

Calvin's Teaching on the Spiritual Journey toward the Restoration of the Image of God

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1. Prologue

John Calvin believes that theology is not only an intellectual speculation but also a way of spiritual life. The goal of theology for Calvin is to come to know God, which, in turn, should then serve as piety. This means that the knowledge of God one gains ought to influence the soul to transform back to its original state of the image of God. However, in Calvin's understanding, human beings have become totally depraved, having lost the image of God with the fall of Adam. Thus, the task of Calvin's spirituality is to restore one's lost image of God, in order to reintegrate one's life with God. He believes that it is possible to restore *imago Dei* in human beings through a "mystical union" with Christ; this is the most fundamental concept of Calvin's spirituality. In this article, I will argue that the ultimate goal of Calvin's spirituality is to restore Christians to a life oriented toward God in order to be restored to their original design that is, being in the image of God.

2. The Nature of Mystical Union

Mystical union is a core notion in Calvin's teaching and spirituality. Wilhelm Niesel asserts that the foundation of Christian faith is a mystical union and for Calvin, to be a Christian is to be united with Christ.¹ Moreover, Charles Partee states that the mystical union is the extensive method to approach the *Institutes* of John Calvin.² According to Canlis, Calvin's emphasis upon mystical union can be called the hallmark of both reformed doctrine and reformed spirituality.³ Likewise, mystical union is the kernel of Calvin's spirituality. But what is this mystical union? Calvin defines mystical union in his *Institutes*: "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, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed."⁴

In other words, for Calvin, mystical union is nothing but the union with Christ. Calvin regards the character and reality of this mystical union of the believers with Christ as one of the great mysteries of the gospel. He uses several metaphors to portray it: "we are engrafted into

¹ Wilhelm Niesel, *Reformed Symbolics* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), 182.

² Charles Partee, "Calvin's Central Dogma Again," *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 18:2 (Summer 1987): 191-9.

³ Julie Canlis, "Calvin, Osiander, and Participation in God," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6, no. 2 (April 1, 2004): 172.

⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.11.10.

Him"; "to grow into one body with Him"; "to put Him on"; and "sacred wedlock"⁵ whereby we become "flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone."⁶

3. The Role of the Holy Spirit and Faith in Union with Christ

Then, how can we be united with Christ? On the one hand, from God's perspective, the bond of the union is the Holy Spirit. Calvin addresses the core teaching of the union with Christ in Book III of the *Institutes*, in terms of the working of the Holy Spirit. The spiritual nature of this union can only be understood by the fact that "the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself."⁷ This means that the Holy Spirit is the essential bond of our union with Christ because he sanctifies defective sinners with our Lord.⁸ Calvin insists on the necessity of the Holy Spirit's role in uniting us to Christ, "We infer that we are one with Christ; not because He transfuses His substance into us, but because the power of His Spirit He communicates to us His life and all the blessings He has received from the Father."⁹ Therefore, it is possible to say that the union with Christ gives rise to the sanctification of the Spirit because the Holy Spirit reconciles the sanctifying benefits of the cross.¹⁰

On the other hand, from humanity's perspective, the bond of union with Christ is faith. Calvin claims that by faith we "come to possess the Heavenly Kingdom"¹¹ since faith actually unites us to Christ and includes us into his body. Although scholasticism asserts implicit faith, Calvin's understanding of true faith is God's gracious intentions toward us, as revealed in the Bible.¹² However, faith is not the most crucial initiative factor that brings about union with Christ. Faith is the work of the Spirit and a gift from God.¹³ Even though faith is the response of humans, the Holy Spirit takes the initiative because of human limits in knowing God. This spiritual incapability can be overcome by the Holy Spirit's enlightenment.¹⁴ Therefore, it is equally true that the union with Christ is initiated not only by the Holy Spirit, but also by faith. Ronald Wallace argues that Calvin employs the same language in correlating union with Christ to faith when he speaks of joining the Holy Spirit.¹⁵

Therefore, for Calvin, union with Christ is a wonderful intimate experience between us and Christ through the bond of the Holy Spirit in faith. However, this does not mean a mixture of us and Christ, but rather a spiritual union with Christ. If so, what kind of benefits do Christians gain through this spiritual union with Christ?

⁵ Ibid., 3.1.1.

⁶ Ibid., 3.1.3.

⁷ Jean Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, Calvin's Commentaries; V.11 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 210.

⁸ Philip Fisk, "Calvin's Metaphysics of Our Union with Christ," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 3 (2009): 323.

⁹ Jean Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John, 11-21 and the First Epistle of John*, Calvin's Commentaries v. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 148.

¹⁰ Gleason, *John Calvin and John Owen in Mortification*, 54–55.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.2.1.

¹² Gleason, *John Calvin and John Owen in Mortification*, 5.

¹³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.1.4.

¹⁴ Ibid., 3.2.7.

¹⁵ Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), 21–22.

4. The Benefits of the Union with Christ

According to Calvin, we receive a twofold benefit through our union with Christ, justification and sanctification which, for Calvin, are intimately related to the process of restoring the image of God.¹⁶ Calvin posits "the grace of justification is not separated from sanctification although they are things distinct."¹⁷ This means that while both of these benefits come from the same source, they remain independent.¹⁸ Nevertheless, since both justification and sanctification are effects of the incorporation into Christ through Holy Spirit, it is impossible for one to exist without the other. Calvin asserts that justification is the starting point of the process toward restoring the image of God. Based on this justification, believers can proceed toward the restoration of the image of God via the sanctification.¹⁹ However, while justification refers to the believer's reconciliation with God through a one-time act of forgiveness and the imputation of Christ's righteousness,²⁰ sanctification is the ongoing process of eliminating the sinful nature by conforming to the image of Christ during the believer's life.²¹ Partee, therefore, argues that while justification is the work of Christ outside us, our sanctification occurs within us through the work of the Holy Spirit.²²

Therefore, in Calvin, justification and sanctification work communally for the recovery of the image of God. He claims, "We must have his blessedness not just once but must hold to it throughout life finally he(Paul) testifies that the embassy of free reconciliation with God is published not for one day or another but is attested as perpetual in the church."²³

For Calvin, sanctification is a human being's process of continual struggle toward the recovery of the image of God, with the help of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, sanctification is not a one-time work as justification is, but rather a lifelong practice. He asserts that

sanctification does not take place in one moment or on 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 guilty, consecrates them to himself as temples renewing all their minds to true purity that they may practice repentance throughout their minds to true purity that they may practice repentance throughout their lives and know that this warfare will end only at death.²⁴

This means that for Christians, sanctification as progress toward the restoration of the image of

¹⁶ Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin*, 106.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.6.11.

¹⁸ Wendel, *Calvin*, 256.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.16.1.

²⁰ Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin*, 106–107.

²¹ Fesko J.V, "Sanctification and Union with Christ: A Reformed Perspective," *Evangelical Quarterly* 82 (2010): 200.

²² Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 211.

²³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.14.11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.3.9.

God should be the ultimate aim of their spiritual journeys. However, Calvin also maintains that it is impossible to fully restore the perfect image of God through sanctification in this life because it is accomplished only in death.

5. Mortification as a Spiritual Practice for Sanctification

Although it is impossible to achieve the perfect image of God in this earthly life, Christians must practice sanctification throughout their spiritual journeys. But how can the spiritual journey that is initiated by justification and sanctification lead believers to the restoration of *imago Dei*? Calvin argues that this is possible through mortification. In other words, mortification is a kind of spiritual practice in this life. According to Calvin, the object of mortification is the “flesh” or the “old man.”²⁵ He claims that the flesh is mortified when it is “violently slain by the sword of the Spirit and brought to nought. As if God declared that for us to be reckoned among his children our common nature must die.”²⁶ Although mortification is definitely God’s work, Calvin believes that it requires human participation as well. What, then, are specific ways to participate in mortification? Calvin suggests three practices of mortification: “Self-Denial,” “Bearing the Cross,” and “Meditation on the Future Life.”

There is no end in the mortification as a practical way of sanctification. Christians should practice spiritual discipline through the three kinds of mortification in this life until death. By exercising mortification, our sanctification becomes deeper and, in the long run, Christians can restore the image of God in themselves more vividly.

6. The Restoration of the Image of God

The Christian life is a spiritual growth toward an ultimate communion with God. Calvin says,

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 slightness of our success; for even though attainment may not correspond to desire... with continuous effort striving toward this end: that we may surpass ourselves in goodness until we attain to goodness itself.²⁷

Thus, the restoration of the image of God in Calvin's spiritual life is gradual regeneration and renewal through ongoing advancement. In this respect, union with Christ is the unceasing sanctification toward the restoration of the image of God. However, we must keep in mind that it is impossible to achieve perfect recovery in this present life. Wendel asserts, "no doubt it becomes closer every day, but it does not reach its culminating point until the life to come."²⁸ In addition, according to Niesel, although union with Christ is achieved in this earthly life, the

²⁵ Ibid., 3.3.5.

²⁶ Ibid., 3.3.8.

²⁷ Ibid., 3.6.5.

²⁸ Wendel, *Calvin*, 237–238.

complete transformation will not be endowed until the Last Judgment.²⁹ Consequently, Calvin claims that the complete restoration of the image of God is the future promise for those who have already united with Christ.³⁰ After all, Christians can attain final restoration of the image of God through a union with Christ in the Kingdom of God. However, through sanctification and mortification, believers should continuously pursue the restoration of the image of God in this life as far as they can.

7. Conclusion

I have argued that in Calvin's spirituality, the restoration of the image of God can be realized through a union with Christ. Calvin believes that human beings are so depraved that they have almost lost the image of God. Therefore, it is the most important aim for believers to recover the *imago Dei* throughout their lives after conversion. Calvin argues that the restoration is possible through a union with Christ. Through this mystical union, believers attain a twofold grace – justification and sanctification – which mutually collaborate to achieve the restoration of the image of God. After receiving these two graces, Christians should pursue mortification as a spiritual practice until they come to death. Although, as Calvin claims, it is impossible to recover *imago Dei* perfectly in this life, believers should continue it during their whole lives.

Therefore, mystical union is not only the beginning but also the end of the spirituality of John Calvin. In this sense, mystical union is not a state, but a process. Through a mystical union with Christ, Christians begin a spiritual life. This mystical union leads Christians to practice spiritual disciplines – such as self-denial, cross-bearing, and meditation on the future life – by producing justification and sanctification. Therefore, Christians who want to experience the image of God in this life must pursue a union with Christ. However, we should keep in mind that all of this is impossible by ourselves, but possible with the Holy Spirit through our faith.

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²⁹ Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 125,129.

³⁰ Jean Calvin, , *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

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