

# John Calvin's Doctrine of Sanctification

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# John Calvin's Doctrine of Sanctification

## *Introduction:*

The doctrine of sanctification is a major tenet of the Christian faith. There is little dispute that Christ came to save sinners and give them life. An understanding of the nature of that life, how it is imparted and lived out, is vitally important to those called to teach and lead in the church. In studying the theology of the Christian life, one cannot escape the influence of John Calvin. Not only is Calvin a theological giant, but his concern and heartbeat for the ordinary Christian trying to live a life pleasing to God is the central theme of his writing. In 1539, Calvin added a section on the Christian life to his *Institutes*<sup>1</sup>. Twenty years later, this section was moved up into the middle section (Book Three), placed just after soteriology and *before* the important section on justification. This section of the 1559 *Institutes* is an epic work and considered by many the climax of his theology mapping out both his beliefs and his prescription for the Christian life.

Calvin begins Book Three of the 1559 *Institutes* by introducing the question of how believers receive the benefits<sup>2</sup>, which the Father bestowed on them in salvation. A major benefit of such salvation is sanctification, the act and process by which the believer is made holy. For Calvin, sanctification together with justification are the core benefits that come to us in Christ and under-gird the Christian life.

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<sup>1</sup> John H. Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 25

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.1.1

The purpose of this paper is to examine John Calvin's doctrine of sanctification in light of his own writings with input from contemporary Calvin scholars as they seek to understand it. Of particular interest is Calvin's view of the duty of the believer in progressive sanctification, especially in mortification of the remainders of indwelling sin and vivification of the new man through the Holy Spirit. If we imagine the believer as an eagle in flight, the dual duties of mortification and vivification are the two wings that keep her aloft. The body of the eagle represents the doctrine of justification that connects the two wings. The Holy Spirit is not only the wind upon which the eagle rides but the energizing force giving her life. Each stroke of the wings creates lift through the Spirit rendering flight possible. Both wings, mortification and vivification, empower flight and testify to the authenticity of her union with Christ, the head.

### *The Nature and Basis of Sanctification*

In our discussion of the Christian life, we will begin by looking at Calvin's understanding of the chief purpose of mankind. Calvin saw God as the author and ultimate cause of all things, not only of human life, but of salvation itself.<sup>3</sup> As loving Father, He desires that people come to know<sup>4</sup> Him so that He might be glorified in them. The highest human goal, the chief end of man is to reflect the glory of God.<sup>5</sup> God is glorified when people respond to God's ultimate act of love in Christ by putting their trust in Him, turning from a life of bondage to sin, to a life characterized by devotion, dependence, obedience, thanksgiving and service to God. Because human beings are fallen and in bondage to

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<sup>3</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, 45vol. 22, 1 Peter 1:3

<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, The subject of Book 1, chapters 1-5

<sup>5</sup> Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 43. Leith summarizes aspects of *sola Gloria Dei* in the Geneva Catechism

sin, such life is only possible through the redemption and sanctification that is in Jesus Christ.

The word sanctification (*agiasmos*) means both causing to become holy or the process of becoming holy. The older testament presents holiness as the definitive characteristic of God. (Isaiah 6:3). Israel as a nation was commanded to be holy (Ex.19:6) The word group “holy” (*qđ*) occurs seventy times in Leviticus alone. Holiness is *the* characteristic of God, and those who would come near to him must be holy. The Leviticus priesthood and sum of tabernacle worship was founded upon the premise that only those consecrated and set apart by God may draw near. According to the Levitical code, no one was to presume to take upon himself that which was reserved only for the priests. God’s righteous anger would burst forth against those guilty of such presumption (Numbers 16:35). In Leviticus, it is God who confers holiness, yet there is a process by which he does so (cleansing with water, separation) and a basis (a sacrifice with blood) through which such holiness is established. We shall see that Calvin’s understanding of sanctification in Christ is likewise attributed to God by way of consecration (sanctified in Christ) and progressive consummation (being conformed gradually to his image), based upon the finished work of Christ.

### **Union With Christ - the Bond of the Spirit**

For Calvin the cause of sanctification is union with Christ. There can be no participation in the benefits and blessings of Christ without being *in Christ*. In the introduction to Book Three of the *Institutes* Calvin writes “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”<sup>6</sup>. Union with Christ means that we are “*engrafted into Him*” (Rom 11:17) and that we “*put on Christ*” (Gal 3:27). Those who see Christ from a distance are outside of Him and derive no benefit from Him. The bond of this union, indeed the “secret energy”<sup>7</sup> of it, is the Holy Spirit. The basis for this bond is the blood of Christ: “For this reason also Peter says, that believers have been ‘chosen in the sanctification of the Spirit unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Christ’ [1Peter 1:2p]” and a few lines further Calvin says “To sum up the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself”.<sup>8</sup> The nature of this union with Christ is a spiritual union and not a union of essence. In refuting Andreas Ossiander (1489-1552) Calvin denies that Christ’s essence is mixed with our own, but is such that it must allow for the separate subsistence of the believer and of Christ.<sup>9</sup> It is likened to a marriage where the two become “one flesh” yet the individuals remain distinct yet mystically united. The bond of this union is the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is also the agent through whom sanctification occurs. He is called the “Spirit of sanctification” (2 Thess 2:13, 1 Peter 1:12, Rom. 1:4). He is the “Spirit of adoption”, “the guarantee and the seal”, the “life”, the “clean water”, the “oil” and “anointing” who “enflames our hearts with the love of God and with zealous devotion”.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.1.1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 3.1.1

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 3.11.5

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 3.1.3

Winecoff notes Calvin's conviction that "from God's perspective, the bond of this union is the Holy Spirit ..... who is the only one who can join things in heaven and on earth."<sup>11</sup>

The Spirit not only initiates sanctification but He also completes it, empowering the Christian to not only mortify indwelling sin but enabling him to "*will and to work for his good pleasure*". (Phil 2:12)

Another major aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer is the giving of faith. Faith is not born of flesh and blood but is a supernatural gift that enables man to be born of God (John 1:12-13). In affirming Peter's confession, Jesus indicates that it was not "flesh and blood" that revealed Jesus' identity, but "my Father, who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:17). Similarly, "Paul says of the Thessalonians that they have been chosen by God 'in the sanctification of the Spirit and belief in the truth' II Thess. 2:13".<sup>12</sup> Calvin's definition of faith is classic:

Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts by the Holy Spirit"<sup>13</sup>

His emphasis is on the agency of the Holy Spirit, both in revelation to our minds and in sealing upon our hearts these promises, resulting in this firm and certain knowledge. Gleason, in summarizing Calvin's view of faith writes: "By affirming that faith is a gift which originates from the Spirit rather than from human motivation, Calvin maintains God's gracious initiative in uniting the believer to Christ".<sup>14</sup> Yet, while Calvin sees God as

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<sup>11</sup> Winecoff, "Calvin's doctrine of mortification.," 85-101.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.1.4

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 3.2.7

<sup>14</sup> Gleason, *John Calvin and John Owen on Mortification*, 55

a gracious initiator of faith, one cannot accuse him of determinism. Faith is very much exercised and embraced as a human act of the will. Calvin writes:

“Here indeed is the chief hinge on which faith turns: that we do not regard the promises of mercy that God offers as true only outside of ourselves, but not at all in us; rather we make them ours by inwardly embracing them.”<sup>15</sup>

Winecoff observes that from the divine side, the Holy Spirit is the bond that unites believers to Christ and from the human side God’s mercy is embraced by the believer resulting in salvation.<sup>16</sup>

### **Double Grace – Justification & Sanctification**

In his treatise on justification by faith in Book Three of *Institutes*, Calvin speaks of a “double grace” that we receive “. First, being reconciled to God through Christ’s blamelessness, we have in heaven instead of a judge, a gracious Father; and second, that sanctified by Christ’s spirit, we are empowered to cultivate blamelessness and purity of life”.<sup>17</sup> Both graces are a benefit of being in Christ. In the first place, we are justified by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8). By this Calvin means that we are declared righteous; our sins are forgiven and Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us.<sup>18</sup> In the second place, we are sanctified, that is set apart and made holy, that we might cultivate holiness and purity of life.

So justification and sanctification are two aspects of one benefit imparted to us through faith by grace. Calvin never sees these two graces as separated but inextricably joined. Jonathan H. Rainbow notes: “For Calvin, transforming grace is always in tandem with

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<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 3.2.15

<sup>16</sup> Winecoff, “Calvin’s doctrine of mortification.,” 87

<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.11.1

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 3.11.2

justifying grace”<sup>19</sup> He cites Calvin’s comment on Romans 8:13, “Let then the faithful learn to embrace him, not just for justification, but also for sanctification, as he has been given to us for both these purposes, lest they rend him asunder by their mutilated faith”.<sup>20</sup> Because they are thus joined, both justification and sanctification are together *equally salvation*. They address the dual human problem of legal guilt and moral corruption. Calvin often refers to these as “remission of sins” and “regeneration”. As we shall see, Calvin’s concept of regeneration is virtually synonymous with repentance and sanctification<sup>21</sup>.

### **Definitive and Experiential Sanctification**

It is evident that for Calvin sanctification has a double aspect. First, it is *definitive* in that it establishes the believer’s state as being set apart and consecrated unto God, a work of grace. It is God that sanctifies the believer. In commenting on Jesus’ prayer in John 17:17 “*Sanctify them by thy truth*” Calvin writes:

“He asks, first, therefore, that the father would sanctify the disciples, or, in other words, that he would consecrate them entirely to himself, and defend them as his sacred inheritance....it is God alone who sanctifies”<sup>22</sup>

Also, being sanctified, in many scriptural passages, is described using the indicative mood, aorist tense, establishing it as an accomplished fact at a point of time in the past.

In 1 Cor. 6:11, the apostle addresses the believers “*you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*”. Calvin in

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<sup>19</sup> Rainbow, “Double grace ,” 99-105

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, vol. 19, Romans 8:13 ,

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.3.5, This paper: *Repentance and Regeneration* p

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<sup>22</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, 45vol. 18, John 17:17



commenting on this verse describes their justification and sanctification as an accomplished reality that should awaken them to the danger of slipping back into defilement. Randall C. Gleason also points out that Calvin reflects this Pauline pattern of the “indicative” and the “imperative”. “Calvin declares God’s sanctifying work in the indicative mood which is demonstrated, in turn, by the believer’s active obedience to the imperatives”.<sup>23</sup> Whereas the definitive aspect of sanctification is reflected in the indicative mood, the imperatives call believers to “work out”<sup>24</sup> their own sanctification, that process itself being empowered by the Holy Spirit (Phil. 2:12)

The second aspect of sanctification is its *experiential* or *progressive* nature. Further along in the same commentary on John 17:17, Calvin writes:

“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 life, till at length, God, having taken away from us the garment of the flesh, fills us with his righteousness”<sup>25</sup>

These two aspects of sanctification are inseparably linked. It is only because believers *have been* sanctified in Christ, that they are able to make progress in sanctification. One aspect of this sanctification is gradual conformity to the image of the Christ. In 2 Corinthians Paul writes: “*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*” (2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV). In commenting on this passage Calvin writes:

“...*secondly*, that it is not fitting that it should be a dead contemplation, but that we should be transformed by means of it into the image of God, and *thirdly* that that the one and the other are not accomplished in us in one

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<sup>23</sup> Gleason, *John Calvin and John Owen on Mortification*, 58

<sup>24</sup> *katargazomai* – Phil 2:12

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, vol. 18, John 17:17

moment. But we must be constantly making progress both in the knowledge of God and in conformity to his image....<sup>26</sup>

Again Calvin affirms that this entire process is the continual and progressive work of grace through the Holy Spirit.

It is clear that for Calvin, justification and sanctification are double aspects of divine grace. Believers are declared righteous, imputed with Christ's righteousness, and set apart and made holy by virtue of their union with Christ. In this sense *both* justification and sanctification are definitive, imputed by Christ to those in Christ. However, as flesh and blood, believers must still walk through this world and must contend with the residues of sin that cling to them as descendants of Adam. Hence we see the need for continual cleansing. Unlike justification, which is definitive (like pregnancy), this continual cleansing is the progressive or experiential aspect of sanctification. Jesus' washing of the disciples feet is an illustration. He declared them all "clean" (except one), yet unless they were washed, they had no part in Him. In commenting on this passage Calvin writes:

"For Christ washes us when he removes the guilt of our sins by his atoning sacrifice, that they may not come into judgment before God; and on the other hand he washes us when he takes away by his Spirit the wicked and sinful desires of the flesh."<sup>27</sup>

This progressive sanctification, that purifies the believer and restores him to the image of God, Calvin also calls regeneration and repentance.

## **Repentance and Regeneration**

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. vol. 20, 2 Cor. 3:18

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. vol. 18 John 13:8

Calvin sees repentance as born of faith and as following faith.<sup>28</sup> In order for a man to repent, he must first recognize the benevolence of God to him, which is recognized in the gospel. As a man sees himself embraced by Christ and forgiven, faith is born in him. He responds in repentance which Calvin defines as “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 the flesh and of the old man, and in the vivification of the Spirit”.<sup>29</sup> Thus, for Calvin, repentance encompasses a turning to God and includes the dual duties of putting to death the old man, and being filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit so as to do good. This turning, dying and empowering Calvin also calls regeneration. In a key passage he writes:

“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. .... Accordingly, we are restored by this regeneration through the benefit of Christ into the righteousness of God; from which we had fallen through Adam.....And indeed, this restoration does not take place in a moment or in a 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 only end at death.”<sup>30</sup>

So we understand that *for Calvin*, repentance, regeneration and progressive sanctification are continual activities and are synonymous.<sup>31</sup> Repentance and regeneration are not singular acts, but continue daily in the life of the believer. This, of course calls to mind Luther’s first of his 95 theses: “the entire life of believers [is] to be

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<sup>28</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.3.1

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 3,3.5

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 3.3.8

<sup>31</sup> Gleason, *John Calvin and John Owen on Mortification*, 59, I had come to this conclusion, which was confirmed by Gleason

one of repentance".<sup>32</sup> In addition, Calvin's definition of repentance includes mortification and vivification as "component parts".<sup>33</sup> Repentance in essence is to cease to do evil and learn to do good (Ps. 36:8). It involves a washing, cleansing, removing of all that is evil and contaminates and a practice of doing good. However, since our very nature and our emotions (the old man) are hostile to God, we must first deny our own nature and put on an inclination towards righteousness and then do righteous acts. This can only come through the action of the Holy Spirit upon our souls. Mortification of the flesh and vivification in Christ are done in tandem in the power of the Holy Spirit, yet they are very much our own actions and are the marks of every true believer. In addition, we must recognize that they must always occur together. John H. Leith points out "mortification and vivification are dimensions of the same experience".<sup>34</sup> One cannot be properly exercised without the other, or the result will be either a self centered ascetism, or a licentious triumphalism. Just as the eagle cannot fly by beating only one wing, there must be symmetry of motion without which flight is impossible.

### *Mortification*

Mortification is the continual practice of putting to death the old self. Mortification is necessary because man's nature is corrupt through the fall. In saying this, Calvin does not imply that all of man's natural impulses are sinful, "but only those bold and unbridled impulses which contend against God's control". Calvin charges these as sin not because they are natural but because they are "inordinate". He writes " 'We have died in Adam':

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<sup>32</sup> "Luther, Martin. "The Ninety-five Theses" in Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings (1989), 21."

<sup>33</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.3.8

<sup>34</sup> Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 76

“Adam by sinning, not only took upon himself misfortune and ruin, but also plunged our nature into like destruction”<sup>35</sup> This “nature” Calvin also calls the “inborn disposition”, “common nature”, “the corruption of original nature”<sup>36</sup>. It is referred to in the Pauline epistles at “the old man” or “flesh”. These terms denote man’s inner disposition to sin, rebellion and hostility to God resulting from Adam’s fall. Calvin defines sin as that “original depravity which dwells in our hearts which impels us to sin”.<sup>37</sup> In order for the transformation to righteousness to take place, this corrupted nature must be put to death. Calvin writes:

“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 naught. As if God had declared that for us to be reckoned among his children our common nature must die!”<sup>38</sup>

This old man has indeed been slain for he is crucified with Christ. In commenting on Romans 6:6 Calvin writes: “This old man, he says, is fastened to the cross, for by it’s power he is slain”.<sup>39</sup> It is only because the old man is already slain, that the believer is able to put him to death. Hence, our union with Christ, our dying with Him is essential in mortification. Any attempt at mortification of the old man apart from entering into Christ’s death is doomed to failure. For until his power is broken, we are powerless against him. It is through the Spirit (vivification), which is the bond of our union with Christ, that the reign of sin is broken. Calvin writes: “For the Spirit dispenses a power whereby they may gain the upper hand and become victors in the struggle. But sin ceases only to reign: it

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<sup>35</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 2.2.1

<sup>36</sup> Gleason, *John Calvin and John Owen on Mortification*, 59

<sup>37</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, vol. 19, Rom 6:12

<sup>38</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.3.8

<sup>39</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, vol. 19, Rom. 6:6

does not cease to dwell in them”.<sup>40</sup> So while the *reign* of sin is broken, its *influence* is still present through the old man that must continually be put to death. This is the first duty of the believer in sanctification, the continual putting to death of the old nature, the flesh. In commenting on Romans 6:11, Calvin points out that this is daily work:

“..for although the mortifying of the flesh is only begun in us, yet the life of sin is destroyed, so that afterwards spiritual newness, which is divine continues perpetually..... yea you must daily proceed with that work of mortifying, which is begun in you till sin be wholly destroyed.”<sup>41</sup>

This is in concert with Calvin’s understanding of regeneration. According to Calvin, regeneration is not something that occurs only at the beginning of the Christian life, so that the child of God can enjoy a heavenly, struggle free life, but rather is a daily, continual battle against the influence of sin, the enemy within. While sin’s capacity to rule over the believer has been destroyed at the cross, the old man does not die quietly, continuing to twitch in his death throes. For this reason the believer is commanded to put him to death, is enabled to do so, and indeed must do so. (Col 3:5). It is noteworthy that the tense of these imperatives is a present iterative, giving the connotation of continued or repeated action.

While believers are assured of continual progress in this struggle against sin, Calvin maintains that sinless perfection is not possible in this life.

“Thus then are the children of God freed through regeneration from bondage to sin. Yet they do not obtain full possession of freedom so as to feel no annoyance from their flesh, but their still remains in them a continuing occasion for struggle.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.3.11

<sup>41</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, 45 vol. 19, Rom. 6:11

<sup>42</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.3.10

In this struggle, the inordinate desires that come from the flesh Calvin labels as sin. He opposes Augustine on this point, who does not call such inordinate desires “sin”. Calvin, on the other hand labels sin “that very depravity which begets in us desires of this sort”<sup>43</sup> Yet Calvin maintains that believers can and do make progress in the struggle against sin. Commenting on Romans 6:14. “Sin shall not rule over you....” Calvin says that sin “cannot overcome us for we are enabled to conquer it by the Spirit of God.”<sup>44</sup> For Calvin, the mechanics of *how* the believer conquers sin and exercises the practice of mortification is threefold:

1. The Denial of Self
2. Bearing the Cross
3. Meditation on the Future Life

All three are done only in the power of the Holy Spirit (vivification).

## The Denial of Self

Denial of self is the first element of mortification. The basis of self-denial is the realization that “we are not our own”. Calvin is so overwhelmed with the truth “we are not our own”, that he repeats this phrase three times in one short paragraph:

**“We are not our own:** let not our reason nor our will, therefore sway our plans and deeds. **We are not our own:** let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. **We are not our own:** insofar as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours.”<sup>45</sup> [Emphasis mine]

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, vol 19. Rom 6:14

<sup>45</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 “We are not our own” will become the first part of the answer to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism: 1563 “What is thy only comfort in life and in death?”

Our duty is then to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God (Rom 12:1). In view of this living sacrifice, Calvin presents three aspects of self-denial. First, we are to deny ourselves looking towards God. Secondly, we are to deny ourselves with respect to self. Thirdly, we are to deny ourselves with respect to others.

Because, we are not our own, but belong to God, we must depart from ourselves and apply the whole force of all our abilities and talents towards God. We now serve Him alone, and there must be no duality of loyalties or affections. The one who looks to God for all things frees himself from vain thoughts and things. We must be like the son whom the Father sent to work in his vineyard. (Matt. 21:28) We must go. This proper orientation to God displaces “pride”, “ostentation”, “avarice”, “lasciviousness”, “effeminacy”, “evil desire” or “self love”.<sup>46</sup> Believers rather are called to resign both themselves and all their possessions to God, to leave off “lusting after glory”<sup>47</sup> and to put away all personal selfish ambition. There must a seeking of no other prosperity other than God’s will and God’s blessing. This requires a mind and a heart-set that recognizes that all desirable outcomes rest in God’s favor and blessing alone. Accordingly, God receives the credit and glory for all successes and is glorified even in failures and hardships. Such God oriented self-denial helps us bear all adversity and produces the steadfastness, which God loves.

Secondly, denial of self is oriented towards selfish desires that come from our flesh. Here Calvin uses “flesh” as a term referring to our corrupt sinful nature inherited from Adam through the fall. The “flesh” includes all the human faculties including the mind

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 3.7.2

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



and the heart.<sup>48</sup> We are to “put off our own nature and deny whatever our reason and heart dictate”.<sup>49</sup> Because “a world of vices are hidden in the soul of man”<sup>50</sup>, we cannot trust our natural inclinations and must take “every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5 ESV). In commenting on this verse Calvin writes, “the liberty of the human mind must be restrained and bridled, that it may not be wise apart from the doctrine of Christ.”<sup>51</sup> The Christian must then, as a matter of course, filter every desire, thought, affection and intent through the Word of Christ. The implication here is clear, that the believer must immerse herself in the Word of Christ. Apart from such discipline, “the flesh” will reorient itself to self.

The third aspect of self-denial is with respect to others. As Phil 2:3, enjoins us, we are to consider others more significant than ourselves and apply ourselves totally to their good, looking after others interest as if they were our own. In a powerfully humbling section, Calvin describes the vileness of our self-love:

“For such is the blindness that we all rush into self-love that each one of us seems to himself to have just cause to be proud of himself and to despise others in comparison. If God has conferred upon us anything of which we need not repent, relying upon it, we immediately lift up our minds, and are not only puffed up, but almost burst with pride. The very vices that infest us we take pains to hide from others, while we flatter ourselves with the pretense that they are slight and insignificant, and even sometimes embrace them as virtues. If others manifest the same endowments we admire in ourselves, or even superior ones, we spitefully belittle and revile these gifts in order to avoid yielding place to such persons. If there are any faults in others, not content with noting them with severs and sharp reproach, we hatefully exaggerate them.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 2.1.9

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 3.7.3

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, vol 20, 2 Cor. 10:5

<sup>52</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.7.4

Calvin continues, enjoining us to examine our faults and call ourselves back to humility, always treating others with good will and honor, cherishing them cordially as friends with lowliness and reverence, rejoicing for them in their giftedness and overlooking their faults.

Such self-renunciation, if empowered by the Spirit, will lead to helping our neighbor. This Calvin maintains is difficult unless we give up all thoughts of ourselves. Only in the power of the Holy Spirit can we look to the neighbor in love that is “patient, kind, not jealous or boastful” (1 Cor.13:4-5). Moreover, the use of our gifts and abilities, are commanded for the benefit of the body, for the building up of the church. (1 Cor. 12:12) Only as we sanctify these, giving them to God himself are they free from corrupt use. Thus, love of neighbor is not focused on others but ultimately looks to God. For no brother or sister in Christ can be viewed as a stranger, but demands the duty of love in Christ’s name. So no brotherly need can be left unmet by the believer who has the power to help. Calvin claims “mortification, then will take place only if we fulfill the duties of love.”<sup>53</sup> And in these duties, the orientation of the heart is paramount. For many give to help their neighbor contemptuously, looking down on their brother. The heart is not in a right place unless the believer can put himself in the place of the one in need and enter into his own experience of need as if it were his own. True love of neighbor sets no limits other than the end of ones own resources. One must be ready to give all. Only then is self-denial complete.

To summarize, the essence of self-denial is self-forgetfulness. As long as we are preoccupied with self, either in self-belittlement or self-aggrandizement, we have made ourselves the centre of our universe. Only by orienting ourselves completely towards

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 3.7.7

God are we able to forget ourselves. This can only be done in the power of the Holy Spirit through simultaneous vivification. The natural man is opposed to God, hostile to God and flees God. Only through regeneration, born of faith in Christ, are we able to throw off the preoccupation with self and turn to God. In doing so, we immediately become aware of our neighbor, and are given Christ's own heart for those who are suffering around us. As we love and serve our neighbor, the denial of self is complete. Only by looking away from ourselves, subordinating ourselves to the will of God and aligning our hearts with His, do we finally lose our anxiety about ourselves. We can then rest in the comfort that God provides for those whose lives are hidden in him. Calvin's discourse in this section of the *Institutes* is magnificent.

## **Bearing the Cross**

Yet now, Calvin calls us to "climb even higher".<sup>54</sup> As followers of Christ, we are to take up our cross.<sup>55</sup> Just as Christ embraced and willingly bore his own cross, so also He appoints us to ours. "For whomever the Lord has adopted and deemed worthy of his fellowship ought to prepare themselves for a hard, toilsome and unquiet life, crammed with very many and various kinds of evil."<sup>56</sup> Calvin describes Christ's entire life as a "perpetual cross". Even though he was a Son, he needed to learn obedience through suffering (Heb. 5:8). If this is appointed for the Son in whom the Father is well pleased, what would make us, his followers, think that we could be in any way exempt? Gleason points out that while self-denial is the inward aspect of conformity to Christ, cross

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 3.8.1

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 3.8.2

bearing is the outward.<sup>57</sup> Our bearing of our own cross is the solidarity that we share in Christ's suffering, indeed his death, burial and resurrection (Phil 3:10-11). Calvin identifies a number of benefits to the believer in bearing the cross.

First, "the cross leads us to perfect trust in God's power"<sup>58</sup>. Because we have too much confidence in ourselves, God afflicts us with disgrace, poverty, disease or calamity, so that we will be driven to call upon Him. Such testing leads us to knowledge of God. For the Christian, prosperity and riches, dull and deaden dependence on God. Affliction rather, causes us to rely on God's grace. Second "the cross permits us to experience God's faithfulness and gives us hope for the future".<sup>59</sup> The mechanism here is that tribulations produce patience, and through endurance, character. As we develop in this way, God sustains us proving himself faithful to his promises. His proven faithfulness inspires in us hope in promises not yet fulfilled. Our confidence is thus born of God's sustenance in affliction. Calvin quotes God's promise in Romans 5:3-4, (to be with believers in tribulation) as the grounds for this hope. Third, by learning patience through affliction, we also learn obedience. Here Calvin uses Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac as an illustration. Will we follow God, even at great cost of those things most precious to us? Will we surrender all, as Christ did in bearing his own cross? The one who mortifies the flesh will do both. Fourth, Calvin notes that the cross is medicine.<sup>60</sup> Left to ourselves, we become "flabby" and "indulgent". We forget obedience and begin to fall back to our own agenda. To jolt us out of our apathy or wanton pride, God snaps us

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<sup>57</sup> Gleason, *John Calvin and John Owen on Mortification*, 64

<sup>58</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.8.2

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* 3.8.3

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 3.8.5

back into obedience through a flesh bestowal of our cross. Fifth, God uses the cross as a vehicle of fatherly discipline. Citing 1 Cor. 11:32<sup>61</sup>, Calvin reminds us that God chastises us with “adversities” so that we will not fall under condemnation along with the world. In this way our Heavenly Father disciplines us, regarding us as sons (Heb 12:8). We need to be constantly reminded of the futility and slavery of our previous life. As we are trained by adversity, to be steadfast and trusting in him, we are moved in conformity to Christ, away from our former manner of life, especially at times when we begin to slip back. Sixth, as we bear the cross in persecution and for righteousness sake, we are deemed worthy to suffer dishonour for his sake (Acts 5:41). This puts us squarely on the side of the gospel and on the side of righteousness. Even as we are “stripped of our possessions”<sup>62</sup>, we are diminished in the eyes of the world but are exalted by God for righteousness sake. In the eyes of God, our treasure is increased and we have a fuller place in the Kingdom of God. Calvin calls us to throw off the fleeting allurements of this present life and strive for that upon which God places great value. Seventh, “Suffering under the cross, the Christian finds consolation in God”.<sup>63</sup> Because we will find ourselves subject to disgrace and persecution for the sake of the gospel and for righteousness, we must guard against ingratitude, reminding ourselves rather that this same suffering has been required of all who will inherit the Kingdom of God. We are called, therefore to reflect upon the joy that is set before us, like Christ, so that we find our consolation in God himself and his promises. Here Calvin points out that the Christian does not meet his suffering with stoic like determinism, giving no expression, even denying and pain. Rather we are to recognize that in being pressed, afflicted and

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 3.8.6

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 3.8.8

persecuted, there is real pain and real suffering. Our Savior was “sorrowful even to death” (Matt. 26:38) and buckled his knees in prayer sweating great drops of blood. Calvin does not pretend that this is easy nor does he have a cavalier attitude toward cross bearing. Rather, he recognizes that such sorrow and suffering that is demanded of us is in real conflict with the patience that God calls us to. There is a monumental inner struggle that goes on here, and our groaning and wrestling by necessity breeds in us an intensity of prayer that unites us with Christ in a bond of suffering that bridges heaven and earth. In this the Father himself “consoles us also in this respect when he asserts that in the very act of afflicting us with the cross he is providing for our salvation... It is thus clear how necessary is it that the bitterness of the cross is tempered with spiritual joy”.<sup>64</sup>

One thing that Calvin does not appear to differentiate, at least in this section of the Institutes, is the difference between suffering that is due to the common human experience and suffering due to afflictions resulting from the believer’s identification with Christ and the gospel. His descriptions of suffering under the cross imply that many of the calamities that befall all people: loss of loved ones, disease, natural disasters, sickness; that these very things are in the life of the believer part of cross bearing. However, we must note that those sufferings, which are common to all men, cannot be termed “a cross” just because the sufferer is now a believer. Christ bore his cross willingly being rejected, despised and crucified *for the sake of his testimony to himself as the anointed One of God*. When we are afflicted for that cause also, then we are bearing the cross. Moreover, whenever Jesus, in his earthly ministry, came upon human suffering, he relieved it. We are called to do the same. However, Jesus predicted that

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 3.8.11

Peter would someday be stretched and carried where he would not want to go, thereby foretelling future affliction. (John 21:18) To be relieved of any affliction that is for the sake of Christ, is to be relieved of discipleship. Such affliction is then truly “a cross” after the pattern of our Lord’s. While there is no question that God uses all sorts of events and circumstances to discipline and chastise us, these cannot rightly be termed “a cross” unless they are the result of our persecution and affliction for the sake of our identification with Christ and His gospel. It appears that Calvin uses the term “cross” in a broader sense, referring to all events whether natural or circumstantial that God uses to discipline us and bring us into conformity with Christ.

### **Meditation on the Future Life**

The third aspect of mortification for Calvin is meditation on the future life.<sup>65</sup> Because our fleshly nature is enraptured with a love of this world, it is not enough to simply deny self and endure under our appointed cross. In our present state, our minds and hearts are enamored with riches, power, honour, ambition and lust. Because of this, self-denial and the patient endurance of affliction must be supplemented with setting our minds and hearts on the glories of the life to come. The vanity of this life is brought home to the believer by a constant exposure to the miseries of the present world. If the believer flees these miseries, and retreats into a state of enjoyment of the world’s riches, his heart becomes satisfied and dull and he will seek to avoid, rather than long for, the eternal Kingdom. Calvin reminds us that our life is “like smoke”.<sup>66</sup> When faced with death, we understand this briefly, yet our manner is to soon forget this and go on with life as if we

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 3.9.1

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 3.9.2

were to live forever. Rather, we should continually live reminding ourselves that we are a heartbeat away from eternity. We should also disregard the things of this world as if despised and worthless. However, Calvin notes, we must not slip into ingratitude for the blessings of this life, but rather use them for eternal purposes, as stewards who must give an account. Moreover, we should regard the present world as a place of exile that is not our true home.

“For if heaven is our homeland, what else is the earth but our place of exile? If departure from the world is entry into life, what else is the world but a sepulcher? And what else is it for us to remain in life but to be immersed in death? If to be freed from the body is to be released into perfect freedom, what else is the body but a prison?”<sup>67</sup>

Having this mindset, we are to regard our current situation as a “sentry post” at which God has posted us, until that time that he calls us home. No soldier on duty gets enthralled with his posting, but rather thinks and longs continually for that day when he will be sent home. Such an attitude will also rightly manifest itself in a proper attitude towards death. Calvin criticizes those who are gripped with a great fear of death. Rather death should be looked at as the final release and entry point to home. Calvin asserts: “no one has made progress in the school of Christ who does not joyfully await the day of death and final resurrection”.<sup>68</sup> This, we are called to “rejoice and raise our heads, for our day of redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:28). This then is how we should regard ourselves on earth: as sheep are destined for slaughter – so that we would be conformed to the image of Christ.<sup>69</sup> And so, as we see wicked men prospering and enjoying the luxurious riches of this world, we are to look toward “the day” when the LORD himself will receive us into the eternal peace of his Kingdom. In

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 3.9.4

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 3.9.5

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 3.9.6



that day, He will wipe every tear from our eyes, will clothe us with glory, crown us with delight, feed us with sweet riches from his own table and elevate us to “his sublime fellowship”.<sup>70</sup> Then we shall see the punishment of the wicked and rejoice, laugh and leap with joy at the righteousness and justice of God. This is the believer’s only hope and sole consolation. Calvin exhorts us to be continually thinking of these things and so focusing on the life to come. Our hearts should be continually gripped with the joyous anticipation of future glory and of eschatological consummation. Hence, nothing that happens to us on this side should cause us the slightest anxiety, because we look toward, long for, and live for that day in which the Son of righteousness will be revealed.

## **Vivification**

As we have seen, mortification and vivification are dual aspects sanctification. While Calvin describes mortification and its three elements at length, he does not write an equal parallel section on vivification in Book Three of the *Institutes*. This is to be expected, for throughout his discussion on mortification and its elements, he continually stresses that these duties are done in the power of the Holy Spirit. Calvin opposes those who would define mortification in human terms as penance. He criticizes those who make mortification into contrition and vivification into that happiness that “the mind receives after its perturbation and fear have been quieted”.<sup>71</sup> Rather, he defines vivification as: “*the desire to live in a holy and devoted manner, a desire arising from rebirth; as it were said that a man dies to himself that he may begin to live to God*”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 3.3.3

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

(emphasis mine). Thus, we see that for Calvin, vivification is an inner disposition and desire to live for God, in all holiness and righteousness, to do His will with no thought as to his own. Vivification is inherent in repentance. Repentance is a turning of one's life to God, "a transformation, not only of outward works, but in the soul itself". Only when it puts off it's old nature, does it bring forth the fruit of works in harmony with its renewal.<sup>73</sup> This requires a transformation of the mind and heart, putting on an inclination to holiness and righteousness. "That comes to pass when the Spirit of God, so imbues our souls, steeped in His holiness, with both new thoughts and feelings that they can be rightly considered new".<sup>74</sup> So we see that for Calvin vivification is the birth of the "new man" and the "new nature" that supplants the old and provide a complete reorientation of one's life to God. Anyone who does not manifest this "new nature" and is not "renewed by the Spirit of God, should be looked upon as nothing in the church"<sup>75</sup>. Part of this reorientation of life is evidenced by how the believer uses the resources of this present life.

In describing how believers should use the present life and it's blessings, Calvin identifies two dangers.<sup>76</sup> It is as though the believer is walking on top of a ridge with two very slippery slopes on either side. On one side is the tendency to opulence and licentiousness, that is the use of all external things without any limitation or restriction placed upon them, according to one's own conscience. The other slope is an overly strict ascetism; whereby one should abstain from all things that one could do without.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 3.3.8

<sup>75</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, vol 20, 2 Cor 5:17

<sup>76</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.10.1

Calvin describes this as a dangerous fetter that binds the believer more than scripture requires. As guidelines for avoiding either extreme, Calvin gives some principles upon which the use of the world's goods and blessings should be based. First, "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."<sup>77</sup> Thus, God created food not only for necessity, but also for pleasure and delight. This would also apply to clothing, the beauties of natural surroundings, wine and oil, and things attractive to us. The use of these with thanksgiving is not wrong and those who deprive themselves harshly, thinking that in doing so that they are commending themselves to God, are wrong. Second, he reminds us that we should always set our affections upon the Giver of gifts and not upon the gifts themselves. Thus, to be overly enamored by the things of the world, and to set our hearts on them is idolatry, a displacement of the worship of God. Third, we should hold all things loosely, as though we had them not. We should indulge ourselves as little as possible, yet not become so engrossed in self-denial that our very acts of self-denial become self-centered idolatry. Fourth, Calvin reminds us that all things belong to God, and that we are merely stewards of God's various blessings, held in trust. To that end we must use our resources wisely, remembering always that we must give an account of our stewardship to God. Hence frugality, patience and the love of our neighbor should govern the use of resources. Finally Calvin reminds us: "the Lord's calling [is to be] a basis for our way of life."<sup>78</sup> To that end, each person must live according to the assigned portion that God has given him and should be content in the performance of our duties. Calvin, does not appear here to endorse any kind of upward mobility in station or calling, but rather claims that: "No one impelled by his own rashness, will attempt more than his

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

calling will permit, because he will know that it is not lawful to exceed it's bounds".<sup>79</sup>

This again brings to mind Calvin's analogy of the soldier on duty assigned to his given sentry post. We are to be content in our posting, always looking to the Captain of our salvation who will reward us according to the riches of His goodness and mercy in the life to come.

### *Conclusion:*

Calvin's doctrine of sanctification is exhilarating. Our union with Christ is a consequence of the gift of faith; given to us by our Heavenly Father that we might glorify Him and exemplify His grace on earth. The bond of that union is the Holy Spirit, which is the efficacious cause of our sanctification. By virtue of this gift we receive a double grace, being both justified and sanctified in Christ. We are cleansed from our sins, our legal guilt removed and we are infused with a newness of life and disposition toward godliness. Our lives are now hidden with Christ in God. This transforming grace sets us apart, making us holy, sanctified by his blood. In addition to this definitive aspect of sanctification, we are empowered by the Spirit to the dual duties of mortification of the old man and vivification of the new man into a life characterized by holiness and conformance into the image of Christ. This turning away from indwelling sin and turning toward God is a daily activity which Calvin calls repentance and regeneration. The basis for such is the death of Christ on the cross, to which we are united. It is because the old man has been crucified with Christ, that we are now able to put him to death. This putting to death of the old man requires self-denial, cross bearing and meditation on the future life. Although sin has no dominion over us, the influence of the sin principle still remains in us and will be until the moment of death. Hence mortification and vivification

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 3.10.6

are duties that must be continually exercised. As an eagle in flight, whose beating of wings must continue until she comes to rest, we are never able to cease exercising these duties in this life. As we do so we are transformed from one degree of Glory to another, ever climbing higher and higher. The Holy Spirit is the wind that empowers these actions and renders them effective. Those who attempt mortification and vivification apart from the Holy Spirit, are like an eagle beating its wings in a vacuum. The wings receive no resistance, create no lift, a pointless self deluded exercise. This leads to vain ascetism or Godless religiosity. But for believers who are in Christ, and empowered by the Spirit, these actions result in increasing holiness, bringing glory to Christ and confirming in their spirits that they are children of God. For them, increasing holiness and Christ likeness moves them to use the resources and blessings of this life to give testimony to the One to whom they belong, rendering the Kingdom of God visible on earth.

Calvin's understanding of sanctification and the Christian life reflects one who has experienced the struggle of the Christian life, and has prevailed. He has had a profound impact on generations of believers who have been moved to increasing levels of holiness through his testimony. He has certainly had a profound effect upon me.

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