

Calvin's *Institutes*: Primer for Spiritual Formation

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The gospel is a doctrine not of the tongue but of life. It is ... received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds a seat and resting place in the inmost affection of the heart.

Calvin, *Institutes*, III.6.4¹

When it came to life on earth, Calvin was a realist. In fact, he was something of a pessimist.² His mother had died when he was three. His undemonstrative father died little more than a decade later, excommunicated from the church. His teenage years brought on chronic headaches, indigestion, and asthma that never left him. His experience of life was as one "lost in a labyrinth,"³ with fear so palpable that he writes, "I wanted to die to be rid of those fears."⁴ But this cloud of fragility and loneliness was not without its silver lining. Calvin, intellectual genius that he was, understood from early on that religion was not only for the mind but also for the heart. For Calvin, the gift of the gospel was not in correct doctrine but in its ability to penetrate to the heart and emotions—indeed, even to transform them.

Modest about his conversion,⁵ we know little of how the self-disciplined, introverted young man was converted—but, one thing we do know is that he was converted to Christ. Not to reform-minded thinking. Not to humanist methods of biblical scholarship. Not to more "authentic" eucharistic practices. But to Jesus Christ himself. And this, for Calvin,

was everything. This was the centre from which Calvin worked, and it is the centre for all of his theological projects. And this, not incidentally, is the only place where Calvin believed the transformation of our hearts and lives could occur—in an ongoing encounter with Jesus the Christ.

An encounter with Jesus was not something one could label and date (as Calvin himself refused to label and date his own conversion), then to be put on display in one's spiritual archives.⁶ From Calvin's perspective, it was a new way of living and being, and its shape was *sonship*. "Adoption ... is not the cause merely of a partial salvation, but bestows salvation entire."⁷ Calvin's theology, for all its clarity and polemic usefulness, loses its centre when it is pulled away from sonship—both the Sonship of Jesus and, consequently, our own adoptive sonship.⁸ If we are going to read Calvin's theology as it was intended, for spiritual formation,⁹ then it must begin here, with Calvin's grasp of the transformative impact of sonship.

Calvin's *Institutes*: Primer for Spiritual Formation

Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is not where many would turn for his understanding of spiritual formation. Its later polemical and dogmatic additions belie its origins as a small catechetical handbook (following exactly the program of Luther's *Lesser Catechism*), intent on shaping persecuted Christians for right belief and living. Yet over all the years that it grew (from six chapters to eighty)

and that it matured (from 1536 to 1559), Calvin's original purpose never wavered. His desire was that it give believers not only a right understanding of the gospel, but that it "pass into daily living, and so transform us" (III.6.4). The "systematic" Calvin who was later to be admired is more of an anachronism, for he viewed doctrine not as the communication of beliefs about God but as a personal experience of the gospel. It must not be forgotten that Calvin was first and foremost a pastor who was intent on forming a people for and by union with Christ.

The *Institutes* gives forth wonderful gems when subjected to intense analysis; but, like the Scriptures, there are elusive diamonds that can only be found when an entire book is read in one sitting. I'll never forget the experience of reading the book of Revelation straight through, when I saw the forest for the first time, rather than the trees. There are themes and nuances in Calvin's *Institutes* which may be hindered by intense analysis and scrutiny, where one does not breathe in the book as a whole, but only in fits and spurts. And perhaps for this reason the *Institutes* is rarely consulted for spiritual formation. Although it is obvious that I have never read the *Institutes* in a day, let alone a week (and not just because I have young children!), I would encourage its broad perusal for the nurturing of our interior lives. Calvin, at least, would approve.

Spiritual Formation: The Trinitarian Context

What a detailed analysis of the *Institutes* often overlooks is the structure of the work—a structure that gives crucial clues for Calvin's vision of the spiritual life. He toyed with how to configure the *Institutes* for over two decades, until at last, he arranged it into four books, loosely conceived as the Father, the Son, the Spirit, and the church. Of this final structure, he writes, "although I did not regret the labor spent, I was never satisfied until the work had been arranged in the

order now set forth."¹⁰ Scripture does not reveal God's nature but instead reveals God's disposition—his "benevolence" toward us, as Calvin would say. All through the Old Testament we have the story of God's benevolent pursuit of humanity, a pursuit culminating in Christ and his cross. So even as Calvin uses the Trinity as a structuring tool, it is not an abstract framework but God triunely relating to us.¹¹ The Trinity is not an organizing principle for spectators. It is profoundly personal, making a claim on the reader's life. In the gospel, Calvin says, we have the "heart of Christ opened"¹² to us, which is the revelation of the heart of the Triune God.

Demonstrated even by the way he organizes the *Institutes*, Calvin declares: *all must begin with the Trinity*. Before we even enter into the words on the first page, the Trinity gives shape to Calvin's understanding of where we have come from and where we are going. The *Institutes* shimmers with this unstated presence of a trinitarian, personal God who is above, before, ahead of, behind, and all around us—loving us, calling us, breathing life into our beings. The *Institutes* follows the steady pursuit of (Book I) God the *Father*, who creates us for love and fellowship, and who incarnates the Word as (Book II) Jesus the true *Son*, who has come to redeem us from sin and show us what this fellowship is really like. The *Spirit* (Book III) continues this wooing, building the life of Jesus the Son into our broken lives so that we can truly be God's children who, as the *church* (Book IV), live a familial life responding to this Triune God of grace. Here we begin to see that for Calvin, the Trinity is not merely a test of orthodoxy, or a mathematical conundrum that we must

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believe by faith. Instead, the Trinity is to be *entered into*. It is the lived experience of the Christian life. The Trinity is our clue and access to spiritual formation as both its means and end.

Often, the “personalness” of the gospel is secured through second-rate means, such as gratitude for salvation, or an individual sense of God’s presence, or a missional call. These are wonderful things, but they are false securities. On the contrary, the only thing that can guarantee the personal nature of our faith is God’s own personhood.

The Trinity provided more than just a handy organizational pattern for Calvin’s theological primer; it ensured its *personal* nature. Thus far, Luther had pioneered the catechism as a way for people to “own” their faith, to lure theology out of the cathedral and into their daily living and practice. (For example, the 1549 Catechism of the Church of England begins with the question, “*what is your name?*” suggesting that catechisms have very much to do with the personalization of the faith).¹³ Yet, over the years that he laboured over the *Institutes*, Calvin began to move away from Luther’s catechetical structure to a trinitarian structure.¹⁴ Though we do not know all the reasons why, I’d like to suggest that in doing so, Calvin provided a more sure foundation for making one’s faith personal. For catechisms (and other helpful spiritual practices) do not secure the personal nature of our faith. God does.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a way of reminding us that everything God does is personal, because God is *three persons*, who can only be received in a personal way. It is not we who make the gospel personal; rather, it is God who is eternally personal—

who is himself a communion of love—who offers his gospel to us. I don’t want to risk misunderstanding here: we can

attend to the gospel’s eternally personal nature through our own devotional life. *We must* attend to it. But unless we rest in God’s personalizing of us, we will try and “personalize” our faith through our own intensity and emotions. Often, the “personalness” of the gospel is secured through second-rate means, such as gratitude for salvation, or an individual sense of God’s presence, or a missional call. These are wonderful things, but they are false securities. On the contrary, the only thing that can guarantee the personal nature of our faith is God’s own personhood. Funnily enough, the quest to “personalize” our faith usually ends in its depersonalization, because we begin to focus inordinately on ourselves. Calvin chides, “it is not very sound theology to confine a man’s thoughts so much to himself ... for we are born first of all for God, and not for ourselves.”¹⁵ Framing our whole existence around the personalness of God—as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is what ensures that our “spirituality” (or “piety”) remains *personal*. And it is in this personal, relational manner that we are led “in” to the *Institutes*.

Being Spiritually Formed by Union with Christ

Calvin sets the stage for the *Institutes* with a trinitarian shape to reality, and an understanding of God and his “personalness”—his life of communion—that sets the agenda. But for Calvin, there is only one entrance to the spiritual life, and that is Jesus. He is our entry point. All contact with God, all gifts from God, all prayer, all peace, all ministry, all holiness comes to us through and in the person of Jesus. Why? Because Calvin believes this has always been the “nature” of things. This is the trinitarian way God works. God doesn’t do things at a distance. He is personal, and all aspects of our Christian faith are—at their core—encounter with him. This is no less the case for us as it was for Adam and Eve who enjoyed all the benefits of God because, even there in the

garden, Christ was the “mediator” or the “midpoint” between God and themselves.¹⁶ He is the one in whom we are given all the things of God and—most centrally to Calvin’s thought—God himself.

A big task of being spiritually formed is to begin to recognize this possibility for Christ-encounter all around us. Spiritual formation in the *Institutes* does not revolve around set spiritual practices. Nor does it begin with an understanding of grace and the gifts that God longs to give us. These gifts have a face—Jesus. This world we have entered is a Christ-saturated world. All “spirituality” we have is encounter with Christ. Calvin wouldn’t have us become sentimental about this. Instead, he simply would have us honour the nearness of Christ in and around us. He would have us recognize that everything we do, as a consequence, is worship. (Calvin is infamous for his iconoclastic leanings, but it is imperative that we understand that Calvin was not against statues and physical representations of God in and of themselves. No, he hated the fact that they *compromised God’s nearness*. He hated the fact that people, believing God to be far off, felt that they could approach the saints and their images with better luck than a distant God.) Calvin desired that people understand the Jesus-saturated elements of our reality¹⁷ and how every aspect of our lived life is God’s hand outstretched to us in communion.

If Book I of the *Institutes* is concerned with Christ as the “midpoint” or “mediator” of all creation, Book II is concerned to show how, after the Fall, Jesus becomes the mediator in a new way. Calvin’s writings can be seen as one great lament for what humanity could have been, but it is a mistake to ever pull Calvin’s virulent language about sin away from what he believed was its true context—the fact that our sin has been provided for in the cross. (For this reason, Calvin refuses to talk about the effects of the Fall under Book I of the *Institutes* on “Creation,” but waits until Book II and the

story of redemption.) Calvin is convinced that there is so much that God desires to give to humanity, but now what God wants to give will take on a Christ-shape. It will take on the characteristics of Jesus himself: his humanity, his obedience, and—above all—his relationship with the Father.¹⁸ It is this that God desires to give fallen humanity. And it is for this that Christ walks the earth—breaking the power of sin, disease, and destruction—so that it can become ours. “Christ has [no] thing, which may not be applied to our benefit.”¹⁹ Every event in Jesus’s life was lived with the self-conscious intent that humanity be able to draw from it and be made new by it.²⁰

So how do we get in on these hard-won benefits? How do we experience Jesus’s salvation, in all its fullness and with all its gifts? Calvin’s solution is simple: we get Jesus himself. We get Jesus “adorned” with all his gifts.²¹ Book III is devoted entirely to this question:

We must now examine this question: 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. For this reason, he is called “our Head.”

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... We also, in turn, are said to be "engrafted into him" ... for, as I have said, all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him. (III.1.1)

In "union with Christ," Jesus's Father becomes our Father, we become children, and we enter the family dynamic. We move from being orphans to suddenly sitting around a table, eating the family food, being included in the Father's legacy, and getting in on everything in this family economy.

Calvin is anything but vague. We are not to imitate Jesus. We are not to consent intellectually to Jesus. We are not to receive the gifts of Jesus, as if they could in some way be "imputed" to us apart from him.²² We are to "grow into one body" with him. We are to undergo, what Calvin terms a few chapters later, "that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union" (III.11.10).

This is Calvin's vision for the spiritual life and all that it includes: "mystical union" with Christ. Calvin makes clear that the death and resurrection of Christ are not simply things that happened to Christ in the past. Nor can we imitate them now. We, through the Spirit, participate in his death and his resurrection (II.16.8).²³ All of the blessings of salvation are only offered to us via communion. God has structured our salvation such that everything of which we have need can only be had *in union with*

Christ. God does not partition his gifts to us piecemeal—justification, sanctification, peace, wisdom—but they come only as we are in communion with the one who is their source: Jesus. Union with Christ provides a clever defense against the gifts becoming separated from the giver, the work of Christ from the person of Christ, lest we become like those of whom Calvin scornfully says, "they sought in Christ

something else than Christ himself."²⁴ So take note: whenever any aspect of Calvin's theology becomes separated from Christ, we risk misunderstanding all of his theology. Calvin's theology is better seen as radiating out from a centre (a *person*, no less!) than as a linear progression of events (or—worse—as a horticultural mnemonic ... in the genus *tulipa*) that threaten to break Calvin's emphasis on the intimate, the personal, the relational.²⁵

Being Spiritually Formed by Our Adoption

What makes Calvin's theology of union unusual is that for all its "mystical" aspect (mystical being Calvin's own term), it is completely anchored in the humanity of Jesus. It is not union with an undifferentiated God, some inarticulate joining of human and divine. Union with God takes the shape of Christ: we are joined, by the Spirit, to Jesus who in turn *opens up to us his earthly relationship to his Father*.²⁶ For Calvin, God becoming our Father is perhaps the best summary of the gospel: "[Paul] proves that our salvation consists in having God as our Father. It is for children, that inheritance is appointed[;] ... we shall partake of it in common with the only-begotten Son of God."²⁷ In "union with Christ," Jesus's Father becomes our Father, we become children, and we enter the family dynamic. We move from being orphans to suddenly sitting around a table, eating the family food, being included in the Father's legacy, and getting in on everything in this family economy.

Calvin, like other Reformers, revelled in the christological, but I believe his theology is better known as *filial*. In nearly every possible way, and at every critical theological juncture, Calvin paints the Christian life in familial terms, as children with their loving Father. Through the years, Calvin's soteriology has sometimes been understood in a limited way, solely having to do with justification and the event of Christ on the cross. My suspicion

is that Calvin's scuttle with Osiander is largely to blame for our Reformed emphasis on justification to the exclusion (or downgrading) of adoption. Osiander was a flamboyant and controversial contemporary of Calvin, who locked horns with Calvin over what it meant to be in union with Christ. Fearing Osiander's focus on union unaccompanied by an appropriate role for the cross, Reformed theology has often compensated by limiting union to the cross—the method by which we are saved.²⁸ With this move, however, we are no longer asking the questions that Calvin was asking; instead we are left with questions about how we are saved, from what we are saved, and what we should do now that we have received this salvation. They tend to be the questions that quench rather than nourish spiritual formation because they are stunted. Calvin's questions always centred around God (not ourselves, or even our salvation) and the glory of God. His questions are not stunted because they open up to a reality much larger than themselves, which cannot be accessed with a (frankly consumerist) how-can-I-get-salvation mentality or a (primarily functional) what-should-I-do-now mentality. Instead, Calvin's questions took their cues from God's inexplicable desire to bring us into his trinitarian fullness, by way of Jesus's truly human life.²⁹

It is when we look at how Calvin uses adoption that we find him to communicate not only the miracle of our justification but that for which we have been saved ... the miracle of our having become children of God.³⁰ Calvin is quite explicit that we have been saved not only *from* sin, but *for* a life of trust, joy, intimacy, and holiness as God's own children. Adoption is Calvin's answer both to Osiander's non-trinitarian union and to the sometimes-limited "union" that the Reformed tradition has embraced throughout various stages of its history. The remarkable thing is that Calvin sees Jesus's earthly experience as the Son—his life of obedience and

intimacy with his Father—as being offered *to us* through the Spirit. This is no family metaphor ... "no matter of figures," Calvin argues.³¹ Instead, it is the reality into which we, unsuspectingly, have been inserted.

It is in Calvin's analysis of Christ's baptism narrative that this comes across with striking force. When God rends the sky and thunders his blessing over Jesus—calling him *beloved*—Calvin reminds us that this is not a private and personal emotion God felt for his only-begotten Son. This was God's declaration of *our belovedness as well*. "It was rather the design of Christ to lay, as it were, in our bosom, a sure pledge of God's love toward us."³² The declaration of belovedness at the baptism was a declaration *for us*, who are in Christ. It is the "pledge of our adoption," whereby we may "boldly call God himself our Father."³³ Christ received this tender title "beloved" not for himself alone but for all of us who would be engrafted into him. Calvin exegetes the passage "this is my beloved Son" thus: "from him [the Father's love] then pours itself upon us, just as Paul teaches: 'We receive grace in the beloved'" (III.2.32).

In all this, Calvin's point is not that the Father reluctantly loves us only because we are hidden behind Jesus. The point is that God has a trinitarian, *personal* way of doing things. He refuses to give us gifts in which he himself is not personally involved. "Such is the determination of God," writes Calvin, "not to communicate himself, or his gifts to men, otherwise than by his Son."³⁴ We really *are* loved, because of the one, saving will of the Triune God—the Father effecting, the Son ordering, and the Spirit empowering (I.13.18). God's Fatherhood is made available to us *in Christ*, the Son.

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The Spirit's work is to make God's Fatherhood concrete. There is nothing more concrete than the Sonship of Jesus, so it is to this that the Spirit unites us and makes a living reality within us.³⁵ Without the Spirit, God is no more than a kindly, fatherly figure. With and by the Spirit, we are engrafted into the Son *who shares his Father with us*. To be sure, Calvin notes, only Christ has the right to the title of "Son," yet "he communicates this honor to us by adoption, when we are engrafted into his body."³⁶ This is the concrete foundation of our adoption.

Therefore God both calls himself our Father and would have us so address him. By the great sweetness of this name he frees us from all distrust, since no greater feeling of love can be found elsewhere than in the Father. Therefore he could not attest his own boundless love toward us with any surer proof than the fact that we are called "children of God" (III.20.37).

Spiritual formation, as radiating from the *Institutes*, is the ongoing task of uncovering the reality of our adoption. Calvin challenges us to situate ourselves squarely in the love of God—the concrete love of Father, Son, and Spirit—and to allow that to transform all our notions about ourselves. It is the radical orientation of our interior lives to the love of God and forcing ourselves to stay there until we really, truly believe it. God's love can only be understood when we realize that his love is not an abstract force (or sentimental platitude!) but is located in the rich life shared between Father, Son, and Spirit. It is *this* life of divine communion that defines "love" and is the very life into which we have been adopted.

Calvin knew that believing this reality about God and his fatherly love was the hardest task of a child. Why is this? Because the effect of Adam's sin, Calvin summarizes, is that "no one now experiences God as Father" (I.2.1). Our assumption that God wants something from us, rather than to be with us, is a mark that our emotions have not yet come under

the transformation from slaves to children. Given Calvin's own acquaintance with anxiety, it should come as no surprise that his interpretation of the Fall involves a fall *into fear*. The tragedy of Adam, at least in Calvin's estimation, was that in place of love, now was terror (II.12.1). God comes to us as a father, but we now misinterpret those very things "by which he would draw us to himself." Instead, "regarding him as adverse to us, we, in our turn, flee from his presence."³⁷ One of Calvin's main grievances against Rome was the fact that priests used fear as a weapon, with "long sermons about the fear of God," making the people "flee from him and terribly afraid before his face."³⁸ For Calvin, this amounted to nothing other than a living hell, "since there is no more terrifying agony than to tremble from fear and uncertainty."³⁹ If our sinful predisposition is fear of God, marked by servile obedience that attempts to pacify him (rather than love him, trust him, and enjoy fellowship with him), faith is its opposite: "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us" (III.2.7). Faith, though, finds its strength not in our zeal, but in the fact that it joins us to Christ the Son.⁴⁰

Calvin was no stranger to fear. He knew the fragility of abandonment. He knew how difficult it is to trust and "dare call upon him as Father" (III.20.14). And so he understood that the Spirit's most difficult work in our lives is to persuade us to act like children, to trust and pray like children, to delight in God's Fatherhood, and to receive this good news in the depths of our being.

But the narrowness of our hearts cannot comprehend God's boundless favour, nor only is Christ the pledge and guarantee of our adoption, but he gives the Spirit as witness to us of the same adoption, through whom with free and full voice we may cry, *Abba, Father* (III.20.37).

Our identity as children of God is not something of which we can convince ourselves. It is the jurisdiction of the Holy Spirit, "without whom," says Calvin, "we

cannot taste either the fatherly favor of God or the beneficence of Christ" (III.1.2). In fact, Calvin notes that we are so slow to believe that the Spirit must place the very words that the Son prayed into our fearful mouths: *Abba*, as a child to its father. Calvin knew that this was such a supernatural revelation, that it could only happen through the Spirit over and over again.

Before the Spirit ever empowers our *doing*, he first confirms our *being*. Calvin reminds us that of all the titles in the New Testament, he is "*first*" called the Spirit of adoption (III.1.3) who "alone can witness to our spirit that we are children of God" (III.2.39). This is the Spirit's ministry to us. It is an identity-forming ministry, calling us to trust in God's fatherly goodness and allowing us to cease from perfectionism and performance. Our confidence is in our status as *children*, not in our perfection or even in the intensity (or lack) of our emotions. Christian freedom thus comes not as a command, but as a benefit of sonship; it is a "spiritual thing. Its whole force consists in quieting frightened consciences before God" (III.19.9).

Calvin's first and foremost emphasis is on the work of the Spirit to open our hearts and minds to look *away* from what we are in ourselves, to who we are in Jesus the Son, as *sons and daughters*. His primary role is spiritual formation—Spirit-ually forming us to live as children of God. Only then does Calvin speak of the Holy Spirit's second work of bearing fruit in our lives, and even so, this is subsumed under sonship, as its evidence. Traditional disciplines in the Christian life are the fruit of participating in this Father-child relationship and, as such, we have tremendous freedom. "To sum up," writes Calvin,

Those bound by the yoke of the law are like servants assigned certain tasks for each day by their masters. These servants think they have accomplished nothing, and dare not appear before their masters unless they have fulfilled the exact mea-

sure of their tasks. But sons, who are more generously and candidly treated by their fathers, do not hesitate to offer them incomplete and half-done and even defective works, trusting that their obedience and readiness of mind will be accepted by their fathers, even though they have not quite achieved what their fathers intended. Such children ought

we to be, firmly trusting that our services will be approved by our most merciful Father, however small, rude, and imperfect these may be.... And we need this assurance in no slight degree, for without it we attempt everything in vain. For God considers that he is revered by no work of ours unless we truly do it in reverence toward him. But how can this be done amidst all this dread, where one doubts whether God is offended or honored by our works? (III.19.5)

The Holy Spirit ushers us into adoption, not workaholicism; the Spirit tells us not so much what to do, but *who we are*. In an era where we are inclined to limit the Spirit to a power, enabling our tasks, we need to allow Calvin to re-form our notions of our Christian identity. And when it is time for work (as Calvin has room aplenty for such minor tasks as changing society⁴¹), it is not as those who are under the "rigor of the law" but as those who "hear themselves called with fatherly gentleness" who can "cheerfully and with great eagerness answer" (III.19.5).

Our adoption in Christ cannot be reduced to a mere "legal status" with

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Our identity is discovered only as it is relinquished, and it is to be sought in its proper place (which is the Spirit's domain). Our uniqueness is not achieved by "staying true" to ourselves, but as we acknowledge that there is One who is better than we are at guarding our uniqueness. The more we discover our identity as being "in Christ," the more our uniqueness is secured.

God. Calvin opens up for us its rich and astoundingly fruitful implications as a new set of relations into which we have entered. This is not for the faint of heart. In an era of "doing"—of activism, of busyness, of measurable ministry—"being" can be one's personal hell. It is the hard task of laying tasks aside in order to contemplate and receive the words, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). Only when we hear that word can our tasks have any meaning at all. Spiritual formation is all about entering this Father-Son relationship, about living out the truth of our adoption. It is *formation as relation*.

Being Spiritually Formed by the Church

Book IV of the *Institutes* articulates what it is to be a family, with God as our Father and "the Church as our Mother." Just as union with Christ is anchored in Christ's humanity, so Calvin anchors our spiritual growth in concrete, human things.⁴² Far from being an add-on to the spiritual life, the church is the nurturer, the maternal environment where we are brought into fellowship and, therefore, into maturity (IV.1.1). Although Zwingli's individualistic ideas have seeped into contemporary Reformed thinking, it is imperative to understand that, for Calvin, the church was essential. The singular Christian is the immature Christian. The isolated Christian is the apostate

Christian. For the church is the very one "into whose bosom God is pleased to gather

his sons." Calvin shocks us by likening the Christian who only accepts God as Father, but not the church as Mother, to one whose parents have been divorced. This person has "put asunder what God hath joined together" (IV.1.1, echoing Mark 10:9). So while the lonely individual has no place in Calvin's spirituality, neither—and this is more to the point—does the pious "child of God" who contemplates her Father in isolation. The Christian no longer has an identity in isolation. She simply doesn't exist.

One can discern a great many things from the prepositions that Calvin uses, especially how he employs the little Pauline phrase "in Christ." Paul often tosses it into a sentence where one would least expect it, or where a "normal" reading would leave it out. Every time Calvin came across one of Paul's phrases such as "in Christ," he knew he was standing on holy ground ... particularly as many of his contemporaries could read the sentence without even realizing that that little phrase altered everything.⁴³ For Calvin, that phrase signals an altered identity.⁴⁴ Not a religious platitude, this phrase required a new self-understanding in which Paul no longer considered himself as individual. He could no longer separate his identity from his being "in Christ" or, indeed, from those who join together forming Christ's body. Calvin picks up on this and declares that "our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God" (I.1.1), thereby insisting that the self can only be understood in its *relation* to God.⁴⁵ Calvin presses this further and (particularly in his commentaries) fights for prepositions that maintain the Christian's position as participating *in Christ*, rather than accomplishing things "for" Christ or "on behalf of" Christ or even "by" Christ.⁴⁶ Once again, we find Calvin waging war on using Christ for our own ends—whether it be using Christ for the purpose of "my salvation" or for "my ministry" or, indeed, for "my spiritual identity."

Our identity is ultimately found in union with Christ and is realized by becoming part of his corporate body. In

a sense, the frantic quest to “discover” one’s self is over. Instead, we are put in a posture of receiving our selves. To seize one’s “unique” identity, particularly one’s *Christian* identity, is death to our identity: it is found only in the reality—mystical and corporate—of our being “in Christ.” This indeed is confusing for those of us in the twenty-first century who experience “increasing difficulty ... in translating Paul’s imagery of incorporation into another person”⁴⁷ into language meaningful within our individualistic notions of the self. Our identity is discovered only as it is relinquished, and it is to be sought in its proper place (which is the Spirit’s domain). Our uniqueness is not achieved by “staying true” to ourselves, but as we acknowledge that there is One who is better than we are at guarding our uniqueness. The more we discover our identity as being “in Christ,” the more our uniqueness is secured. And this, of course, is the Spirit’s work—maintaining our identity as persons-in-Christ, ministering to us as the “Spirit of adoption” who works this identity deeper and deeper into the church’s consciousness.

Spiritual formation requires a cultivated awareness of our being “in Christ.” Like breathing, it is the almost unconscious environment in which we live; it requires attentiveness lest we forget the source of our life and health. Our being “in Christ” is a new relation that requires our participation: “Surely this is so: We ought not to separate Christ from ourselves or ourselves from him. Rather we ought to hold fast bravely with both hands to that fellowship by which he has bound himself to us” (III.2.24). Being in “union with Christ” does not mean that we will necessarily live out the truth of this corporate identity (as the primal sin of individualism still holds sway over many of our lives). It is an ongoing task to remain attentive and not forget who we are *in him* and *in his church*. We need, as Calvin says, to not only “hold fast bravely” to his commitment to us, but also prayerfully

to ask him to teach us more of what this means. “It remains for us to seek in him, and in prayers to ask of him, what we have learned to be in him” (III.20.1). We need to become what we already are! This is the journey of a lifetime. “But what? It is only an entrance! We must march further in it.... So, then, it is not all to have entered, but we must follow further, until we are fully united to Jesus Christ.”⁴⁸

Looking Like Children of God: Being Spiritually Formed by Suffering

Just as Calvin’s understanding of justification is best understood when placed in the larger frame of adoption, so is our sanctification. Calvin’s understanding of sanctification is that *children of God look like the Son of God*. This is no magical transformation, no plastic surgery. It happens in the same way that we were justified: participation in Christ, and *in his sufferings*.

Calvin is clear that, through adoption, believers are drawn into Christ’s own life and relationship with his Father. But this relationship with his Father was worked out, for us, in a historical way—in the slog and determination and suffering of life on earth (John 16:33). Suffering, therefore, is as much our context as it was for Christ. Being united to Christ does not short-cut suffering.

It leads us straight into the heart of it.⁴⁹ Christ’s path is our own. “The afflictions of the faithful are nothing else than the manner by which they are conformed to the image of Christ.”⁵⁰ Calvin specifically links adoption and cross-bearing, in order that adoption doesn’t usher us into a feel-good realm or into unreality itself. Salvation

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comes through a cross-shaped life.

Calvin's approach to suffering is not cavalier—one that sees God rewriting people's life-scripts to make it hard and unpleasant. No, suffering is part and parcel of life on earth, which itself can be hard and unpleasant. Calvin gives the naked reality of suffering a purpose: you have been adopted. Now take these circumstances to grow into the family likeness. Using Romans, Calvin sketches out his spirituality of suffering: we are predestined to glory, but the highway to glory is via our ordinary lives. The route to glory begins at the "YOU ARE HERE" signpost under our feet, which means our everyday, fallen life-on-earth, including loss, injustice, thwarted dreams. We are predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29), but God doesn't need to engineer difficult circumstances for this. Life on fallen earth provides them aplenty.

Suffering is not predestined by God, according to Calvin. But the transformational character of suffering is. "Afflictions conform us to Christ"⁵¹ because we are people who have been united to the one who suffered and has overcome the world. For this reason, because of Christ's redemption of suffering, suffering itself can be said to be "appointed by God"⁵² for a work far beyond face value.

Calvin calls upon Paul for his defense: "[Paul] now draws this conclusion from what had been said, that so far are the troubles of this life from hindering our salvation, that, on the contrary, they are helps to it."⁵³ Once again, God has taken our context—life on a broken and suffering

planet—and creatively worked good from it. It can break us or minister salvation to us. It is *ordinary*. It is not to be analyzed for a deeper spiritual meaning. (After all, the root of suffering and evil is beyond our comprehension.) But it is to be entered into with confidence, as children of God receiving their inheritance: "but Christ came to [his inheritance] by the cross; then we must come to it in the same manner."⁵⁴

If suffering is neither God's intent, nor an orchestrated test, then what is it? Calvin focuses on the vulnerability of suffering—how suffering is vulnerable to the transforming sovereignty of God. Suffering is, in Christ, subject to the recapitulating love of the Father who, through the Spirit, draws near to his children—first to comfort, and one day finally to heal. In between that first and final embrace, our transformation occurs, for

God had so determined that all whom he has adopted should bear the image of Christ.... Gratuitous adoption, in which our salvation consists ... determines that we are to bear the cross; for no one can be an heir of heaven without being confirmed to the image of the only-begotten Son of God.... We ought to refuse nothing which he has been pleased to undergo.⁵⁵

This is the life of Christ into which we are being drawn, deeper and deeper, day by day. We are being lured away from the siren-song of the self-contained person, and into a family who together witnesses to the true human identity. We have been freely adopted and are growing up into our family as we "hold fast" to that fellowship by which the firstborn Son first bound himself to us. But this Son still bears the marks of suffering and humiliation, of death and resurrection, in his body. We are joined to these marks as much as we are joined to him.

Conclusion

For Calvin, the gospel is a new set of relations into which we have entered. Spiritual formation begins when we wake

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up to these relations. Calvin's *Institutes* is a marvelous work opening our eyes to the trinitarian context in which we almost unconsciously live and move and have our being. But Calvin wants more than an awareness of our context. He desires that we be *spiritually formed* by it.

For Calvin, everything hinges on the fact that our salvation moves us from "terror" at the sight of God (II.12.1) to knowing God as Father. (Faith, as mentioned above, is moving away from the belief that God is "out to get us" and instead into the understanding that he is "out to give to us," or to use Calvin's word, that he is "benevolent" [III.2.7]). This is not so much a mental adjustment, as it is a *relational adjustment*, occurring when the "Spirit of adoption" engrafts us into the beloved Son, who shares the love and blessing of the Father with us. This, however, is no easy realization. It is a miraculous insight—a special ministry of the Spirit—who persuades us over and over that we truly are God's children.

This same Spirit who places us "in Christ" also places us into Christ's family—the church—challenging us to put our orphan ways behind us and to start living and acting like family. As family, we are welcomed into the family inheritance, but also included in the "chore chart." These family chores (or commonly called "good works") demonstrate that we are part of the family, and reflect our status as children resembling their Father, in the image of the Son. The Father loves us and "shows favor to the image of his Son which he recognizes in us,"⁵⁶ which grows within us day by day, particularly as we face suffering head-on, as our Saviour did. X

Endnotes

1 All references to Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* are to the 1559 edition and will be inserted directly into the text. I am working from the two-volume Library of Christian Classics (20–21) edition, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

2 See the delightful chapter "Pilgrim," by Herman J. Selderhuis (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2009), in which he gleans this sense of uncer-

tainty from Calvin's letters. For example, Calvin's reflection that our life "hangs as if from a silk thread" or his exposé on the dangers of "modern" living:

If you step onto a ship, you are only one step away from death. If you climb onto a horse, your foot only needs to slip and your life is in danger. Just walk through the city streets one time, and there are as many dangers as there are roof tiles on the houses. If you or your friend are carrying a weapon, injury lies in wait. [36]

3 See William Bouwsma's penetrating analysis in *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

4 Selderhuis, *John Calvin*, 33.

5 The scant statements we have are from the "Preface" to his *Commentary on Psalms*, in which he relates that it was "unexpected" (*subita*). All references to Calvin's commentaries are from the modern twenty-two volume reprint (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) of those put out by the Calvin Translation Society (Edinburgh, 1843–55).

6 In Calvin's writings, there is tremendous movement "upward" toward deeper and deeper communion with God. One's reference point is not backward to a point in time (such as conversion), but forward into the intimacy of obedience and love, as enacted by the Son.

7 Calvin, "True Method of Obtaining Concord," in *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith III*, ed. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 275.

8 I am unwilling to drop the gendered term "sonship," as our "sonship" is founded upon Christ's own Sonship. For those who find the term suspect, I do think it can be interchanged with all sorts of terms like "becoming children of God" or "being adopted," but these lose the christological clarity that Calvin intended.

9 A better term, though more inaccessible to our modern ears, is Calvin's own use of the word "piety." For Calvin, this was not a holier-than-thou term, but a holistic, life-affirming one that spoke of unity among our life, beliefs, and emotions. For Calvin, piety is one's reverential life-response in the face of knowing God's true character. Since Calvin says that the first step toward true piety is "to know that God is a father to us" (II.6.4), I am taking the liberty to use the more contemporary term "spiritual formation" (with all its baggage), as I argue that the first step of spiritual formation (according to Calvin's theology) is knowing God as Father.

10 *Institutes*, "Preface to the Reader."

11 For this reason, Calvin does not use the titles "Father," "Son," "Spirit," and "Church" but instead speaks of "I: The Knowledge of God the Creator," "II: The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ," "III: The Way in Which We Receive the Benefits of Christ," and finally "IV: The External Means . . . by Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein." Note the emphasis on how the Triune God works *in Christ* to bring humans to salvation and communion.

12 *Commentary John*, 15:15.

13 This is from the catechism found in the first edition of *The Book of Common Prayer*, “an instruction to be learned of every childe, before he be brought to be confirmed of the bushop.” Although catechisms existed in the medieval church, they were used so advantageously by the Reformation that the Council of Trent declared great “mischief” to have been done “especially by those writings called catechisms.”

14 Luther's Lesser Catechism began with the Decalogue and Apostle's Creed, then moved on to the Lord's Prayer, true and false sacraments, Christian liberty, and ended with church government and discipline.

15 From Calvin's letter to Sadoleto, in *A Reformation Debate*, ed. John C. Olin (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 58.

16 See Julie Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), chapter two.

17 Calvin sees Christ everywhere, not only in our present lives but through all of history, particularly the Old Testament. God's presence in the garden? It was Christ. The insight of the prophets? They were speaking the words of Christ. The cloud in the desert? It was Christ.

18 “The Son of God became man in such a manner, that God was his God as well as ours” (*Commentary Ephesians*, 1:17).

19 *Commentary Hebrews*, 7:25.

20 *Commentary John*, 17:19–21.

21 Calvin sees Jesus as a walking treasure-chest, “adorned” with gifts (“not those gifts which he had in the Father's presence from the beginning”) but those gifts of his own holy and obedient life, which he desires to give to us (IV.17.9).

22 “We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him. For this reason, we glory that we have fellowship of righteousness with him” (III.11.10).

23 From these events in the life of Christ, we receive the “double grace” of justification and sanctification (III.11.1). “For in [his flesh] 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 the sanctification of the Spirit” (*Commentary John*, 6:51). The classic Protestant emphases on justification and sanctification here find their proper place, as subsets of a primary union with the person of Christ. Justification, for all its forensic and legal overtones of guilt and pardon, centres on our being counted righteous in Christ. God not only releases us from guilt, but receives us into his family.

24 *Commentary John*, 6:26.

25 This is no less true for an overemphasis on justification as the “means” by which we are saved, than for “union with Christ.” The recent deluge of articles in the Reformed world on “union with Christ” only underscores the delicious irony of how easy it is to miss the point. For many of these new

champions of union with Christ (against the “older” and more outdated proponents of justification), union has become the new mechanism by which we are saved! Once again, we lose the personal for the functional, turning even *unio cum christo* into a way to get our problems solved.

26 Mystical union, in Calvin, has a wonderful upward momentum, because Calvin reminds us that Christ is in heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father. (Heaven is often termed “the heavenly fatherland,” III.9.5). For us to be “in union” with Christ signifies that we are, in some way, taken into this fellowship with the Father. The *christus pro nobis* (Christ for us) in the incarnation and crucifixion is also the *christus pro nobis* in the resurrection and ascension.

27 *Commentary Romans*, 8:17.

28 Calvin does not shy away from “mystical union” because Osiander had so twisted it. Instead, he reappropriated it, grounded it in the Trinity, and handed it back to us as the concrete movement of adoption: by the Spirit, in the Son, to the Father. In distancing himself from Osiander, Calvin was not necessarily less radical than Osiander in his description of union with God; he was just relentlessly trinitarian. Calvin says, “[This] has been perversely twisted by Osiander; for he ought to have considered the manner of the indwelling—namely, that the Father and Spirit are in Christ, and even as the fullness of deity dwells in him, so in him we possess the whole of deity.... For the fact that it comes about through the power of the Holy Spirit that we grow together with Christ, and he becomes our Head and we his members, he reckons of almost no importance” (III.11.5).

29 Although Alister McGrath notes that “Calvin is actually concerned not so much with justification, as with incorporation into Christ,” it seems as if Reformed theology traded this full-bodied trinitarianism for a narrower (though vital) christocentrism. Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 225.

30 For many years, adoption was relegated to a sequential position in the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation), which caused its importance as a comprehensive category to be overlooked. While adoption is also linked to justification in Calvin—the massive change from darkness to light, the pure gift of God to us in Christ—this is only one of its nuances. Calvin's doctrine of adoption is connected to justification (I.10.1), sanctification (III.6.3, *Commentary Romans*, 8:14), election (III.25.4), the *imago dei* (III.11.6, III.11.8), and the *historia salutis* (history of salvation) (II.7.1–2, II.10). For more on the loss of adoption as a category in Reformed theology, see Tim Trumper's two-part series “The Theological History of Adoption,” in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 20 (2002): 4–28, 177–202.

31 “For here it is not a matter of figures, such as when atonement was set forth in the blood of beasts. Rather, they could not actually be sons of God unless their adoption was founded upon the Head” (II.14.5).

32 *Commentary John*, 15:9.

33 *Commentary Matthew*, 3:17.

34 *Commentary Colossians*, 1:19.

35 "But because [Osiander] does not observe the bond of this unity, he deceives himself. Now it is easy for us to resolve all his difficulties. For we hold ourselves to be united with Christ by the secret power of his Spirit" (III.11.5). The Spirit, though, is not a "bridge" to Christ and his benefits, but the one who fulfills them within us. Calvin does not use the word "bridge"—as if the Spirit leads us to something somewhere *else*—but uses the word "bond" to connote the Spirit's presence to make these realities within us.

36 *Commentary John*, 3:16. Also from *Institutes*, II.14.6: "We admit Christ is indeed called 'son' in human flesh; not as believers are sons, by adoption and grace only, but the true and natural, and therefore only, Son in order that by this mark he may be distinguished from all others. For God honors us who have been reborn into new life with the name 'sons,' but bestows the name 'true and only-begotten' upon Christ alone."

37 *Commentary Genesis*, 28:12.

38 Selderhuis, *Calvin*, 61.

39 *Ibid.*, 37.

40 Faith is *in* the person of Christ, but its power comes not from us but from the fact that it joins us to Christ, for "how can there be saving faith except in so far as it engrafts us in the body of Christ?" (III.2.30).

41 See the excellent defense of the rightful place of human activity in Calvin in Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

42 For a deeper discussion, see Julie Canlis, "Downloading our Spirituality: Why Going to Church Doesn't Seem to Matter in this Virtual Age,"

Crux 45, no. 1 (2009): 2–12.

43 "But I prefer to retain the words of Paul, *in Christ Jesus*, rather than to translate with Erasmus, [*alive to God*] *through Jesus Christ*; for thus the grafting, which makes us one with Christ, is better expressed" (*Commentary Romans*, 6:11).

44 See Calvin's discussion of "and the two shall be one flesh" in *Commentary Ephesians*, 5:30–31.

45 Calvin's famous "negative anthropology" is a reflection on the sinful human condition, which is "not our nature, but its derangement" (II.1.10).

46 "The phrase *in ipso* (*in him*) I have preferred to retain, rather than render it *per ipsum* (*by him*), because it has in my opinion more expressiveness and force. For we are *enriched in Christ*, inasmuch as we are members of his body, and are engrafted into him: nay more, being made one with him, he makes us share with him in everything that he has received from the Father" (*Commentary 1 Corinthians*, 1:4). See also *Commentary 2 Corinthians*, 5:21.

47 James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 393.

48 *Sermon Acts*, 1:1–4.

49 For a thorough study of Calvin and Romans 8, see Mark Garcia, "Christ and the Spirit: The Meaning and Promise of a Reformed Idea," in *Resurrection and Eschatology*, ed. Lane Tipton and Jeffrey Waddington (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008), 424–42.

50 *Commentary Romans*, 8:29.

51 *Ibid.*

52 *Ibid.*, 8:28.

53 *Ibid.*

54 *Ibid.*, 8:17.

55 *Ibid.*, 8:29.

56 *Ibid.*, 2:1.