brings with it knowledge, righteousness, and holiness.”

⁹¹Leith, 73.

repentance throughout their lives and know that this warfare will end only at death.⁹²

God will carry on to completion the good work he has begun in our (re)formation (Phil. 1:6) until our whole life is perfectly conformed to the image of God. “Perfection must be the final mark at which we aim, and the goal for which we strive.”⁹³ This perfection will not be fully attained in this life; although the holiness of the church has begun, “so long as there is daily progress, there cannot be perfection.”⁹⁴ Against the “frenzied excess” of the Anabaptists of his day, Calvin insisted that those in Christ would still be besieged by many vices and bodily weaknesses in this life, entanglements that they must daily fight as they are still far from perfection.⁹⁵ “Believers have never advanced so far as not to need farther growth. The highest perfection of the godly in this life is an earnest desire to make progress.”⁹⁶

“Now this is not to deny a place for growth,” adds Calvin; “rather I say, the closer any man comes to the likeness of God, the more the image of God shines in him. In order that believers may reach this goal, God assigns to them a race of repentance, which they are to run throughout their lives.”⁹⁷ This race of repentance is by no means easy. It requires intense effort on our part. “We must not toil slowly or listlessly, much less give

⁹²Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.9.

⁹³Calvin, *The Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*, 22.

⁹⁴Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians*, 5:27.

⁹⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.14.

⁹⁶Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians*, 3:16.

⁹⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.9.

up.”⁹⁸ Calvin’s vivid description of the imperfection and endeavor of the Christian life in the *Institutes* is worth quoting in full:

But no one in this earthly prison of the body has sufficient strength to press on with due eagerness, and weakness so weighs down the greater number that, with wavering and limping and even creeping along the ground, they move at a feeble rate. Let each one of us, then, proceed according to the measure of his puny capacity and set out upon the journey we have begun. No one shall set out so inauspiciously as not daily to make some headway, though it be slight. Therefore, let us not cease so to act that we may make some unceasing progress in the way of the Lord. And let us not despair at the slowness of our success; for even though attainment may not correspond to desire, when today outstrips yesterday the effort is not lost. Only let us look toward our mark with sincere simplicity and aspire to our goal; not fondly flattering ourselves, nor excusing our own evil deeds, but with continuous striving toward this end: that we may surpass ourselves in goodness until we attain to goodness itself. It is this, indeed, which through the whole course of life we seek and follow. But we shall attain it only when we have cast off the weakness of the body, and are received into full fellowship with him.⁹⁹

Lest the picture painted here be too bleak, a final word must be added that the believer’s being (re)formed after the pattern or blueprint of Christ, the living image of God, depends not so much on pure imitation as upon union with Christ. On the one hand, Christ’s followers are indeed to obey Christ’s commands and abide in his love just as he kept the Father’s commands abides in the Father’s love (Jn. 15:10). On this Calvin comments, “As we have been elected in Christ, so in him the image of our calling is exhibited to us in a lively manner; and therefore he justly holds himself out to us as a pattern, to the imitation of which all the godly ought to be conformed.”¹⁰⁰ Christ is the Christian’s example. If one claims to live in him, one must live as Jesus lived (1 Jn. 2:6). On the other hand, conformity to the blueprint of Christ Jesus does not—indeed cannot—

⁹⁸Ibid., 4.1.20.

⁹⁹Ibid., 3.6.5.

¹⁰⁰Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 15:10.

occur outside of “a secret union, by which we are joined to him.”¹⁰¹ Calvin speaks of imitation of Christ in the context of union with Christ. Believers are not simply exhorted to be like Christ by copying his actions without also recognizing that their insertion into the mysteries of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection proves that they ought to be like him.¹⁰² It is because Christ lives and is vigorous in believers that they might have the image of God reformed in them after the example of Christ.¹⁰³ This wonderful mystery of a spiritual union with Christ forms the foundation upon which we may build a (re)formed life after the blueprint of Christ. This will be the subject of our next chapter.

¹⁰¹ Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 6:5.

¹⁰² Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin*, 99; Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 47. See also Calvin, *Commentary on First John*, 2:6.

¹⁰³ Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 8:44; 15:10.

CHAPTER 4

UNION WITH CHRIST:

THE FOUNDATION FOR BUILDING A (RE)FORMED LIFE

For no one can lay any other foundation than the one we already have—Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 3:11 (NLT)

Therefore, that joining of Head 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.

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*¹

Q. 20. Will all men, then, be saved through Christ as they became lost through Adam?

A. No. Only those who, by true faith, are incorporated into him and accept all his benefits.

*The Heidelberg Catechism*²

In order to build a (re)formed life, a strong and secure foundation is essential. In this chapter we will see how having the deformed character, reformed after the image of Christ, requires a spiritual union with Christ. To have the deformed *imago Dei* within believers rebuilt according to the blueprint of Jesus Christ, they must be united with the One who is the perfect *imago Dei*. This must be the starting point, for it is the union with Christ that empowers the (re)formed life and makes it possible.

In this chapter, then, we will first examine the central role that incorporation into Christ plays in Calvin's soteriology. We will see that, for Calvin, union with Christ is an

¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.10.

²*The Heidelberg Catechism*, 4.020.

absolute necessity because Christ the Savior can never be separated from his saving work. In the following section, we will consider how it is that Calvin understood believers to be united with Christ. Finally, we will explore how union with Christ is, paradoxically, both an objective possession and a subjective progression.

The Necessity of the Union with Christ in Calvin's Theology

The *unio mystica*, the mystical union of Jesus Christ with believers, plays a central role in the theology of John Calvin. Union with Christ is the linchpin that holds Calvin's soteriology together; it is the pivot upon which it turns. While it is popular to view Reformed theology as being built upon the doctrine of predestination or eternal decrees, interpreters of Calvin have labeled the believer's union with Christ as "the real center of Calvinism,"³ "the central theme of Calvin's theology,"⁴ "the essence of salvation" in Calvin's writings,⁵ and "the real heart of holiness in the Reformed tradition."⁶ Calvin himself declared, "Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance."⁷

Broadly speaking, all of the benefits of salvation discussed in chapter 2—justification that (re)forms our communion with God; adoption that (re)forms our community with others; sanctification that (re)forms our character within us—are all

³Hageman, "Reformed Spirituality," 60.

⁴Hart, "Humankind in Christ and Christ in Humankind," 81.

⁵Niesel, 125.

⁶Rice, *Reformed Spirituality*, 66.

⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.10.

located in the person of Christ. We are deprived of “this utterly incomparable good” until we are in Christ and Christ is made ours.⁸ Union with Christ, then, becomes what Kevin Kennedy refers to as “the actualizing event of our salvation in the theology of Calvin.”⁹ Calvin did not analyze various stages of the Christian life and experience in the ways often done today, using categories such as conversion, justification, sanctification, or glorification. Calvin is relentlessly Christocentric. He insists on beginning with Jesus Christ, and he makes the believer’s union with Christ the starting point or fount from which all understanding and appropriation of God’s saving work must flow.¹⁰ Any discussion of Calvin’s theology of the Christian life, then, must start not with the imitation of Christ (*imitatio Christi*) but with the mystical union (*unio mystica*). Building a (re)formed life, then, is not simply a matter of copying the pattern of Christ. Jesus did not come only to show us the way; Jesus *is* the Way (John 14:6).

After discussing first the knowledge of God the Creator and then of God the Redeemer in Christ in the beginning two books of the *Institutes*, Calvin titles Book Three, “The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us from It, and What Effects Follow.”¹¹ It is by no means insignificant that Calvin begins this new

⁸Ibid.

⁹Kevin Dixon Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement in Calvin*, ed. Hemchand Gossai, *Studies in Biblical Literature*, vol. 48 (New York: P. Lang, 2002), 99. Kennedy adds, “Union with Christ is not simply something we experience as a result of our justification. Rather, union with Christ is seen by Calvin as that which brings about our justification. Because we are made one with the one who was made to be salvation for us, all of the benefits which he won for us on the cross accrue to us because we are joined to him.” See Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.23.

¹⁰Hageman, “Reformed Spirituality,” 61.

¹¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.

chapter with a clear statement regarding the necessity of one's union with Christ if one is to receive the benefits of salvation that reside in Christ.

How do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only-begotten Son—not for Christ's own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men? First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us. . . . All that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him.¹²

Hence, Calvin proclaimed not only the possibility but also the necessity of real oneness with Christ if the benefits of his death are to be applied to us.¹³

The person of Christ the Savior can never be separated from his ministry of saving. Consequently, one cannot receive any part of salvation—the (re)formation of deformed communion, community, or character—apart from being united with the one in whom salvation is found, Jesus Christ. “This union alone ensures that, as far as we are concerned, he has not unprofitably come with the name of Savior.”¹⁴ Expressed positively, all that Christ possesses becomes ours as we are united with him. Writes Calvin, “Since Christ has been so imparted to you with all his benefits that all his things are made yours, that you are made a member of him, indeed one with him, his righteousness overwhelms your sins; his salvation wipes out your condemnation; with his worthiness he intercedes that your unworthiness may not come before God's sight.”¹⁵

¹²Ibid., 3.1.1.

¹³Clive S. Chin, “*Unio Mystica and Imitatio Christi: The Two-Dimensional Nature of John Calvin's Spirituality*” (Ph.D. Diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2002), 262; Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement in Calvin*, 59; Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin*, 174.

¹⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.3.

¹⁵Ibid., 3.2.24.

Moreover, when believers are united with Christ, they receive not only Christ's benefits, but they actually receive Christ himself. Calvin contends, "For we await salvation from him not because he appears to us afar off, but because he makes us, ingrafted [*sic*] into his body, participants not only in all his benefits *but also in himself*" (emphasis mine).¹⁶ We must remember that in Christ Jesus God gave neither a self-existent benefits package for salvation nor an independent pathway to receiving salvation; instead, God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son (John 3:16). In Calvin's theology, salvation or atonement was not something that operated outside of Christ, a debt for which he needed merely to provide payment. Salvation was not so much something Christ had to obtain as it was something Christ had to become.¹⁷ We are better off, then, not speaking about the saving benefits of God's grace but instead speaking first of Christ.¹⁸

This truth applies not only to the salvation found in Christ but also to the way in which one "receives salvation." The end of the gospel of Jesus Christ is not a new relationship between the sinner and some commodity of salvation purchased for humanity and now to be received; it is a reformed relationship with the Savior himself. Salvation and the Savior, the gift and the Giver, are never separated. Jesus does not simply proclaim the gospel; he is the essential content of the gospel. The believer, then,

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement in Calvin*, 137.

¹⁸This may be contrasted with some popular gospel presentations that emphasize substitutionary work of Christ without equal time to participation in Christ. We are often instructed to pray to "receive forgiveness and eternal life" rather than to pray to "receive Christ."

does not receive *salvation*, but receives *Christ*.¹⁹ Wilhelm Niesel, a renowned interpreter of Calvin, summarizes Calvin's view as follows: "We do not receive gifts of grace but the one gift, Jesus Christ. . . . God's gift to us is not something, not a power, not an improvement of our own nature. Nor does God give us part of His own being. Rather He imparts to us Himself, which means: He gives us Jesus Christ as our own."²⁰

How We Are United with Christ

As we begin to examine how believers are united with Christ so that the deformed *imago Dei* might be (re)formed in Christ's likeness, it must be acknowledged that Calvin applied an aspect of union to all of humanity. On one level, there is a union with Christ experienced by all human beings through the hypostatic union of the incarnation because the Word became flesh (John 1:14).²¹ "Because God's children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—Jesus also became flesh and blood by being born in human form" (Heb. 2:14 NLT). Though Christ Jesus was in very nature God, he "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Phil. 2:6-7).

Thus, all humanity shares a common nature with Christ as he has joined himself with humankind on a fraternal level. According to Kennedy, "Since Christ shared this common fraternal union with all of humanity, in Calvin's mind, Christ's death could have been nothing other than a death for all of humanity. Yet Calvin is quick to indicate that

¹⁹Hart, "Humankind in Christ and Christ in Humankind," 70; Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement in Calvin*, 110; Marcel, "Relation between Justification and Sanctification in Calvin's Thought," 136.

²⁰Niesel, 122.

²¹For this element of Calvin's Christology, see *Institutes*, 2.13-14.

this fraternal union of flesh is not salvific.”²² True children of God are not born of flesh and blood alone but of the Spirit of God (John 1:13; 3:5) “Flesh alone does not make the union of brotherhood,” writes Calvin. Therefore, he adds:

Even though the apostle assigns to believers alone the honor of being one with Christ, it does not follow that unbelievers cannot be born of the same source. For example, when we say that Christ was made man that he might make us children of God, this expression does not extend to all men. For faith intervenes, to engraft us spiritually into the body of Christ.²³

Calvin insists that a subsequent and further spiritual union is necessary for us to come to share in the salvific benefits that Christ possesses.

Calvin’s Terminology

The spiritual union of believers with Christ is described by Calvin through a variety of terms and images. The actual term “mystical union” (*unio mystica*) occurs only twice in the *Institutes*. The first is a brief interpretation of Jesus’ reference in Matthew 19:4-6 to Genesis’ “the two will become one flesh” statement. Calvin merely comments, “Here he is not discussing the mystical union with which he graced the church, but only fidelity in marriage.”²⁴ The second and more significant passage, quoted in part previously, merits a more complete citation:

Therefore, that joining of Head 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. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us

²²Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement in Calvin*, 149.

²³Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.13.2.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 2.12.7.

but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him.²⁵

Believers come to God through Christ alone who took on our humanity; therefore, the believers' union is mediated through Christ alone as their humanity is joined to him in whom all the benefits of salvation reside.

The image Calvin most frequently used for union with Christ was that of being “engrafted” (*insero, insitio*) into Christ.²⁶ Though not as frequent, other common images in Calvin's writings include “communion” (*communio, communico*), “partaking” (*participes*), “fellowship” (*societas*), “spiritual union” (*coniunctio spiritualis*), and “growing together” (*coalesce*). While these different terms are used, it is essential to note that all of them point to a unique and mysterious relationship or bond between Christ and believers.

Thus far, we have primarily referred to the spiritual union as a union with Christ. This begs the question of whether or not Calvin ever speaks more generically of a union with God, or similarly if he focuses the union exclusively on the Son as opposed to the Father and the Spirit. In response to the former, Howard Rice contends that, unlike some medieval forms of spirituality that spoke of “union with God,” Reformed spirituality has centered on “union with Christ.”²⁷ Calvin does indeed write at times, in both the *Institutes* and in his commentaries, of “union with God.”²⁸ However, Calvin regularly

²⁵Ibid., 3.11.10.

²⁶This discussion of Calvin's terminology is based largely on lists in Dennis E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 111-113. See also Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement in Calvin*, 116.

²⁷Rice, *Reformed Spirituality*, 66.

²⁸E.g., Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.6.2, 3.25.2; Calvin, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, 3:23.

speaks of a union with God in the context of the mediation of Christ. He argues, “We can be fully and firmly joined with God *only when Christ joins us with him*” (emphasis mine).²⁹ “While for the short time we wander away from God, Christ stands in our midst, to lead us little by little to a firm union with God.”³⁰ Moreover, in commenting on the statement in 1 John 4:15 that God abides or lives in all who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, Calvin contends that the author is repeating the truth “that we are united to God by Christ, and that we cannot be connected with Christ except God abides in us.”³¹

Does Calvin’s emphatically Christ-centered understanding of spiritual union dismiss or even demote the Father and Spirit? Emphatically not. In one place, as Calvin states that in baptism we receive sure testimony “that we are not only engrafted into the death and life of Christ, but so united to Christ himself that we become sharers in all his blessings,” he speaks of the Father, Son, and Spirit, respectively, as the “cause,” “matter,” and “effect” of our purification and regeneration.³² Elsewhere in his refutation of his theological opponent, Andreas Osiander (1498-1552), Calvin agrees that not only Christ but also the Father and the Holy Spirit dwell in us; however, he insists, “the Father and Spirit are in Christ, and even as the fullness of Deity dwells in him (Col. 2:9), so in him we possess the whole of Deity.”³³

²⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.3.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 2.15.5.

³¹John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Epistle of John*, trans. John Owen, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 22 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 4:15.

³²Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.15.6.

³³*Ibid.*, 3.11.5.

Union with Christ Mediated by the Holy Spirit

Spiritual union with Christ requires the work of the Spirit who unites the believer to Christ. One comes to enjoy Christ and all his benefits only through what Calvin calls “the secret energy of the Spirit.” He insists, “The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.”³⁴ The Spirit proceeds from Christ and bridges the gulf between Christ and the sinner. If we neglect this truth, we fall into the error of supposing that there can be an immediate connection between Christ and us.³⁵ Without the Spirit’s work of making Christ dwell in us, all that Christ has done for our salvation remains useless and of no value to us. “All that Christ accomplished, all the benefits of his life and work, all the activity that makes it possible for humankind to be restored to the original state of union with God, remains only potential until the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing men and women to faith establishes the bond or union between the believer and Christ.”³⁶ In a letter to Peter Martyr, Calvin wrote:

I know only this: that through the power of the Holy Spirit the life of heaven flows down to earth, for the flesh of Christ is neither life-giving in itself nor can its effect reach us without the unmeasurable work of the Spirit. Thus it is the Spirit who makes Christ live in us, who sustains and nourishes us, who accomplishes everything on behalf of the Head.³⁷

This is not to say that Christ is passive as believers are engrafted into him; Son and Spirit work together, for the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. Thus, says Calvin, “Christ

³⁴Ibid., 3.1.1. See also 3.11.5.

³⁵Niesel, 124.

³⁶Chin, “*Unio Mystica and Imitatio Christi*,” 275.

³⁷John Calvin, Letter 2266 to Peter Martyr Vermigli, 8 August 1555, C.O. 15:723, trans. Dennis E. Tamburello; quoted in Tamburello, *Union with Christ*, 87.

communicates his righteousness to none but to those whom he joins to himself by the bond of his Spirit”³⁸

If Christ does not unite himself with believers apart from the Holy Spirit, how much less will individuals be able to unite themselves to Christ unaided? Even when believers are commanded to “clothe themselves in” or “put on” (ἐνδύσασθε) the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 13:14), Calvin understands this to be fundamentally a work of God through the power of the Spirit.

Now to *put on* Christ, means here to be on every side fortified by the power of his Spirit, and be thereby prepared to discharge all the duties of holiness; for thus is the image of God renewed in us, which is the only true ornament of the soul. For Paul had in view the end of our calling; inasmuch as God, by adopting us, unites us to the body of his only-begotten Son, and for this purpose,—that we, renouncing our former life, may become new men in him.³⁹

Calvin will always insist on placing the initiative for any saving action, including the foundational spiritual union that allows one to build a (re)formed life, solely with the sovereign God. It is therefore the Spirit of God alone who can bring about the necessary union between things in heaven and things on earth, between the ascended Christ and the Christian. It is the living Spirit alone who can be the living and life-giving bond between the Head, Jesus Christ, and his body, the church. It is the Holy Spirit alone who brings into existence and makes real the wonderful but mysterious incorporation of human life into the divine life.⁴⁰ “Such is the union between us and Christ,” argues Calvin, “who in some sort makes us partakers of his substance. ‘We are bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh,’ (Genesis 2:23;) not because, like ourselves, he has a human nature, but because,

³⁸Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 8.4. See also Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response*, 93.

³⁹Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 13:14.

⁴⁰Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response*, 93; Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin*, 110; Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 20.

by the power of his Spirit, he makes us a part of his body, so that from him we derive our life.”⁴¹

Union with Christ as Sharing in Christ’s Humanity

“Do you not know,” the Apostle Paul asked the Corinthians, “that your bodies (σώματα) are members of Christ himself” (1 Cor. 6:15)? The mystery of spiritual union with Christ by the power of the Spirit, that engrafting into Christ that makes believers part of his body, necessarily but mysteriously involves all of their human nature including their bodies. The (re)formation of character, the redemption of humanity, requires being united to the humanity of Christ.⁴² According to Calvin:

Christ is joined with us and we with him in such a way, that we become one body with him. . . . Observe, that the spiritual connection which we have with Christ belongs not merely to the soul, but also to the body, so that we are *flesh of his flesh*, etc. (Ephesians 5:30.) Otherwise the hope of a resurrection were weak, if our connection were not of that nature—full and complete.⁴³

Much of evangelical theology today focuses on the efficacious death and resurrection of Christ. Calvin would by all means agree and teach that our salvation—the (re)formation of our communion with God, our community with others, and our character within us—would not be possible without the Cross and Resurrection. However, in Calvin’s soteriology, as with much of Reformed piety that would follow him, the Incarnation and the Ascension also hold an essential position.⁴⁴ For Calvin, Christ’s taking on our humanity is more than a historical reality or a theological necessity for

⁴¹Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians*, 5:31.

⁴²Tamburello, *Union with Christ*, 92; Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 17.

⁴³Calvin, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, 6:15.

⁴⁴Hall, “The Shape of Reformed Piety,” 213.

Christ's work on the cross to be applicable to human beings. Likewise, the ascension of the risen but still incarnate Christ is not merely a logical consequence of Christ's resurrection. Instead, the humanity of Christ, from the Incarnation through the Ascension, is essential in Calvin's understanding of how believers receive the benefits of Christ's Cross and Resurrection. As noted, one shares in the benefits of Christ only as one shares in Christ himself. "More specifically," argues Kennedy, "we come to share in the benefits of Christ when we are joined to the humanity of Christ. When we are joined to him, all that he did on the cross, all that he became for us, will be ours on account of our union with him."⁴⁵ The Incarnation and the Ascension, then, are not limited to being a logical means and consequence, respectively, to the Cross and the Resurrection.

The Incarnation of Christ

Our humanity may not have unmediated communion with Christ's Deity. Therefore, Calvin understands union with Christ to center on being united with the incarnate humanity of Christ. Christ became the mediator between holy God and sinful humanity by taking on human flesh and becoming one of us. "The Son of God became man in such a manner, that God was his God as well as ours."⁴⁶ Christ's flesh, according to Calvin, becomes "as a channel" and becomes life-giving to us because it conveys to us that life which dwells intrinsically in Christ's divinity. The full manifestation of God's righteousness is found nowhere else than in the flesh of Christ. "For in it was accomplished the redemption of man, in it a sacrifice was offered to atone for sins, and an obedience yielded to God, to reconcile him to us; it was also filled with sanctification of

⁴⁵Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement in Calvin*, 105.

⁴⁶Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians*, 1:17.

the Spirit, and at length, having vanquished death, it was received into the heavenly glory. It follows, therefore, that all the parts of life have been placed in it.”⁴⁷

Kennedy provides the following helpful summary:

It is the common nature that we share that makes possible our union with the Son of God. . . . *Unless Christ had taken on human flesh and become one such as we are, we could have no hope of being united with him, for there would be no common point of contact* [emphasis mine]. In this human flesh Christ warred to death with sin and offered himself in sacrifice. Clothed with our flesh, Christ was able to triumph over sin when we could not. It is this same flesh with which we have the possibility of being united. Because Christ has taken on our human flesh, his work can be ours through our union with him.⁴⁸

The Ascension of Christ

While Calvin insists that Christ took on real humanity in the Incarnation in order to give real salvation, Calvin also upholds a necessary place for the Ascension. “In discussing the mystery of how we can be . . . united to the human nature of Christ . . . Calvin does not forget that in the Ascension Jesus Christ has taken His human nature beyond this earth to Heaven where it will remain until His second coming in glory.”⁴⁹ Calvin writes:

The Lord by his ascent to heaven opened the way into the Heavenly Kingdom, which had been closed through Adam (John 14:3). Since he entered heaven in our flesh, as if in our name, it follows, as the apostle says, that in a sense we already “sit with God in the heavenly places in him” (Eph. 2:6), so that we do not await heaven with a bare hope, but in our Head already possess it.⁵⁰

As with the Incarnation, the Ascension of Christ brings saving benefits to those who are united with him. Consequently, Calvin continues, “He therefore sits on high,

⁴⁷Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 6:51.

⁴⁸Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement in Calvin*, 86.

⁴⁹Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 19.

⁵⁰Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.6. See also Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians*, 2:6.

transfusing us with his power, that he may quicken us to spiritual life, sanctify us by his Spirit, adorn his church with divers gifts of his grace, keep it safe from all harm by his protection, restrain the raging enemies of his cross and of our salvation by the strength of his hand, and finally hold all power in heaven and on earth.”⁵¹

Union with Christ is Spiritual

Union with Christ, while involving all of humanity including the flesh, must nonetheless be seen as a fundamentally spiritual communion. As the connection with Christ is even closer than that of a husband and wife, believers are not merely one flesh with Christ but are also one spirit.⁵² Albeit mystical, this union with Christ is not figurative or merely a matter of conforming to Christ’s example; though “a secret union,” it is a real union by which believers are joined to Christ so that he may revive them by his Spirit and give them his life.⁵³ “We are then really united to the body of Christ.”⁵⁴ Likewise, the result of one’s union with Christ is not merely a change in one’s position but a change in one’s very nature.⁵⁵ Paul affirms that those who are in Christ have been united (σύμφοιτοι; literally “grown together” or “planted”) with Christ not only in the likeness of his death but also his resurrection (Rom. 6:5). According to Calvin, “As the graft has the same life or death in common with the tree into which it is grafted, so it is

⁵¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.6.

⁵²Calvin, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, 6:17.

⁵³Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 6:5.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 6:3.

⁵⁵Contra Chin who contends, “For Calvin, *unio mystica* does refer to the relationship between Christ and the believer, but he understands it theologically as a believer’s positional union with Christ in salvation.” Chin, “*Unio Mystica and Imitatio Christi*,” 198.

reasonable that we should be partakers of the life no less than the death of Christ.”⁵⁶

However, Calvin cautions that the metaphor or comparison of the grafting of branches into trees and of our being “ingrafted” [*sic*] into Christ should not be pressed to every particular. “In the former the graft draws its aliment from the root, but retains its own nature in the fruit; but in the latter not only we derive the vigour [*sic*] and nourishment of life from Christ, but *we also pass from our own to his nature*” (emphasis mine).⁵⁷

This is not to say, however, that there is a pantheistic mingling of divinity and humanity in the union with Christ. Unlike Osiander, Calvin vigorously denied that Christ’s essence is mixed with the believer’s or that God somehow transfuses himself into believers thus making them part of himself.⁵⁸ Salvation involves, for Calvin, the (re)formation of character in Christ and the regeneration of the *imago Dei*, not some blurring of the infinite qualitative difference between Creator and creature.⁵⁹ Calvin does affirm, “The end of the gospel is to render us eventually conformable to God, and, if we may so speak, to Deify us.”⁶⁰ However, when the Scripture says we “may become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4 NASB), Calvin argues that the word “nature” (φύσεως) is not referring here to essence but to quality. Further, Calvin contends the Apostle “only intended to say that when divested of all the vices of the flesh, we shall be partakers of divine and blessed immortality and glory, so as to be as it were one with God

⁵⁶Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 6:5.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.5.

⁵⁹Hart, “Humankind in Christ and Christ in Humankind,” 78.

⁶⁰Calvin, *Commentary on Second Peter*, 1:4.

as far as our capacities will allow.”⁶¹ When Calvin spoke of the believer’s union with Christ, he did not have in mind an essential unity of Christ with his faithful; he was not referring to a total identification or absorption into Christ. “Rather, he was describing a mystical union, by which he meant an intimate and personal union with Christ, a union realized without confusion of persons, but which transforms us into an ever more perfect image of God.”⁶²

If the spiritual union is not a mixture of essence, could a distinction be made so that the union may be said to be a sharing of substance? Here Calvin is less clear. In commenting on Jesus’ prayer to the Father that all believers “may be in us” (Jn. 17:21), Calvin infers “that we are one with the Son of God; *not because he conveys his substance to us*, but because, by the power of his Spirit, he imparts to us his life and all the blessings which he has received from the Father” (emphasis mine).⁶³ At the same time, as previously noted, when Ephesians refers to the Genesis statement that “two shall become one flesh” (5:31; cf. Gen. 2:24), Calvin suggests, “Such is the union between us and Christ, who in some sort *makes us partakers of his substance . . .* because by the power of his Spirit, he makes us a part of his body” (emphasis mine).⁶⁴ The key to resolving this apparent conflict, however, is to note the common reference and emphasis on “the power of his Spirit.” Again, against Osiander, Calvin insists it is “through the power of the Holy Spirit that we grow together with Christ, and he becomes our Head and we his

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin*, 109. See also Chin, “*Unio Mystica and Imitatio Christi*,” 278.

⁶³Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 17:21.

⁶⁴Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians*, 5:31.

members”⁶⁵ Union with Christ is not a raw mixture of substance.⁶⁶ The difference and boundary between Christ and the believer are never removed or even blurred. The Spirit is the bond that unites and (re)forms the believer into the image of God.

In part of his refutation of the doctrine of transubstantiation, Calvin argues that Christ’s ascended body is still limited by the same characteristics common to all human bodies, particularly that it cannot be present everywhere. His ensuing comments are germane to our present discussion of the Holy Spirit and union with Christ.

And there is no need of this for us to enjoy a participation in [Christ’s body], since the Lord bestows this benefit upon us through his Spirit so that we may be made one in body, spirit, and soul with him. The bond of this connection is therefore the Spirit of Christ, with whom we are joined in unity, and is like a channel through which all that Christ himself is and has is conveyed to us. For if we see that the sun, shedding its beams upon the earth, casts its substance in some measure upon it in order to beget, nourish, and give growth to its offspring—why should the radiance of Christ’s Spirit be less in order to impart to us the communion of his flesh and blood? On this account, Scripture, in speaking of our participation in Christ, relates its whole power to the Spirit. . . . The Spirit alone causes us to possess Christ completely and have him dwelling in us.⁶⁷

It must also be noted that Calvin openly admitted that he could not describe completely the nature of the union with Christ. It is a mystery, the precise nature of which cannot be explained fully or adequately. In a letter to his contemporary Peter Martyr, Calvin wrote, “How this happens far exceeds the limits of my understanding, I must confess; thus I have more of an impression of this mystery than I strive to comprehend

⁶⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.5.

⁶⁶Marcel, “Relation between Justification and Sanctification in Calvin’s Thought,” 136; Tamburello, *Union with Christ*, 87. Kennedy, though, maintains the nature of our union with Christ is in fact ontological. “I posited that Calvin understood our union with Christ to be an ontological union. Yet, our union with Christ is not an ontological union with His Deity. Rather, it is an ontological union with His humanity, for through our union with his humanity the very life that resides intrinsically in his Deity is mediated to us.” Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement in Calvin*, 149-150. However, this may leave Kennedy open to charges that he is erroneously separating the human nature of Christ from the divine nature. See *Institutes* 2.14.1-4.

⁶⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.12.

it.”⁶⁸ Calvin readily identifies with the Apostle’s statement of astonishment in Ephesians

5:32: “This mystery is great” (NASB). Calvin adds:

No language can explain fully what it implies. It is to no purpose that men fret themselves to comprehend, by the judgment of the flesh, the manner and character of this union; for here the infinite power of the Divine Spirit is exerted. . . . For my own part, I am overwhelmed by the depth of this mystery, and am not ashamed to join Paul in acknowledging at once my ignorance and my admiration. . . . Let us therefore labor more to feel Christ living in us, than to discover the nature of that intercourse.⁶⁹

Union with Christ as Incorporation into Christ’s Body

Before leaving the general subject of how one is united with Christ, we must briefly address the role of the church. As discussed in chapter 2, Western Christianity has a propensity to view salvation, in general, and the (re)formation of our character, in particular, in highly individualistic ways. For Calvin, however, union with Christ could never be expressed solely as *the individual in Christ*, but it must include *the individual in the church in Christ*. Moreover, the church precedes the individual in primacy and focus rather than the individual preceding the church as is so common in contemporary discussions of spirituality.⁷⁰ As we have seen, Calvin equates “mystical union” with “that joining together of Head and members.”⁷¹ Members of the body of Christ, the church, cannot be joined to the Head without also being joined with one another. To be united with the Christ and to receive the benefits of salvation he possesses, one must also be

⁶⁸John Calvin, Letter 2266 to Peter Martyr Vermigli, 8 August 1555, C.O. 15:723, trans. Dennis E. Tamburello; quoted in Dennis E. Tamburello, “John Calvin and Mysticism: An Introduction,” *Hungryhearts* XIII, no. 4 (2004). 4-5.

⁶⁹Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians*, 5:32.

⁷⁰Hageman, “Reformed Spirituality,” 64-65; Hall, “The Shape of Reformed Piety,” 213; McKee, ed., *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 4.

⁷¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.10.

united with the church. “For no hope of future inheritance remains to us unless we have been united with all other members under Christ, our Head.”⁷² The Spirit who unites believers with Christ also engrafts believers into Christ’s body.

All the elect are so united in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:22-23) that as they are dependent on one Head, they also grow together into one body, being joined and knit together (cf. Eph. 4:16) as are the limbs of a body (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 10:17; 12:12, 27). They are made truly one since they live together in one faith, hope, and love, and in the same Spirit of God. For they have been called not only into the same inheritance of eternal life but also to participate in one God and Christ (Eph. 5:30).⁷³

Thus, being united with Christ by being united with his body, the church, is essential.

Salvation is personal, but it is not private; it is for individuals, but it is not individualistic.

Calvin’s theology of the Christian life held in healthy tension inwardness and outwardness. He may provide a corrective for today in that he kept a balance between private and public spirituality, between the transformation of individuals and the transformation of the community.⁷⁴

It is necessary, however, to keep in mind that Calvin saw the church first and foremost as an “organism” and not primarily as an organization. Niesel observes:

Reformed theology treated with great breadth the doctrine of the Church as a living organically articulated community without losing sight of the individual and with no thought of establishing principles for an authoritarian church, but offering guidance for the assembly of God’s people to the praise of God’s glory in a world which though lost has been placed under God’s promise.⁷⁵

⁷²Ibid., 4.1.2.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴McKee, ed., *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 66; Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin*, 179; Tamburello, *Union with Christ*, 97.

⁷⁵Wilhelm Niesel, *Reformed Symbolics* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), quoted in Hageman, “Reformed Spirituality,” 254.

The church, for Calvin, is more of a communion and than an institution. Failure to discern which of these Calvin is emphasizing may lead one to false conclusions regarding the Spirit's work in and through the Church.⁷⁶

Union with Christ as a Paradox: Objective Possession and Subjective Progression

Calvin seemed intuitively to recognize and balance the tensions inherent in the union with Christ. On the one hand, the believer's union with Christ is a present reality. On the other hand, communion with Christ is ongoing and even advancing as members of the body grow in union with their Head. In his understanding, Calvin held both to the believers' objective possession of the spiritual union with Christ and also to their subjective appropriation of it while refusing to separate the two.⁷⁷ This can be seen in Calvin's reflections on the Apostle Paul's statement, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). Calvin writes of Paul, "He does not live by his own life, but 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" (emphasis mine).⁷⁸

Thus, Trevor Hart concludes about Calvin:

In this Calvin is, I believe, faithful to the biblical dialectic between the 'already' and the 'not yet'. The danger of taking the latter seriously at the expense of the

⁷⁶For example, what Richard labels a "misconception" is actually a misrepresentation when he proposes that some may find in Calvin's thinking that "the action of the Holy Spirit was manifested principally in the Church, rather than in the faithful." Unfortunately, Richard fails to appreciate Calvin's own understanding of the visible church ("the Church") versus the invisible church ("the faithful") (see *Institutes* 4.1.7 et al.). Thus, Richard concludes falsely of Calvin: "In reality, however, he considered the action of the Holy Spirit as occurring first and principally in the individual. The action of the Holy Spirit is directed towards the individual independent of the community." Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin*, 128. Cf. Tamburello, *Union with Christ*, 147 n. 96.

⁷⁷Chin, "*Unio Mystica and Imitatio Christi*," 269; Marcel, "Relation between Justification and Sanctification in Calvin's Thought," 136; Tamburello, *Union with Christ*, 89.

⁷⁸Calvin, *Commentary on Galatians*, 2:20.

former is precisely the danger of extrinsecism, of failing to do justice to the biblical statements that as Christians we are *already* participants in the perfection of the New Humanity. The equal and opposite danger is that of failing to take fully seriously the *not yet* aspect, and looking to one's own being for the New Humanity. . . . That Calvin falls into neither trap is clear enough.⁷⁹

Union with Christ, then, is portrayed paradoxically in Calvin's writings as both an objective possession and a subjective progression.

Union with Christ as an Objective Possession

"Christ," says Calvin, "when he illumines us into faith by the power of his Spirit, *at the same time* so engrafts us into his body that we become partakers of every good" (emphasis mine).⁸⁰ Later in the *Institutes*, as Calvin equates "mystical union" with "that joining of Head and members" and "that indwelling of Christ in our hearts," he will add, "Christ, *having been made ours*, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed" (emphasis mine).⁸¹

The Apostle Paul wrote, "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves (ἐνεδύσασθε) with Christ" (Gal. 3:27). Perhaps taking his cue from the aorist verb, Calvin interprets Paul as communicating a past action with present consequences. He claims Paul "employs the metaphor of a garment, when he says that the Galatians have put on Christ; but he means that they are so closely united to him, that, in the presence of God, they bear the name and character of Christ, and are viewed in him rather than in themselves."⁸² As believers "put on" Christ, the (re)formation of the *imago*

⁷⁹Hart, "Humankind in Christ and Christ in Humankind," 80.

⁸⁰Calvin, *Institutes*, trans. Battles, 3.2.35.

⁸¹Ibid., 3.11.10.

⁸²Calvin, *Commentary on Galatians*, 3:27. See also previous discussion on Romans 6:5.

Dei after the character of Christ is something they already possess through their union with Christ; it is not a reality disconnected from Christ, but a participation in Christ. It is the result of Christ in us.⁸³

The present reality of the believer's union with Christ is the bedrock of hope. The writers of *The Heidelberg Catechism*, Calvin's contemporaries in Germany, opened with the question, "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?" The catechetical answer read:

That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.⁸⁴

For Calvin, union with Christ is always perfect in the sense that it cannot be broken and accomplishes our salvation perfectly.⁸⁵ Yet, there remains a place for progress and the increase of the union with Christ.

Union with Christ as a Subjective Progression

While the believer's union with Christ is an objective possession and a present reality, Calvin still allowed for a deepening of that union. He could affirm, "Christ is not outside us but dwells within us," and in the next sentence add, "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

⁸³Hart, "Humankind in Christ and Christ in Humankind," 80.

⁸⁴*The Heidelberg Catechism*, 4.001.

⁸⁵Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 331.

us” (emphasis mine).⁸⁶ Those who are joined with Christ are in a life-giving and life-shaping union with the true and visible image of God (Col. 1:15). Yet even with this foundation laid firm and secure, the deformed *imago Dei* of the believer is not completely (re)formed. Hart writes, “It is *in Christ* that we are already redeemed, insofar as we are implicated in his humanity. In ourselves we are gradually ‘becoming what we already are’, and this is the work of Christ in us, but we are not yet there.”⁸⁷ A deepening and strengthening of the foundation are required. Thus, Calvin contends, “Wherefore, whatever progress any of us have made in the Gospel, let him know that he needs new additions. This is the reward which Christ bestows on their perseverance, that he admits them to greater familiarity with him.”⁸⁸ Growth in communion with Christ is not, for Calvin, only a possibility or even a preferred future. Progress is a necessity. “It will not be enough to have been once made partakers of adoption,” says Calvin, “if God do [*sic*] not continue the work of his grace in us.”⁸⁹

Progress into deeper communion with Christ will be different for each believer. Yet each individual should experience subjectively the maturing of this union. Calvin urges, “Let us therefore labor more to feel Christ living in us.”⁹⁰ Christ will live and grow in each believer as each one lives in Christ, but this can only be accomplished by “real and actual communication” with Christ.⁹¹

⁸⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.24.

⁸⁷Hart, “Humankind in Christ and Christ in Humankind,” 81.

⁸⁸Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 8:32. See also 10:10.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 15:2.

⁹⁰Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians*, 5:32.

⁹¹Calvin, *Commentary on Galatians*, 2:20.

Thus ingrafted [*sic*] into him (cf. Rom. 11:19) *we are already, in a manner, partakers of eternal life*, having entered in the Kingdom of God through hope. Yet more: *we experience such participation in him* that, although we are still foolish in ourselves, he is our wisdom before God; while we are sinners, he is our righteousness; while we are unclean, he is our purity . . . while we still bear about with us the body of death, he is yet our life (emphasis mine).⁹²

At the obvious risk of redundancy, it may be stated that believers participate in their participation in Christ. This is not to say we have something of ourselves to add to God's grace or that we have some power of our own with which to cooperate with God's work in Christ—apart from Christ we can do nothing (Jn. 15:5). As believers are in Christ and Christ is in them, they actively participate in the ongoing work of the Spirit.⁹³

Through ongoing and progressive union with Christ, those who are in Christ are to share in Christ's death and resurrection so that the image of God in them may be (re)formed. Christians should never be content with the current state of their union with Christ; they must never become complacent. Calvin believed that progress would best come from a recognition of one's lack of progress. He wrote, "I think he has profited greatly who has learned to be very much displeased with himself, not so as to stick fast in this mire and progress no farther, but rather to hasten to God and yearn for him in order that, having been engrafted into the life and death of Christ, he may give attention to continual repentance."⁹⁴ For Calvin, the idea of repentance encompassed "the whole of conversion," which consists of the mortification of our flesh and the vivification of the

⁹²Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.15.5.

⁹³Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 15:5. See also Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 127-128.

⁹⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.20.

Spirit.⁹⁵ “Both things happen to us by our participation in Christ.”⁹⁶ Union with Christ, then, becomes the foundation upon which the reformed image of God may be built.

⁹⁵Ibid., 3.3.5.

⁹⁶Ibid., 3.3.9.

CHAPTER 5

REPENTANCE:

THE PROCESS AND PRACTICES FOR BUILDING A (RE)FORMED LIFE

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Mark 8:34

Therefore, in a word, I interpret repentance as regeneration, whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God that had been disfigured and all but obliterated through Adam’s transgression.

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*¹

Q. 88. How many parts are there to the true repentance or conversion of man?

A. Two: the dying of the old self and the birth of the new.

Q. 89. What is the dying of the old self?

A. Sincere sorrow over our sins and more and more to hate them and to flee from them.

Q. 90. What is the birth of the new self?

A. Complete joy in God through Christ and a strong desire to live according to the will of God in all good works.

*The Heidelberg Catechism*²

Thus far, we have seen that the (re)formation of our character is essential, is patterned after the image of God, and is built on the foundation of our union with Christ. We must now turn our attention to the process and practices needed for building the (re)formed life. In this chapter, we will first present John Calvin’s understanding of the process of conversion or regeneration as a life of repentance. In section two, we will look at the two sides or component parts of repentance: mortification and vivification. In our

¹Ibid.

²*The Heidelberg Catechism*, 4.088-4.090.

third section, we will look at three practices for the work of repentance, Calvin's "universal rule," for the (re)formation of the Christian's life. Finally, we will comment on both the need for progress toward perfection and the gracious act of the Spirit in our repentance unto a (re)formed life.

The Reformation of Life through Repentance

As Calvin explicates the way in which we receive the grace of Christ that (re)forms the deformed *imago Dei* upon our union with Christ, repentance becomes the central concept. Repentance is Calvin's term for the new life conferred on us by Christ.³ Calvin interprets repentance as "regeneration, whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God,"⁴ and he claims as fact that "the whole of conversion to God is understood under the term 'repentance.'"⁵ Consequently, it appears that Calvin uses the words "repentance," "conversion," and "regeneration" almost interchangeably. Repentance is interrelated to but somewhat distinct from sanctification. According to Wallace, Calvin generally uses the term "sanctification" when referring to the process as a whole, both its inward and outward aspects. The term "repentance" is typically employed by Calvin in reference to the change of heart and soul involved, and to the effect this change spontaneously has upon outward behavior. Thus, for Calvin, sanctification is one's whole participation in Christ; repentance is one's response to Christ.⁶

³Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.1.

⁴Ibid., 3.3.9. See also Calvin, *Commentary on Colossians*, 2:10.

⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.5.

⁶Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 94.

It is crucial to note that Calvin understands and uses repentance in the Christian life in ways markedly different from those of most Christians today. In contemporary Christianity, repentance is frequently associated with certain feelings (e.g., guilt or remorse), or with an attitude (e.g., humility), or more commonly with particular actions in which to engage (e.g., confession) or to cease (e.g., bad habits). Calvin would certainly affirm all of these to varying degrees as having a place in repentance. However, our modern mindset has also come to associate repentance with a temporary, though perhaps recurring, stage or event of religious life. It is generally viewed as something done once, or at most periodically, but then moved beyond as the believer progresses into a higher or more mature place in the Christian life.

In contrast, the whole of the Christian life is a constant act of repentance for Calvin. “Accordingly, we must strive toward repentance itself, devote ourselves to it throughout life, and pursue it to the very end if we would abide in Christ.”⁷ Repentance is not done just one day, but day by day. Conversion is not so much an event as it is a lifestyle. The term “repentance” for Calvin covered the whole response to the gospel by the person of faith, in the outward life to be sure, but primarily in the mind, heart, attitude, and will.⁸ Here again, as with the union with Christ, a tension exists between the “already” and the “not yet,” between “what is” and “what should and will be.”

Wilcox writes:

Calvin views each individual, like the whole church, as caught between the inauguration of Christ’s kingdom and its completion, and he sees the Christian life of repentance and renewed forgiveness in the light of the tension between the present age and the next. Insofar as Christians are new creatures, they experience

⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.20.

⁸Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 94.

the fullness of salvation; insofar as they are still subject to sin, they live in constant need of repentance and faith. Insofar as Christians are ‘in Christ’, their salvation is complete. Insofar as they are still in the world, they experience a constant progress of regeneration towards its final consummation.⁹

In seeking to define repentance, Calvin looks to the etymology of the Hebrew and Greek words most often translated as such. He does not reference the words specifically; however, he says the Hebrew word (presumably שׁוּב) is derived from “conversion,” and the Greek word (presumably μετανοέω) from “change of mind” or “intention.” From this, Calvin concludes that the meaning of repentance is that, “departing from ourselves, we turn to God and having taken off our former mind, we put on the new.”¹⁰ Calvin then provides his full three-part definition: “It is the true turning of our life to God, a turning that arises from a pure and earnest fear of him, and it consists in the mortification of our flesh and of the old man, and in the vivification of the Spirit.”¹¹

We have noted that Calvin said the sole end of repentance was to restore in the believer the image of God that had been disfigured by sin. One can deduce, then, that every aspect of the *imago Dei* needs the (re)formation that comes with repentance. If, as we have seen in chapter 3, the divine image touches all of our humanity—our minds, hearts, wills, and even our bodies—then all of our humanity is in need of this regeneration. Repentance must truly be a conversion of the whole person, as Calvin requires a transformation of life in its totality. It must penetrate into every area of one’s life and extend throughout all of one’s life.¹²

⁹Wilcox, “Conversion in the Thought and Experience of John Calvin,” 119.

¹⁰Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.5.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Leith, 68.

Yet, we have also seen that the proper and primary seat of the divine image is in the soul; Calvin considered it a “settled principle” that the *imago Dei* is spiritual. Consequently, repentance is primarily a work of the soul; it is a matter of converting the inmost part of those who are in Christ. “*Be renewed*,” commented Calvin, “not only with respect to the inferior appetites or desires, which are manifestly sinful, but with respect also to that part of the soul which is reckoned most noble and excellent.”¹³ External exercises of repentance, public confession, weeping, and fasting should not be depended upon too much, but they were acceptable in moderation and only then if they were connected with a spiritual repentance. “Nothing is achieved,” Calvin argued, “unless we begin from the inner disposition of the heart.”¹⁴

Calvin does acknowledge a place for outward and visible fruits or sure signs of repentance: “the duties of piety toward God, of charity toward men, and in the whole of life, holiness and purity.”¹⁵ In addition, when Calvin argues that the “turning of our life to God” requires “a transformation, not only in outward works, but in the soul itself,” he also adds, “Only when it puts off its old nature does it bring forth the fruits of works in harmony with its renewal.”¹⁶ Nonetheless he writes at length on how the outward practice of repentance must not become the chief thing,¹⁷ and he contends, “when the

¹³Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians*, 4:23.

¹⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.16.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., 3.3.6.

¹⁷Ibid., 3.3.17.

term ‘repentance’ is applied to this external profession, it is improperly diverted from its true meaning.”¹⁸

Unlike his Lutheran contemporaries, Calvin argued that repentance followed, flowed from, and was born of faith. According to Calvin, “Repentance is a turning unto God, when we frame ourselves and all our life to obey him; but faith is a receiving of the grace offered us in Christ.”¹⁹ This receiving of grace precedes repentance. Repentance like faith, however, is not to be found apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, Philip Butin writes:

To the extent, then that the divine image is thoroughly renewed in humanity according to the pattern of Christ by the dynamic of the Holy Spirit, human action becomes an authentically human and genuinely free response to God. In redeemed humanity, divine and human action need no longer be dialectically opposed; rather, they may be reconfigured by grace into a concursive relationship by which human action is most human precisely when and because it is most thoroughly motivated by the Spirit of God according to the pattern of redemption in Christ.²⁰

The Two-Sided Process of Repentance: Mortification and Vivification

If one were to remodel a home, to do a so-called “extreme makeover,” one must simultaneously tear down the old and construct the new. One must remove what is bad or broken, and one must install what is good or repaired. This is analogous to the building of a (re)formed life through the process of repentance. In the simply worded but difficult to obey command of the psalmist: “Depart from evil and do good” (Ps. 34:14; 37:27 NASB).

¹⁸Ibid., 3.3.18.

¹⁹John Calvin, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 19 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 20:21.

²⁰Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response*, 85.

According to the final part of Calvin's definition, repentance "consists in the mortification of our flesh and of the old man, and in the vivification of the Spirit."²¹ It is through this two-sided process that the image of God is (re)formed in the believer by the union with Christ. Calvin insists, "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."²²

The pairing of the death of the old nature with the quickening of the new is found frequently in Scripture, including the following:

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. . . . Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. . . . In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:4-5, 8, 11)

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:22-24)

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature. . . . Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. (Colossians 3:5, 9-10)

Mortification and vivification are united in the believer as the believer is united with Christ. "These two things are connected together by an indissoluble knot—that the old man is destroyed by the death of Christ, and that his resurrection brings

²¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.5.

²²Ibid., 3.3.9.

righteousness, and renders us new creatures.”²³ Yet of what do mortification and vivification consist? Leith provides a brief summary: “Mortification is essentially the destruction of the sinful corruption which has entered into humanity since the fall. It is not a curtailment of true humanity. Yet it is not enough simply to be displeased with oneself. There must be the positive vivification. By vivification Calvin means fundamentally a life in which the Spirit of God lives and rules.”²⁴ With this starting point, and with the acknowledgment that it is difficult at best to discuss one without the other, we can now explore each in more depth.

Mortification

Calvin agrees, he says, with others who have gone before him.

Mortification they explain is sorrow of soul and dread conceived from the recognition of sin and the awareness of divine judgment. For when anyone has been brought into a true knowledge of sin, he then begins truly to hate and abhor sin; then he is heartily displeased with himself, he confesses himself miserable and lost and wishes to be another man. Furthermore, when he is touched by any sense of the judgment of God (for the one straightaway follows the other) he then lies stricken and overthrown; humbled and cast down he trembles; he becomes discouraged and despairs.²⁵

Yet mortification, as Calvin understands it, goes beyond sorrow, dread, displeasure, and misery, as significant as such an affective response to sin might be. Mortification relates to being dead to the world around us and to the corrupt nature within us.²⁶ Most importantly for building a (re)formed life, mortification means the one in Christ dies while living by renouncing sin. The Apostle Paul instructed his readers to look upon

²³Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 6:4.

²⁴Leith, 75.

²⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.3.

²⁶Calvin, *Commentary on Colossians*, 3:5.

themselves and consider themselves dead to sin (Rom. 6:11). Calvin expresses the meaning of the verse as follows: “Take this view of your case,—that as Christ once died for the purpose of destroying sin, so you have once died, that in the future you may cease from sin; yea, you must daily proceed with that work of mortifying, which is begun in you, till sin be wholly destroyed.”²⁷ To renouncing sin, then, we can add that mortification also includes ceasing from sin and wholly destroying sin.

One cannot know Christ without mortification, without learning to put off the old corrupt nature and to put on Christ. It should come as no surprise that those who live apart from a union with Christ yield themselves up to their base and deceitful lusts of the flesh. “But the doctrine of Christ,” Calvin says, “teaches us to renounce our natural dispositions. He whose life differs not from that of unbelievers, has learned nothing of Christ; for *the knowledge of Christ cannot be separated from the mortification of the flesh*” (emphasis mine).²⁸

This is not to say that mortification is easy. “Indeed, the very word ‘mortification’ warns us how difficult it is to forget our previous nature,” writes Calvin in the *Institutes*. He continues on with a graphic warning. “For from ‘mortification’ we infer that we are not conformed to the fear of God and do not learn the rudiments of piety, unless we are violently slain by the sword of the Spirit and brought to nought. As if God had declared that for us to be reckoned among his children our common nature must die!”²⁹ Consequently, Calvin cautions his readers elsewhere not to “despond in your minds,

²⁷Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 6:11.

²⁸Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians*, 4:20. See also Calvin, *The Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*, 20.

²⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.8.

because you find not yourselves to be of the number of those who have wholly crucified the flesh; for this work of God is not completed in the day in which it is begun in us; but it gradually goes on, and by daily advances is brought by degrees to its end.”³⁰ Relics of the flesh may remain in the Christian, but this does not mean that fellowship with Christ is nonexistent; it means only that the believer needs to labor diligently on unto the goal of becoming like Christ as the divine image is (re)formed. It means not that salvation is in doubt, but only that it is in process. Although strenuous, progress in mortification can nevertheless be made. Though we may see parts of life still under the power of death, mortification will be effective because ultimately its power is in the Spirit of Christ.³¹

Finally, it must be said about mortification that it is not an end in itself. Leith observes, “Calvin devoted more space to mortification than to vivification, if an attempt is made to separate the two factors, but this does not mean that his doctrine is negative.”³² Mortification is a means to vivification. Paul promises, “For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13). Calvin comments on Paul’s intent, “However we may as yet be exposed to sins, he nevertheless promises life to us, provided we strive to mortify the flesh: for he does not strictly require the destruction of the flesh, but only bids us to make every exertion to subdue its lusts.”³³

³⁰Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 6:7.

³¹Ibid., 8:10.

³²Leith, 75.

³³Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 8:13.

Vivification

Once again, on first examination of vivification, Calvin agrees with others who have gone before him.

“Vivification” they understand as the consolation that arises out of faith. That is, when a man is laid low by the consciousness of sin and stricken by the fear of God, and afterward looks to the goodness of God—to his mercy, grace, salvation, which is through Christ—he raises himself up, he takes heart, he recovers courage, and as it were, returns from death to life.³⁴

Here again, however, Calvin is not content to leave the interpretation of vivification as “the happiness that the mind receives after its perturbation and fear have been quieted.” Hence, he continues, “It means, rather, 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 begin to live to God.”³⁵ As with mortification, Calvin wants to move our understanding beyond an affective response toward the objective work Christ is doing in the Christian. Christ vivifies the ones with whom he is united, giving them new life, his life. “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (Romans 6:4). On this Calvin observes, “And surely, since Christ has been given to us for life, to what purpose is it that we die with him except that we may rise to a better life? And hence for no other reason does he slay what is mortal in us, but that he may give us life again.”³⁶

Vivification by the Spirit of Christ frees the believer from sin and death (Rom. 8:2). Since death has no mastery or dominion over Christ (Rom. 6:9), and since believers

³⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.3.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 6:4.

are united with Christ, believers too are delivered from the peril of death unto life.

According to Calvin, “Christ, who now vivifies the faithful by his Spirit, or breathes his own life into them by his secret power from heaven, was freed from the dominion of death when he arose, that by virtue of the same dominion he might render free all his people.”³⁷ Moreover, vivification not only frees us *from* sin, it frees us *for* holiness. “As Christ is raised to an incorruptible life, so you are regenerated by the grace of God, that you may lead a life of holiness and righteousness, inasmuch as the power of the Holy Spirit, by which ye have been renewed, is eternal, and shall ever continue the same.”³⁸

Christ Is Our Example of Both Mortification and Vivification

Let us recall that Christ is the blueprint for (re)formation in the divine image. Recall too that one becomes like Christ not through pure imitation alone, but through a real but mysterious union with Christ. This union includes being joined with Christ in his death and resurrection, his mortification and vivification. Thus, in Christ we find the means for (re)formation as well. Niesel notes, “This change brought about in our life whereby the old man is slain and we are made a new creation is rooted in the fact of Jesus Christ. He is the Crucified and Risen One and as such He brings us into communion with Himself. We must live as those who belong to the Crucified and Risen Lord.”³⁹ Christ is the example believers are to follow in this mortification-vivification process; they are to look to him for the pattern they are to pursue. Calvin declared, “After [Scripture] has

³⁷Ibid., 6:9.

³⁸Ibid., 6:11.

³⁹Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 127.

taught that we have degenerated from the true origin and condition of our creation, it also adds that Christ, through whom we return into favor with God, has been set before us as an example, whose pattern we ought to express in our life.”⁴⁰ As believers follow Christ’s example in their dying to the old life that they might rise to the new, they can only progress as enabled by Christ’s Spirit. Therefore, Niesel adds, “Our old man is seized upon and crucified by the power of the death of Jesus Christ. We are awakened into a new life by the power of His resurrection. This happens through the Spirit of Christ which binds us to Him and evokes in us faith and obedience.”⁴¹

Three Practices for Repentance and (Re)Formation: Self-Denial, Cross-Bearing, and Meditating on the Future

Completing a remodeling project in a home will require the right types of practices. Some might be for efficiency (e.g., “measure twice; cut once”); some might be for safety (e.g., “lift with your knees; not with your back”). One may view these practices as rules to ensure that the job is done right. In the same way, the (re)formation of our character benefits from the right types of practices. These are to be understood more as general categories of actions than as specific activities or even spiritual disciplines.

For the practice of repentance and the (re)formation of our character, we need what Calvin labeled “a pattern for the conduct of life” that will show how the Christian life is to be ordered so we do not wander about in our zeal.⁴² In his instructions on the life of the Christian, Calvin does not seek to describe individual virtues at length or to give

⁴⁰Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.6.3.

⁴¹Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 128. See also Leith, 75.

⁴²Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.6.1-2.

many specific exhortations. Instead, his approach is “to show the godly man how he may be directed to a rightly ordered life, and briefly to set down some *universal rule* with which to determine his duties” (emphasis mine).⁴³ He provides a rule to ensure that the (re)formation of character is done right. In this case, a “rule” is a specific and even precise term. According to Marjorie Thompson, “A rule of life is a pattern of spiritual disciplines that provides structure and direction for growth in holiness.”⁴⁴

Holiness is, in fact, the motive Calvin gives for pursuing the Christian life.⁴⁵ As discussed in previous chapters, God is holy and, as those created in the divine image, human beings were meant to be holy as well. However, the character of God that was formed within us pure and whole has become deformed by sin. Yet we are called to be holy as God is holy (Lev. 19:2; 1 Pet. 1:15-16), to be united with Christ in order to receive his holiness. As those in whom the Spirit dwells, those who are in Christ are to have no fellowship with impurity and uncleanness. “For to what purpose are we rescued from the wickedness and pollution of the world in which we were submerged if we allow ourselves throughout life to wallow in these?” asks Calvin. Then in dramatic fashion he adds, “For it is highly unfitting that the sanctuary in which he dwells should like a stable be crammed with filth.”⁴⁶ Holiness, then, is the common theme that holds the facets of the Christian life together for Calvin. On this Jonathan Rainbow observes, “Significantly, Calvin does not find this theme in the keeping of the Ten Commandments. . . . Calvin’s

⁴³Ibid., 3.6.1.

⁴⁴Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, 138.

⁴⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.6.2.

⁴⁶Ibid. See also Calvin, *The Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*, 17-18.

theme of the Christian life is not the law. It is Christ.”⁴⁷ Christ is always the pattern or example, including in one’s search for a rule to lead one in mortification and vivification.

What then is Calvin’s universal rule for holy living? Calvin proposes three interrelated exercises or practices: *self-denial*, *bearing the cross*, and *meditating on the future life*. All three practices are observed readily in the life and teaching of Jesus who said, “If any want to become my followers, let them *deny themselves* and *take up their cross* and *follow me*” (Matthew 16:24 NRSV). Though these spiritual practices may sound joyless and arduous to modern ears, they need not be received as such. Leith argues, “The discipline of the Reformed tradition, especially as illustrated by Calvin . . . was not regarded as a burden. It was a manner of life that was freely chosen and that was believed to be the means of the joyful and responsible freeing of life’s energies and vitalities.”⁴⁸ After all, Calvin insisted that the Lord offers in Christ “all happiness in place of our misery, all wealth in place of our neediness; in him he opens to us the heavenly treasures that our whole faith may contemplate his beloved Son, our whole expectation depend upon him, and our whole hope cleave to and rest in him.”⁴⁹ Further, it is necessary to keep in mind the purpose behind these practices. “Calvin calls us to deny ourselves in order that we may give ourselves to God in complete devotion; he tells us to bear the cross so that we may have a relationship with God through our trials and tribulations; and he urges us to meditate on the future life so that we may properly value, orient, and fulfill

⁴⁷Rainbow, “Double Grace,” 103.

⁴⁸John H. Leith, *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 87.

⁴⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.1.

the present one.”⁵⁰ Robert Ramey and Ben Campbell Johnson add, “In more contemporary language these challenges may be referred to as living for Christ and others, not for ourselves; taking up the pain and suffering of the world and accepting our own; evaluating the present in the perspective of eternity.”⁵¹

At first blush, it may seem that Calvin is emphasizing mortification over vivification in his rule or set of practices for (re)formation. Leith argues, however, “On close examination it will appear that vivification is involved not only in meditation on the future life but also in cross bearing and self-denial. In order to interpret these concepts truly, we must keep in mind that vivification and mortification are dimensions of the same experience.”⁵² This will become more apparent momentarily as we examine each practice in turn.

Self-Denial

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Romans 12:1 (NRSV)

Paul’s instruction to the Romans to consecrate and dedicate themselves to God as “a living sacrifice” is Calvin’s starting point for discussing the foundational practice of self-denial. We are to deny ourselves because we recognize that we are not our own (1 Cor. 6:19). With that repeated refrain, Calvin implicitly links self-denial to mortification. “We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our

⁵⁰Ramey and Johnson, *Living the Christian Life*, 108.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 80.

⁵²Leith, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 76.

plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours.” Then, in like fashion, he frames self-denial in the more positive language associated with vivification. “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 good.”⁵³

Calvin’s conviction that all of our humanity is deformed by sin, including our reason and our will, leads him to believe that seeking our own self-interest will ultimately be self-destructive. Consequently, “self-denial for Calvin meant more than self-control; it meant a crucifixion in which God puts to death our old nature and gives us a new nature.”⁵⁴ It meant mortification and vivification. It meant being wise in nothing and willing nothing through ourselves, but instead following the leading of the Lord alone with the full force of one’s abilities. It meant giving up one’s natural inclinations and parting with the affections of the flesh, and instead submitting and subjecting oneself to the Spirit so that Christ may live and reign in one’s life (Gal. 2:20).⁵⁵

Self-denial is not mere self-control; it is giving Christ control. Wherever self-denial is practiced in one’s life, there Christ rules. Thus, self-denial as Calvin understood it is not an empty resignation, a letting go or abandonment to nothing. For this reason, Niesel contends, “The self-renunciation which we are called upon to exercise has nothing

⁵³Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.7.1.

⁵⁴Ramey and Johnson, *Living the Christian Life*, 81.

⁵⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.7.1; John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 26 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), Matt. 16:24. See also Chin, “*Unio Mystica and Imitatio Christi*”, 241.

in common with self-denial in the usual sense. Firstly, it is not a question of resignation in itself but of a resignation which relinquishes the control to Christ. Secondly, such resignation means not merely passive self-denial but an active rejection of all our own willing and desiring.”⁵⁶ It is not a giving up on life but a giving over of life to Christ. For this reason, self-denial requires constant effort and practice.

It is unfortunate that some might equate self-denial with self-hatred. We must acknowledge that in his hyperbolic language Calvin does suggest that our sinful self-love be replaced with a form of self-hate. However, as Niesel points out, self-denial for Calvin is not “self-tormenting scrupulosity.”⁵⁷ True repentance will naturally lead us to hate, abominate, and abhor sin, that which is so displeasing to God but yet is so much a part of our fallen nature. We must become truly and deeply displeased with ourselves.⁵⁸ To avoid taking either self-love or self-hate to unhealthy extremes, though, we must keep in mind the end of self-denial as Calvin does. We are not to practice self-denial for its own sake or because we loathe ourselves as wretched creatures worthy of God’s righteous judgment and condemnation. Self-denial is for the sake of the (re)formation of character.

Expressed positively, the practice of denial of the self is devotion toward God. “We seek not the things that are ours but those which are of the Lord’s will and will serve to advance his glory,” Calvin writes. “Almost forgetful to ourselves, surely subordinating our self-concern, we try faithfully to devote our zeal to God and his commandments.”⁵⁹ Believers become fully committed to God in all of life. Rather than living dependent

⁵⁶Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 144.

⁵⁷Ibid., 145.

⁵⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.3; 3.3.7.

⁵⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.7.2.

upon themselves, self-denial leads them to a full dependence upon God and a confidence that God sustains and governs the destiny of human life.⁶⁰ “Therefore,” says Calvin, “he alone has duly denied himself who has so totally resigned himself to the Lord that he permits every part of his life to be governed by God’s will. He who will be thus composed in mind, whatever happens, will not consider himself miserable nor complain of his lot with ill will toward God.”⁶¹ In this way, self-denial helps those who are in Christ to face adversity.

In addition, the repentant practice of self-denial gives hope in the face of the addictions that plague us all, even unknowingly. Addictions come when we attach our inborn desire for God to anything other than God. We affix that God-given desire to specific behaviors, things, or people that in turn enslave us. The addiction provides a substitute for God. The sure sign of addiction is our inability to deny ourselves the real or imagined fulfillment the object of our addiction promises. Consequently, as Ramey and Johnson point out, “The cure for addiction lies clearly in self-denial. By the grace of God, we say ‘no’ to the power of concupiscence, no to our obsessions, no to our compulsions. Whatever treatment is required for our healing, at the core will be a rejection of the instant and repeated gratification of the undisciplined desires inspired by concupiscence.”⁶²

Although the practice of self-denial applies chiefly to the believer’s relationship with God, it also provides the positive function of allowing for genuine love of others.

⁶⁰Leith, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 77.

⁶¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.7.10.

⁶²Ramey and Johnson, *Living the Christian Life*, 83.

Love, the Apostle Paul famously wrote, “is not self-seeking” (1 Cor. 13:5). By denying ourselves and our perceived need to have the first and best at all times, we are no longer in competition with everyone else. Self-denial frees us to begin to love others for who they are, warts and all. Calvin acknowledged that most men, judged on their own merit, will seem unworthy. However, “we are not to consider what men merit of themselves but to look upon the image of God in all men, to which we owe all honor and love.”⁶³

Further, by denying ourselves, we are then freed to share with others. We are to be stewards of everything God has bestowed upon us and entrusted to us. The only right stewardship of God’s benefits and resources is a liberal and kind sharing of them with others under the rule of love.⁶⁴ This can, and likely will, begin with those closest to us. We can begin to be less self-centered in the immediate relationships we have in our family, workplace, school, or church. “On the other hand, self-denial may be cast in the larger arena of consumerism, public policy, and care for the environment.”⁶⁵ Since Reformed spirituality is never meant to be individualistic, the practice of self-denial may lead us to be countercultural and “go without,” not just for our own sake but so that we might not contribute to the exploitation of people and creation. We practice the classic spiritual disciplines of frugality and simplicity, and we direct our resources toward “the least of these.”⁶⁶ “Self-denial, therefore, is more than a negative concept. It includes

⁶³Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.7.6.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 3.7.5.

⁶⁵Ramey and Johnson, *Living the Christian Life*, 88.

⁶⁶For more on the classic spiritual disciplines of frugality and simplicity, see Richard J. Foster, *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life: Christian Reflections on Money, Sex & Power* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), 19-87; Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, Rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 79-95; Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 168-170, 193-219.

vivification as well as mortification. On the one side, there is the death of self-centeredness. On the other, there is the positive love of neighbor and full commitment of self to God.”⁶⁷

Bearing the Cross

And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

Luke 14:27

The cross is the central metaphor for Christian life and faith.⁶⁸ Jesus taught that his followers must not only deny themselves but also take up their cross (Matt. 16:24). There is, unfortunately, a viral strain of teaching within the Church today that shuns the cross in favor of “health and wealth”; it preaches a gospel of prosperity and upward mobility rather than Jesus’ message of repentance through the practice of bearing the cross. Surely, such thinking would have been met by Calvin with scorn and contempt. In Calvin’s view, the pious and godly must ascend to higher ideals, to the heights to which Christ calls his disciples: that we each must bear our own cross. “For whomever the Lord has adopted and deemed worthy of his fellowship,” Calvin proclaimed, “ought to prepare themselves for a hard, toilsome, and unquiet life, crammed with very many and various kinds of evil.”⁶⁹ As Jesus simply said, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33); and “if they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20). Following this lead, Niesel writes, “We must count as nothing all worldly success in comparison with

⁶⁷Leith, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 77.

⁶⁸Rice, *Reformed Spirituality*, 178.

⁶⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.8.1.

the privilege of fighting under the sign of our Lord Jesus by bearing His cross. It is the divine will that this struggle under the sign of the cross should be permanently our lot.”⁷⁰

What It Means to Bear the Cross

What is meant by the phrase “bearing the cross”? Paul said, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (Phil. 3:10-11). On this passage, Calvin comments, “There is, however, a twofold participation and fellowship in the death of Christ. The *one* is inward—what the Scripture is wont to term the *mortification of the flesh*, or the *crucifixion of the old man* . . . the *other* is outward—what is termed the *mortification of the outward man*.”⁷¹ In Calvin’s view, it is this latter mortification of the outward man that is associated with bearing the cross. This is not to deny what has been previously said, that mortification, as well as vivification, is ultimately part of the process of repentance that (re)forms the deformed image of God in us from the inside out. As we bear the cross, however, we encounter and endure from outside ourselves harsh forces and adverse conditions that in turn shape our character (Rom. 5:3-4). In this believers follow the example of Christ Jesus, “the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame” (Heb. 12:2).

When we speak of Christ bearing his own cross, we must not limit this to the wood and nails used to crucify him, the cross Jesus bore to Golgotha (John 19:16; cf. Mark 15:21 et al.). According to Calvin, “While he dwelt on earth he was not only tried

⁷⁰Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 146.

⁷¹John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, trans. John Pringle, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 21 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 3:10.

by a perpetual cross but his whole life was nothing but a sort of perpetual cross.”⁷² The syllogism is simple: Christ, the firstborn, the Son in whom the Father was well pleased, bore his cross. We are being conformed to the likeness of the Son (Rom. 8:29).

Therefore, we too must bear our own cross as Christ bore his. Moreover, if one rejects the cross, one is in actuality rejecting Christ. In time, crosses come to all God’s children.

Still we must ask, what specifically are crosses? Ramey and Johnson offer this succinct definition: “Our crosses are those occurrences in our lives which interrupt our plans, test our faith, and teach us patience in suffering.”⁷³ Far less concise but nevertheless helpful is the list generated by Karl Barth who associated bearing the cross with the many “afflictions to the creaturely life and being:”

Misfortunes, accidents, sickness and age; parting from the most important human relations and communications; anxiety concerning one’s daily bread, or what is regarded as such; intentional or unintentional humiliations and slights which have to be accepted from those immediately around; the inability freely to develop one’s life and talents; the sense of a lack of worthwhileness in respect of particular tasks; participation in the general adversities of the age which none can escape; and finally the dying which awaits us all at the end.⁷⁴

Before discussing the purpose behind bearing the cross and how this repentant practice (re)forms us, several additional points need to be made regarding what cross bearing is. First, the bearing of one’s cross is a vivid illustration that the Christian life is not lived on an esoteric, otherworldly plane; instead, it is concrete, real, and fleshed out in the day-to-day activities of God’s people. “In every aspect of the cross, one element of Reformed spirituality shines through: our spirituality consists of the flesh-and-blood

⁷²Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.8.1.

⁷³Ramey and Johnson, *Living the Christian Life*, 94.

⁷⁴Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas Forsyth Torrance, Church Dogmatics, vol. IV/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), 611.

reality of our daily lives. God comes to us in everything that happens to us. The joy, sorrow, and routine of our lives constitute the substance with which our faith must deal.”⁷⁵ There is a rich tradition within the Christian Church of asceticism and desert spirituality that, in part, embraces hardship as a means of cross bearing. From Calvin’s perspective, we need not go into the desert to find our cross; it will find us. The crosses that believers bear are neither self-sought suffering nor self-flagellation.

Second, crosses must be embraced. Calvin contends, “Though God lays both on good and bad men the burden of the cross, yet unless they willingly bend their shoulders to it, they are not said to *bear the cross*; for a wild and refractory horse cannot be said to admit its rider, though he carries him. The patience of the saints, therefore, consists in *bearing willingly the cross* which has been laid on them.”⁷⁶ Receiving the cross with Christ is transforming; denying the cross is only suffering.

Finally, we must always remember the cross is not a burden that is unjustly imposed upon a person. God does not treat people harshly without cause, for God is love (1 John 4:8), and God can only act in our best interest. The crosses we bear are never a sign that God no longer loves us or somehow loves us less.

Can anything ever separate us from Christ’s love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or are hungry or cold or in danger or threatened with death? (Even the Scriptures say, “For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.”) No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can’t, and life can’t. The angels can’t, and the demons can’t. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can’t keep God’s love away. Whether we are high above the sky or in the deepest ocean, nothing in all

⁷⁵Ramey and Johnson, *Living the Christian Life*, 101.

⁷⁶Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, Mt. 16:24.

creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39 NLT)

Why We Bear the Cross

Christians do not bear their crosses alone but with Christ, with whom they are united by the Spirit. Thus, Calvin can say, “By communion with him the very sufferings themselves not only become blessed to us but also help much in promoting our salvation.”⁷⁷ As part of the believers’ mortification and vivification, bearing the cross helps to (re)form the divine image in them. It is the Heavenly Father’s will to use the hardships and toils of life as a means to put his children to a definite test so that they will be conformed to the image of his Son.⁷⁸ In the *Institutes*, Calvin speaks of three related purposes for the cross: (1) discipline or training in faith, (2) chastisement or castigation for transgressions, and (3) persecution for righteousness’ sake. We will examine each in turn.

The Cross as Training

As training, the crosses that believers bear teach them about trust and faithfulness. Approached negatively, they learn not to trust themselves. Calvin says that, because we are “by nature too inclined to attribute everything to our flesh,” and because we place “stupid and empty confidence in the flesh,” God must restrain our arrogance. “Therefore, he afflicts us either with disgrace or poverty, or bereavement, or disease, or other calamities. Utterly unequal to bearing these, in so far as they touch us, we soon succumb to them. Thus humbled, we learn to call upon his power, which alone makes us stand fast

⁷⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.8.1.

⁷⁸Ibid.

under the weight of afflictions.”⁷⁹ Here we see the positive side of the discipline.

Believers learn by experience that God is faithful to provide assistance during trials and tribulations, just as he promised. The cross, Calvin says, “teaches us, thus humbled, to rest upon God alone, with the result that we do not faint or yield.”⁸⁰ Further, as we are cleansed of our “blind love of self” we learn not only to distrust ourselves but more importantly to transfer our trust to God.

Afflictions are also used by God to test the patience of Christ’s followers.

Commenting on Jesus’ statement that his followers will have trouble in this world (John 16:33), Calvin says, “All believers ought to be convinced that their life is exposed to many afflictions, that they may be disposed to exercise patience.”⁸¹ Believers are also instructed by the cross to obey God. If everything went to our liking, we would not know what it is to follow God. The afflictions of the saints, then, are used by God to teach them “to live not according to their own whim but according to God’s will.”⁸² If even the Son of God learned obedience through what he suffered (Heb. 5:8), how much more will his followers?

Still we do not see how necessary this obedience is to us unless we consider at the same time how great is the wanton impulse of our flesh to shake off God’s yoke if we even for a moment softly and indulgently treat that impulse. For the same thing happens to it that happens to mettlesome horses. If they are fattened in idleness for some days, they cannot afterward be tamed for their high spirits; nor do they recognize their rider, whose command they previously obeyed.⁸³

⁷⁹Ibid., 3.8.2.

⁸⁰Ibid., 3.8.3.

⁸¹Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 16:33.

⁸²Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.8.4.

⁸³Ibid., 3.8.5.

In all these things, God treats his children as individuals, knowing their needs intimately. The Lord, as he sees fit, confronts them and their unrestrained flesh with the remedy of the cross “in various ways in accordance with what is healthful for each man.”⁸⁴

The Cross as Chastisement

In other instances, the cross comes in response to transgressions, as a form of correction. “Accordingly,” says Calvin, “whenever we are afflicted, remembrance of our past life ought immediately to come to mind; so we shall doubtless find that we have committed something deserving this sort of chastisement.”⁸⁵ Once identified, the transgression may be confessed, and the process of repentance advanced. God actually dooms us to destruction if he does not, by reproof and correction, call us back when we have turned away. However, it is not popular today to speak of God actively disciplining or correcting us when we sin. We prefer the image of the father in Jesus’ “prodigal son” parable to the Father described by the writer of Hebrews.

As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Whoever heard of a child who was never disciplined? If God doesn’t discipline you as he does all of his children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children after all. Since we respect our earthly fathers who disciplined us, should we not all the more cheerfully submit to the discipline of our heavenly Father and live forever?

... God’s discipline is always right and good for us because it means we will share in his holiness. (Hebrews 12:7-10 NLT)

The Scriptures also teach, according to Calvin, that the difference between believers and unbelievers is that the former attain repentance when chastised while the latter, “like

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Ibid., 3.8.6.

slaves of inveterate and double-eyed wickedness” only become worse and more obstinate.⁸⁶

The Cross as Persecution

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10). For Calvin, it is an honor and a special badge of solidarity with Christ to be persecuted for the gospel and to suffer for righteousness. Moreover, in the face of such a cross, one may find comfort in knowing that in God’s presence in heaven one’s true treasures are increasing.

If we are cast out of our own house, then we will be the more intimately received into God’s family. If we are vexed and despised, we but take all the firmer root in Christ. If we are branded with disgrace and ignominy, we but have a fuller place in the Kingdom of God. If we are slain, entrance into the blessed life will thus be open to us.⁸⁷

Summary

In this discussion of bearing the cross, we must again keep in mind that the process or rule is not ever meant to be an end in itself. Believers are not made by God to suffer for suffering’s sake; such would be sinful and not from the hand of a holy God. The trials and afflictions from God that Christians bear are for the sake of their repentance, for their regeneration and the (re)formation of their character. Moreover, while they should bear the cross willingly, and even cheerfully, knowing that they do so in the Lord’s hand, they are not required to remove all feelings of bitterness and pain. To the contrary, says Calvin, “to bear the cross is not to be utterly stupefied and to be

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Ibid., 3.8.7.

deprived of all feeling of pain.”⁸⁸ By his example as well as his teaching, Christ himself showed a heart that groaned and wept under the cross.

In addition, sufferings invite believers to look beyond the cross to being made “alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11). Once again, it was for the joy set before him that Jesus endured the cross and its shame (Heb. 12:2). Beyond the cross for those in Christ is a new depth of fellowship with God as they have learned to trust him more fully. Beyond the cross is a new humility grounded in increased knowledge of not only their sin but of God’s grace. Beyond the cross is increasing Christ’s likeness, as through this practice of repentance the divine image is (re)formed in them. Finally, Niesel writes, “The imitation of Jesus Christ implies looking forward to the eternal consummation and the bearing of the cross implies the aspiration towards future blessedness. The two things are indissolubly linked together.”⁸⁹ The “looking forward” is further revealed in Calvin’s third practice of repentance: meditating on the future.

Meditating on the Future

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

Colossians 3:1-2

The process of repentance, with its self-denial and cross bearing, “is bound to lead to that meditation on the heavenly life for which man was made in the image of God, which image will be finally restored when that heavenly life is finally attained after

⁸⁸Ibid., 3.8.9.

⁸⁹Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 149.

death.”⁹⁰ “We must ever look to this end,” Calvin urges, “to accustom ourselves to contempt for the present life and to be aroused thereby to meditate upon the future life.”⁹¹

Christians are to be future oriented and their future is secure in Christ. This is not to say that believers embrace escapism and renounce all that is of this world, or cease to meet their obligations to love God and neighbor each day. The believer’s life of repentance with its process of (re)formation is one that yearns, strains, and longs for a completion and fulfillment that is found only beyond death. “It finds the present full of meaning and purpose only because it knows that the future has meaning and certainty. It is a constant and bold march through the darkness of this world to the day of resurrection.”⁹² The (re)formation with Christ in the divine image will one day have an end. With that sure hope, believers imitate Christ through mortification and vivification that they might reach that goal. This, in turn, eases the burdens of both self-denial and bearing the cross.

The comparison of this present life to the life that is to come is so dramatic and extreme that Calvin resorts to a series of vivid hyperboles to describe it.

For if heaven is our homeland, what else is the earth but our place of exile? If departure from the world is entry into life, what else is the world but a sepulcher? . . . If to enjoy the presence of God is the summit of happiness, is not to be without this, misery? But until we leave the world “we are away from the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:6). Therefore, if the earthly life be compared with the heavenly, it is doubtless to be at once despised and trampled under foot.⁹³

⁹⁰Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 100.

⁹¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.9.1.

⁹²Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 88.

⁹³Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.9.4.

Here Calvin is not so much trying to diminish or demean this present earthly life as he is seeking to elevate and elucidate the future heavenly life. He is quick to add that the earthly life “is never to be hated except in so far as it holds us subject to sin.”⁹⁴

Certainly, after seeing how Calvin views the crucial daily role of self-denial and cross bearing in regeneration, one cannot accuse the Reformer of teaching that this present life is meaningless. In fact, Calvin’s writings reveal the tension in which we all must live. On the one hand, he says, “This life, judged in itself, is troubled, turbulent, unhappy in countless ways, and in no respect clearly happy; that all those things which are judged to be its goods are uncertain, fleeting, vain, and vitiated by many intermingled evils.”⁹⁵ On the other hand, he writes:

Indeed, this life, however crammed with infinite miseries it may be, is still rightly to be counted among those blessings of God which are not to be spurned. Therefore, if we recognize in it no divine benefit, we are already guilty of grace ingratitude toward God himself. For believers especially, this ought to be a testimony of divine benevolence, wholly destined, as it is, to promote their salvation.⁹⁶

This life is not to be needlessly cast away. God has placed us here according to his purpose, and so we must be diligent until he calls us away. Moreover, Calvin allows for the use of those things in this life that serve delight more than necessity. Calvin’s concern is that we mistakenly become either too strict or too lax. “Let this be our principle,” suggests Calvin, “that the use of God’s gifts is not wrongly directed when it is referred to that end to which the Author himself created and destined them for us, since he created

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Ibid., 3.9.1.

⁹⁶Ibid., 3.9.3.

them for our good, not for our ruin.”⁹⁷ Thus, food can be enjoyed not only for sustenance but also for delight and good cheer. Trees and fruits, apart from their various uses, may simply be enjoyed for the beauty of their appearance and the pleasantness of their fragrance.

Still, Calvin emphasizes the meditation on the future life as a helpful process of repentance. Ramey and Johnson contend, “In his writings Calvin seems ever conscious of the attraction of the world, the illusion of human immortality, the alien nature of our earthly pilgrimage, and the fear of death that obsesses so many. To combat these obstacles to spiritual growth, Calvin recommends meditation on the future life.”⁹⁸ The obstacles to growth that Ramey and Johnson list are as present today as they were in Calvin’s time. Many Western Christians, if pressed, would acknowledge that, given the choice, they would just as soon have Christ wait a while longer before he returns. It is not to say that they in no way look forward to the heavenly life, as little as they might actually think about it; rather, they simply feel they have places to go, sights to see, relationships to enjoy, things to do, and dreams to pursue before this life is over. Subsequently, a genuine meditation on the future life—one that in fact brings us into deeper communion with the risen and ascended Christ—is a much-needed practice of repentance in our time.

Progressing toward Perfection

We have now seen that the (re)formation of life comes through a life of repentance. Repentance, also dubbed regeneration or conversion, is a two-sided process

⁹⁷Ibid., 3.10.2.

⁹⁸Ramey and Johnson, *Living the Christian Life*, 103.

as we engage in both mortification and vivification, both dying to the old life and being raised to the new. This process, for Calvin, was followed through exercises of self-denial, bearing the cross, and meditating on the future life. Now remain the significant questions of if and how one progresses in this life of repentance.

Elsewhere we looked in more depth at Calvin's view that the restoration in believers of the image of God "does not take place in one moment or one day or one year; but through continual and sometimes even slow advances God." At this point, we must emphasize Calvin's accompanying teaching that believers should seek the perfection of that restoration through the process of repentance. Calvin writes, "Now this is not to deny a place for growth; rather I say, the closer any man comes to the likeness of God, the more the image of God shines in him. In order that believers may reach this goal, God assigns to them a race of repentance, which they are to run throughout their lives."⁹⁹ Indeed, "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6), and "he will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:8). While the (re)formation of character in believers is "not in the first instance perfected," nonetheless "it goes well with us if we are every day making progress in penitence."¹⁰⁰

Christians need not be perfect today or even tomorrow. "The children of God are counted spiritual, not on the ground of a full and complete perfection, but only on account of the newness of life that is begun in them."¹⁰¹ Furthermore, we will not ever be

⁹⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.9.

¹⁰⁰Calvin, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, 1:8.

¹⁰¹Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 8:10.

perfect in this life. “As long as we sojourn in the world, we are never cleansed from all unrighteousness, with regard to our reformation.” Yet God is faithful “to cleanse us, not today or tomorrow; for as long as we are surrounded with flesh, we ought to be in a continual state of progress; but what he has once begun, he goes on daily to do, until he at length completes it.”¹⁰² Calvin’s metaphorical interpretation of Jesus’ washing only the feet of his disciples is also helpful in illustrating his view.

The children of God are not altogether regenerated on the first day, so as to aim at nothing but the heavenly life; but, on the contrary, the remains of the flesh continue to dwell in them, with which they maintain a continued struggle throughout their whole life. The term *feet*, therefore, is metaphorically applied to all the passions and cares by which we are brought into contact with the world; for, if the Holy Spirit occupied every part of us, we would no longer have anything to do with the pollutions of the world; but now, by that part in which we are carnal, we creep on the ground, or at least fix our feet in the clay, and, therefore, are to some extent unclean. Thus Christ always finds in us something to cleanse. What is here spoken of is not the forgiveness of sins, but the renewal, by which Christ, by gradual and uninterrupted succession, delivers his followers entirely from the sinful desires of the flesh.¹⁰³

If the Lord did not lead his own onward toward the final goal of their salvation, including their regeneration, their redemption would be imperfect. “Accordingly,” warns Calvin, “the moment we turn away even slightly from him, our salvation, which rests firmly in him, gradually vanishes away. As a result, all those who do not repose in him voluntarily deprive themselves of all grace.”¹⁰⁴ Those who are in Christ do need to progress toward perfection. Our knowledge of God and subsequent transformation into the image of God “are not accomplished in us in one moment, but we must be constantly making progress both in the knowledge of God, and in conformity to His image, for this

¹⁰²Calvin, *Commentary on First John*, 1:9. See also Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.14

¹⁰³Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 13:10.

¹⁰⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.1.

is the meaning of the expression—*from glory to glory*.”¹⁰⁵ Fortunately, this is not something we must undertake under our own power or direction, but instead we are able to depend upon the Spirit of regeneration. “For it would be easier for us to create men than for us of our own power to put on a more excellent nature.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵Calvin, *Commentary on Second Corinthians*, 3:18.

¹⁰⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.27.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In this final chapter, we will first look at possible applications of the above articulation of John Calvin's theology of the Christian life, both to the area of discipleship and to evangelism. We will also propose areas where further research and study would be beneficial in addressing the problem. Finally, we will provide a general summary of our findings.

Applications

Suggestion for Discipleship

As helpful as recovering John Calvin's theology of the Christian life may be, it must still be communicated to the members of the church in a way they may grasp and even experience. To that end, educational opportunities might be pursued through offering a class or one-day seminar (see appendix for suggested course outline); however, two factors must be kept in mind before pursuing this course. First, the focus of such a class must include the "why" behind spiritual formation, and not just offer the "how." Numerous books and curricula are available that provide good information on the practice of spiritual disciplines and the ways in which they may assist in the formation of one's character in Christ's likeness. What is lacking, however, is sufficient explanation of why these disciplines, or spiritual formation in itself, are even necessary.

A second factor to consider is the need for community. God's work of (re)forming believers' character does not happen apart from God's work of (re)forming their community with others. Consequently, any class or seminar must at the minimum include

times of interaction with others rather than simply be all lecture. Further, challenging participants to become active in spiritual formation groups—groups of five to ten individuals who meet for the purpose of encouraging one another in the life of repentance—would be a logical follow-up to the seminar.

Suggestion for Evangelism

The way in which the church approaches evangelism and outreach must also be addressed. All three essential dimensions of God's redemptive work in Christ must be emphasized—the (re)formation of one's community with others and of one's character within, as well as one's communion with God. Like many American evangelical congregations, the accent of past efforts at sharing the gospel through First Presbyterian Church has been decidedly on the latter. Proclamations of the gospel, however, must include the good news that God seeks to transform our relationships with others and to restore in us the *imago Dei*. This will require changes in gospel presentations.

For example, countless evangelical Christians have learned variations of the "Four Spiritual Laws"¹ popularized by Campus Crusade for Christ, or the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association's "Steps to Peace with God."² Both four-part presentations begin with statements about God's love for individuals and his plan for their abundant life. This could easily be expanded to include not only the fact that humankind was created for relationship with God but was also created in the image of God; thus, one aspect of God's wonderful plan for our lives is an internal character that reflects God's

¹Campus Crusade for Christ International, "Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?" 2006, <http://www.greatcom.org/english/four.htm> (accessed January 3, 2007). Campus Crusade for Christ claims that approximately 1.5 billion copies of the Four Spiritual Laws have been printed.

²Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, "Steps to Peace with God," 2007, http://www.billygraham.org/SH_StepsToPeace.asp (accessed January 3, 2007).

own. Similarly, the second part of each presentation introduces the problem of sin with its consequence of separation from God. Both focus on relational brokenness; neither mentions ontological brokenness. As with the first part, this could easily be expanded to include a discussion of the ways sin deforms the *imago Dei* in us, as well as its effect upon our experience of community with others.

With this emphasis on the relational gap or gulf between God and sinful people, both the “Four Spiritual Laws” and “Steps to Peace with God” introduce Christ as the only bridge between God and people since Christ is the one who pays the penalty for sin. Since both presentations are intentionally designed to be brief, it may be unfair to critique the way in which Christ is introduced only as a means to an end, God’s provision for sin, and not as the one in whom we were created and in whom salvation is found. Nonetheless, both could be altered to present Christ as the one in whom both the (re)formation of the believer’s relationship with God and the (re)formation of the divine image may be found. Thus, the necessity of union with Christ would then become the natural focus of the fourth part of the presentation. More than just praying to “receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord”—a proposition that could be interpreted as only giving Christ a new role in one’s life—individuals could be invited to embrace an abiding and life-changing union with Christ. At this point, the definition of repentance could be expanded beyond a onetime turning from self and sin in order to turn to God; repentance could be introduced as a lifestyle of dying to the old sinful person (mortification) and being transformed into the new person who reflects Christ (vivification). This would also set the stage for the need for progress in the Christian life, a concept not present in the current presentations.

Suggested Areas of Further Research

Further study both of the biblical material and of John Calvin's understanding of the *imago Dei*, union with Christ, and repentance would certainly be beneficial. Yet, perhaps one of the most pressing needs for additional research is in the area of communicating the truths of spiritual formation in a postmodern context. As our Western culture continues its shift from modernism through postmodernism and beyond, theology in general and philosophies of ministry in particular must shift too. In the modern world, "what is true" was conceived in terms of more abstract, yet universal, principles and qualities. Modernist theology, then, followed suit and sought to provide objective and systematic statements of doctrine that were expressions of absolute truth. Postmodern critics of modernism have rightly questioned the presumptions of radical doubt and distancing and shown them to be wanting. In postmodern epistemology, "what is true" is increasingly seen as relative to specific contexts because any knowledge of truth is understood to be dependent upon language, which defines and organizes ideas.

An effective theology of ministry and communication of the need and plan for spiritual formation in the emerging context must move beyond both modernism and postmodernism. Truth may still be absolute, as in modernism, but we must come to understand it less as an abstract principle and more as an animate Person. The goal of the church's teaching ministries must not simply be to help people know through formulas some impersonal and inanimate truth, but to know better through faith the personal and animate one who says, "I am the Truth" (John 14:6), the one who seeks to (re)form us. Moreover, we need not search for truth independently; Truth is seeking us. It would be beneficial to examine further ways in which we might take the understanding of the

(re)formed life, captured by Calvin and articulated above, and then present it to postmoderns.

Similarly, postmodernism has rightly critiqued the individualism rampant in modernism. Additional research also needs to be done on how spiritual (re)formation happens in community. If, as we have claimed, part of God's redemptive work in the world includes a (re)formation of community that is prefigured by the church, our ecclesiology must move away from the consumer-driven models that have dominated under modernism's influence.

Summary of Findings

In this project, we have sought to address the need for members of a Presbyterian congregation both to understand God's plan and to appropriate God's power for their spiritual growth in Christ's likeness. While acknowledging that many factors may contribute to the lack of spiritual formation among church members, we have specifically responded to the need for a theology of the Christian life that is both applicable and consistent with the Reformed tradition. We have seen that John Calvin provides an understanding of spiritual formation as the necessary and progressive reformation of the deformed image of God, after the pattern of Christ, through spiritual union with Christ by the process of repentance. In order to capture and communicate the essence of Calvin's teaching, we have described spiritual formation as "(re)formation," and have loosely employed the metaphor of construction or building a (re)formed life.

Chapter 2 traced three emphases found in Calvin's soteriology corresponding to three essential dimensions of our humanity: communion with God, community with others, and character within us. All three have been deformed by sin, and all three are

included in the redemptive work of God in Christ as they are (re)formed. Regarding the latter, the (re)formation of character was seen to be the necessary and progressive restoration of the divine image through union with Christ by the regeneration of repentance. To build a (re)formed life, each component must be addressed.

The third chapter established that the image of God or *imago Dei* provides both the materials and the blueprint for spiritual formation. Humankind was created in the image of God, a reality that is essentially spiritual yet touches every aspect of our humanity. The *imago Dei*, however, has been deformed by sin and must be (re)formed. The divine image is revealed and fulfilled in Christ, and thus in Christ we find the model or blueprint for the (re)formation of character.

This restoration of the *imago Dei* after the pattern of Christ cannot happen, however, apart from a real union with Christ. In chapter 4, then, we saw that, for Calvin, union with Christ is an absolute necessity because Christ the Savior cannot be separated from his saving work. The spiritual union with Christ serves as the foundation upon which a (re)formed life must be built. This union involves a uniting with Christ's humanity and an incorporation into Christ's body, the church. Moreover, it is paradoxically both a present possession for believers and something in which believers must progress.

The process and practices for progressing in the building of a (re)formed life were the focus of chapter 5. For Calvin, the process of conversion or the restoration of the image of God was subsumed under the unifying concept of repentance. Repentance was seen to be more of a lifestyle than a particular action, and it involved both the mortification of the old sinful self and the vivification of the new self in Christ. Calvin

also articulated a “universal rule” for the (re)formation of the believer’s life that involved the practices of self-denial, bearing the cross, and meditation on the future life.

As we look toward the building of the (re)formed life, may we pray with Calvin:

Grant, Almighty God, that as nothing has been omitted by thee to help us onward in the course of our faith, and as our sloth is such that we hardly advance one step though stimulated by thee,—O grant that we may strive to profit more by the various helps which thou hast provided for us, so that the law, the prophets, the voice of John the Baptist, and especially the doctrine of thine only-begotten Son, may more fully awaken us, that we may not only hasten to him, but also proceed constantly in this course, and persevere in it until we shall at length obtain both the victory and the crown of our calling, as thou hast promised an eternal inheritance reserved in heaven for all who faint not, but wait for the coming of that great Redeemer. Amen.³

³John Calvin, *Devotions and Prayers of John Calvin*, ed. Charles E. Edwards (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1954), 117; quoted in Rice, *Reformed Spirituality*, 199.

APPENDIX

OUTLINE FOR A SEMINAR ON THE (RE)FORMED LIFE

Lesson One: Our Need for a (Re)Formed Life – Why Does Spiritual Maturity Matter?

A. God's plan for our salvation

1. In the beginning, we were formed
 - a. Communion with God
 - b. Community with others
 - c. Character within
2. In the meantime, we are deformed
 - a. Communion with God
 - b. Community with others
 - c. Character within
3. In Christ, we are (re)formed
 - a. Communion with God
 - b. Community with others
 - c. Character within

B. Spiritual maturity is God's plan for us

1. Spiritual maturity is not automatic
2. Spiritual maturity is not optional

Lesson Two: Knowing the Blueprints – What Does Spiritual Maturity Look Like?

- A. Spiritual maturity is becoming who we already are
- B. Spiritual maturity is becoming more like Christ

- C. Spiritual maturity is becoming who we are meant to be

Lesson Three: Laying the Foundation – How It All Starts with Christ

- A. How we are united with Christ
- B. How we grow in our union with Christ

Lesson Four: The Building Process – How We Progress in the (Re)Formed Life

- A. Spiritual growth as a process
 1. It's a lifelong process
 2. It's a life-giving process
 3. It's a life-sharing process
 4. It's a life-surrendering process
- B. A different look at “Repentance”
 1. Mortification
 2. Vivification

Lesson Five: Tools for the Job: What Is Our Part in Building a (Re)Formed Life?

- A. Practices of Repentance
 1. Self-denial
 2. Bearing the Cross
 3. Meditating on the future life
- B. Place of spiritual disciplines

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