

The Theology of John Calvin. Part Two: The Christian's Conflict with the Flesh.

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1. The image of God: background and Calvin's inheritance.

As we move on to consider the flesh in the theology of John Calvin, we have to begin with his understanding of man being created in the image and likeness of God and, in particular, we need to understand the way in which he uses the term 'soul'. It is in this area that Calvin may have been influenced by the Platonist tradition.¹ To appreciate the effect this influence has had on Calvin's understanding of the flesh, we must first take into account the philosophical and theological background from which Calvin's own theology developed.

We begin by simply noting the fact that, for Plato, although this world is good, he is also very much aware of its imperfections. He could come to no other conclusion because 'the disorderly element of blind necessity is never completely mastered by the mind which designed the world, and the world soul which governs its motions in the heavens.' The evils and imperfections of the physical world are therefore attributed to matter. Plato's concept of matter as giving rise to evil obviously has repercussions for man when we introduce Plato's understanding of the nature and destiny of the soul. 'The soul has fallen into a sensible world, and it must return to the supersensible world if it is to attain its proper destiny,'² hence the reason why the material world, with its capacity to gratify our desires must be shunned, otherwise the soul will be diverted from its true destiny.

The complexities of Plato's teaching on the soul have been clearly expounded elsewhere.³ For our purposes we need simply to note that, for Plato, the soul of man is of the same spiritual substance as the world soul, and is 'divine' in the sense that it is immortal.⁴ The soul contains the reasoning element within man, and is the part of man which survives death. The inevitable conclusion that follows from this, is "that soul in itself is good."⁵ For Plato, or indeed for later religious writers, the urge for goodness was simply the urge to 'lay hold on eternal life'. The importance of this was not purely eschatological but had relevance for this present earthly life. The implication is that man 'should act so as to give the fullest play here and now to that element in us which is immortal and therefore truly real.'⁶ The importance that Plato attached to this particular activity of the soul has certain similarities to Calvin's teaching about soul and spirit [mind].⁷

So far as Plato does distinguish here between Soul and Mind it is only in the sense that Mind or reasoning is regarded as one of the functions or forms of activity of Soul. And the most natural impression that we get from the later discussions is that he believed it to be its most essential form of activity, that in which the soul is most truly itself.⁸

When we move on to consider the philosophy of Plotinus and his understanding of the soul, we notice that he develops Plato's idea of the World Soul. He goes further than Plato, arguing that 'the World Soul . . . is an hypostasis of true Being; it does not enter the world of sense and change, but produces and creates that world from above.'⁹ The World Soul is seen too, as 'governing' the material universe. Plotinus virtually identifies the World Soul with the

Creator God, which makes him appear to come close to Biblical thought. But what is particularly striking is the language he used to describe the individual souls which emanate from the World Soul. Plotinus, in answering his own question of why it is that the souls forget their father, says that the beginning of evil for these souls is their 'audacity' and their desire to be 'self-centred.' As Rist concludes, 'here then is the most striking difference between the World Soul and the individual souls. Somehow or other the individual souls may be, and are, sinful.'¹⁰

Plato clearly talks of the image of God being in the soul¹¹ and whilst Plotinus does not actually state this in so many words, it is clearly implicit in his teachings as well. What is also apparent is that Plotinus develops Plato's understanding of the soul. For Plotinus, soul has two functions: 'One, that of its undescended part, of pure contemplation, and the other concerned with the direction of the visible universe.'¹² The first part is *nous* [mind], the second part is equivalent to will. Calvin accepted this basic distinction, and identified mind with the spirit which, like Plotinus, he regarded as the higher part of the soul.¹³

We have noticed already that Plotinus was much closer to Biblical thought in some of the concepts and terminology that he employed,¹⁴ than was Plato. This did not go unnoticed by the later Church Fathers, who sought to adapt Plotinus' Neoplatonism to Christianity. They had no difficulty in identifying the World Soul with God the Creator, so that human souls which, in the Plotinus tradition, were seen as reflections of the World Soul, were identified with the image of God in man.

There were however, certain aspects of Platonist anthropology that could not be 'adapted' to a Christian philosophy. To overcome the aversion to matter inherent in the Platonist tradition, some of the early Fathers, notably Tertullian, inclined in Stoicism which united soul and body on the basis that both were material. This was eventually rejected by the majority of Christian writers who wished to affirm the immateriality of the soul. But the essential goodness of the body was also affirmed in the credal doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh. The Christian theologian closest to Plato was Origen whose basic teaching had a strong influence on subsequent Christian thought, although it should be remembered that Origen himself was condemned about 400 AD and again 553 AD for a doctrine of the soul which was Platonic to the extent of being incompatible with the teaching of Scripture. Thus, although Origen's influence was very great, his views were never accepted uncritically by the Church. Christian theology, whilst borrowing much of the ethos and vocabulary of Platonic anthropology, avoided making an open affirmation of its most characteristic feature *viz.* the absolute distinction between soul and body. Instead, they 'unanimously affirmed that man is a unity of soul and body.'¹⁵ In addition to this they asserted the Biblical view of the visible world and its history being worthy of salvation and redemption. This was particularly necessary to combat the tendency in the Origenistic system to regard the only true and eternal reality to be 'spiritual and divine,' whereas the Biblical and Christian concept 'understood the universe in its entirety as "very good"; and this concept applied first of all to man.'¹⁶ What the Fathers therefore established, was that man is truly man because he is created in the image of God and that the divine factor in man concerns not only his spiritual aspect (as Origen maintained), but the whole of man, soul and body.

They therefore distanced themselves from the Platonist view of the soul, to accommodate a more Biblical view of man to take account of the Fall. They noticed that the Genesis account of man talked of both the image and likeness of God, which enabled them to accommodate both the Platonist and the Biblical view of man. The term 'image' was therefore used for

natural endowments, including the mind and the will, which were, they argued, retained even after the Fall, whereas the term 'likeness' was used for supernatural gifts, including the ability not to sin, which was lost as a result of the Fall.¹⁷

Whilst the Fathers certainly moved towards a more Biblical view of man, it would appear that the influences of Platonism were such that they were never totally eradicated. The Fathers most certainly, and quite correctly, insisted on the goodness of matter (against Manichaeism) and generally speaking, emphasized that the root of sin lies in the soul/mind, rather than in the body and the material world as in Platonism. Their insistence too, on the resurrection of the material body emphasized that they had grasped, to some extent, the Biblical view of the body being an essential, constituent part of human nature. But having said that, it is certainly true to say that they retained the Platonist view that the spiritual and the material were quite distinct and that of the two, the spiritual was the superior reality. This inevitably meant that they believed the spiritual part of man was more akin to the image of God than the material, which in turn meant that the soul, not the body was the image of God. We should not, therefore, be surprised that, for the Fathers, generally speaking, the soul's true orientation was always upwards towards God, and that the soul's relationship downward to the body and thereby to the material world, must serve this upward orientation. Through the Fall, the Fathers believed that human nature was so disordered as to make this upward orientation impossible. The soul, they believed, was turned away from God and downwards and, through the body and its passions, ended up being absorbed into the material world. Passions were therefore viewed as bad, because they were the way in which the material world, through the body, influenced the soul and deflected it from its obedience to God. They viewed the body in fallen human nature, as having the upper-hand, controlling the soul. Therefore the Fathers tended to believe that a major part of man's salvation was the struggle of the soul to regain control of the body and its passions. Whilst they could accept that the body may be good, the body was to be kept in its proper place, subordinate to the reason and the will which were in turn, to be subordinate to God.

To appreciate the influence of Platonism on the theology of John Calvin, we must move on to consider Augustine, who, of all the Church Fathers, was the most influential on Calvin. Augustine differed, in fact, from the other Church Fathers, in that he argued that the terms 'image' and 'likeness' were synonymous. Having said that, he did on occasions use the term 'likeness' in isolation, to convey the growth resemblance of man to God. This was because, for Augustine, man is an imperfect image and so is capable of growth in likeness to God. Full likeness in this sense, however, is reserved for the state of glory and the resurrection. Whilst Augustine was certainly influenced by Neo-Platonism and was never able wholly to break free from that influence, the way in which he viewed the image of God in man as imperfect, shows how decisively he broke away from the 'Plotinian concept of image.'¹⁸ He did however, tend to draw a distinction between soul and body and certainly held to a hierarchical view of soul and body, the soul always being viewed as the nobler part, because, for Augustine, the image of God is very definitely in the soul and not the body. There was a tendency, even in the theology of Augustine, to view salvation as a struggle of the soul to regain control over the body and its passions. The body, whilst viewed as 'good' was, nonetheless, to be subordinate to the reason and the will, which are, in turn, subordinate to God. It has to be noted therefore, that Augustine's approach was not purely Biblical and that the remaining Platonist influence in Augustine inevitably led to certain tensions in his thinking which are reflected in his theology.

2. The image of God: Calvin's understanding

Having said that Augustine, of all the Church Fathers, was the most influential on Calvin, it is important to note that he did not unthinkingly accept all the teachings of Augustine.¹⁹ When we consider, for example, Calvin's understanding of the image of God, we notice that in line with Augustine he accepted the idea of 'likeness' and 'image' as meaning the same and included spirit in the soul as mind. When, however, he moved on to consider the faculties of the soul as a whole, he rejected the Augustinian view that the soul is the reflection of the Trinity because in it reside the understanding, will and memory. For Calvin this was 'speculation' and 'by no means sound,'²⁰ he preferred to think of the human soul consisting of only two faculties, understanding and will.

Calvin therefore, was not uncritical of Augustine. He started with Augustine (and indeed Plato and the Greek Fathers), in accepting that the image of God was to be found in the soul of man, but was quite prepared to depart from Augustine when he believed it to be necessary. Calvin was therefore, very much his 'own man,'²¹ something which must be borne in mind as we move on to consider the Platonist influence on Calvin through Augustine.

As the two terms image and likeness both meant the same for Calvin, then, obviously, there can be no distinction between the two. This means that when Calvin takes the Fall into account, he has no alternative but to say that both image and likeness were destroyed by the Fall. Therefore, the faculties of the soul (understanding and will), which are the image of God, are both corrupted.²² This means that in practice the soul shares the same situation as the flesh and therefore the whole of man is totally depraved.

It could perhaps be said that the Platonic influence on Calvin was such that it appears to force him to a view of the image of God in man that is not strictly Biblical. The Scriptures never actually state that the image of God was destroyed or corrupted by the Fall. In fact, after the Fall, the prohibition of Genesis 9:6 is given precisely because man still retains the image of God. Calvin therefore, has no alternative but to talk in terms of a 'remnant'²³ of the image remaining which is not, in fact, substantiated by Scripture itself. How much this can be directly attributed to the Platonic influence on Calvin is hard to evaluate. In fairness to Calvin, it might be more accurate to say that his view of the loss of the image at the Fall is more a result of his thinking about New Testament passages²⁴ which seem to suggest that acquiring the image of God is a process within Christian salvation, resulting from the work of the Holy Spirit in the elect; thus Calvin could say that the purpose of the Gospel is the restoration in us of

the image of God, which had been cancelled by sin and that this restoration is progressive and goes on during our whole life, because God makes his glory to shine in us little by little.²⁵

This restorative process within Christian salvation means, in effect, that man becomes more 'Christ-like', because Christ himself is, for Calvin, the perfect image of God. But it needs to be stated that Christ, as the image of God, is very different from the man Adam in the image of God, something that Calvin appears to overlook.

Just what the image of Christ is, however, Calvin never formally states; nor does he explicitly state in what respect it differs from the image in Adam.²⁶

It is true to say however, that Calvin goes so far as to infer that Christ's image involves such things as His suffering, His humility, His marvellous works, His death and resurrection, and His possession of the life-giving Spirit, since in all these, Christ shows forth the glory of His Father. The restorative process in the elect, since it is to Christ, is therefore very different from a restoration to the state of Adam in Paradise. The result appears to be a contradiction in Calvin's development of man's restoration.²⁷

On a number of occasions, Calvin appears to use terminology that suggests he has been very strongly influenced by the philosophers.²⁸ He talks in terms of the body being an 'earthly prison' and, of course, the notion of the body as prison of the soul is very definitely from Plato.²⁹ He retains a clear distinction between soul and body and, on occasions, appears to suggest a hierarchy of soul and body, when he describes the soul as 'the nobler part' (*Inst.* 1:15:2), which sounds very Platonic. This, in turn, influences his rationalistic account of what the Christian life should be like, with an emphasis on the will, in accordance with what reason judges and approves, directing the body, with feelings, passions and bodily appetites being played down, regarded even as dangerous. It is, in fact, possible to argue that although Calvin regarded the flesh as the whole of human nature, there was a tendency in his theology, on occasions, to identify this with the body. For example, his emphasis on 'mortification of the flesh' has a tendency to suggest the mortification of bodily appetites and passions.

Having said that, there are other emphases that we must take into consideration. When, in *Inst.* 1:15:2, Calvin talks of the soul being the 'nobler part', he does so arguing from Scriptures which clearly distinguish the soul from the body and emphasize the immortality³⁰ of the soul. It is in this sense that Calvin then concludes that the soul is the 'principal part:'

For surely these passages and similar ones that occur repeatedly not only clearly distinguish the soul from the body, but by transferring to it the name 'man' indicate it to be the principal part.³¹

Even if Calvin does regard the soul as the 'principal part' because of its immortality, and at that level, it could be argued, betrays a Platonist influence, he is always careful to break away from the philosophers when talking of the body. Whilst conceding that 'It is difficult to believe that bodies, when consumed with rotteness, will at length be raised up in their season.'³² Calvin nonetheless passionately believed in the resurrection of the body and was obviously aware that he was departing from the views of the likes of Plato³³ and Plotinus: 'While a number of the philosophers were not ignorant of the immortality of the soul, not one has had the least notion of the resurrection of the flesh.'³⁴

Calvin was therefore attempting to be Biblical in his view of body and soul.³⁵ Whilst it is possible to argue that Calvin held to a hierarchical view of soul and body, it might be more accurate to say that he was attempting to argue for the diversity of body and soul which he nonetheless also viewed as a unity and that he came to these conclusions as he reflected on the teaching of the Scriptures. When we consider for example, that in *Institutes* 1:15:2 Calvin refers to no less than sixteen passages in Scripture which talk of the soul and body separating at death, and that he only uses the word 'flesh' when the New Testament uses it, then it is harder to accept that Calvin is Platonic in this area, rather than Biblical.

Similarly, when we examine in more detail his use of the term 'mortification of the flesh' we can begin to see that his theology is more Biblical than Platonist. In *Institutes* 2:3:1 for example, he makes it very clear that he views the whole man as flesh, and is not just talking of the body. It is interesting to note too, that whilst he does talk of the 'prison house of the

body' he also talks of the 'prison house of the flesh,'³⁶ which includes body and soul. The mortification of this 'flesh', refers therefore, not just to the body, but also to the soul. This is perhaps brought out more clearly in other terms that Calvin also uses to describe mortification of the flesh *i.e.* self-denial (3:3:8) and self-renunciation (3:6:7), which sound less Platonic. Whichever of the terms he uses, however, it is clear that he includes 'soul' in this mortification, as his constant references to 'mind,' 'will' and 'reason' bear witness.³⁷ When he talks more in terms of the body, as in 3:10:3 for example, then we must note that the whole tenor of the passage is moderation rather than abstinence. If Calvin was to have been unduly influenced by Platonism then we would have expected the reverse; abstinence rather than moderation. Again, Calvin appears to be more Biblical than Platonic on his view of the body. Finally, we should also note that the same vices of the body Calvin talks of in *Inst.* 3:10:3 he also applies to the soul in *Inst.* 3:7:2.

It is perhaps impossible to ascertain exactly the Platonist influence on Calvin.³⁸ He was certainly well versed in both Plato and Plotinus and, of course, in Augustine and this may well have resulted in certain tensions in his thinking, reflected, perhaps, in the Platonist language and terminology he frequently used.³⁹ But, having said that, it appears that his overriding concern was to allow his theology to be shaped by Scripture.⁴⁰

Calvin certainly started with assumptions that he inherited from the Greek Fathers and Augustine. Along with Augustine he modified their position by saying that image and likeness were the same and then applied Biblical teaching about the Fall to both. His mistake was to identify the image with the soul and mind with the spirit, when it could have been more accurate to identify the image with spirit, or better still person, which fell into disobedience, but was not physically corrupted by the Fall. The corruption applies to the flesh, which includes soul and its faculties, which, in fact, Calvin recognized by the way in which he treated the faculties of the soul. Therefore it could be said that Calvin reached conclusions about the state of the soul which reflected the Biblical doctrine of the Fall, even though his starting point was not entirely Biblical. It would be left to later Calvinists⁴¹ to sort out the true meaning of the image of God in a way that did justice both to Scripture and the substance of Calvin's teaching.

3. Definition and scope of the term 'flesh'

We have made reference already to Calvin's understanding of the pattern of life which man was meant to fulfil. This pattern, had he not fallen from God, was primarily a pattern of order. This indeed, is a dominant theme in the theology of Calvin, so much so that Wallace suggests that 'the main feature in Calvin's picture of the life of man in Paradise which must strike the observer is that everything is arranged and moves in perfect order.'⁴²

We have seen how, as a result of the Fall, the pattern of order in creation and particularly between man and his environment was dramatically overturned. The repercussions of the Fall, in terms of disorder, are not restricted to this area alone. Man himself is seriously and irrevocably affected. It is, in fact, 'in man's own heart and mind and in man's relations with his fellow men that the disorder is most apparent.'⁴³ We must therefore consider, in particular, this 'disunity' which is now a part of man, if we are to fully understand the term 'flesh' in the theology of Calvin.

We begin by considering Calvin's understanding of man's creation in the image and likeness of God. For Calvin the fact that man consists of body and soul should be 'beyond controversy.' He understands by the term 'soul' an 'immortal yet created essence' which is sometimes called 'spirit.' The body, he argued, is the part of man that is mortal. The conscience,⁴⁴ able to discern between good and evil and to respond to God's judgment, proved for Calvin, the immortality of the spirit.

In short, the many pre-eminent gifts with which the human mind is endowed proclaim that something divine has been engraved upon it; all these are testimonies of an immortal essence.⁴⁵

The soul, then, is something essential apart from the body and is, argues Calvin from Scripture, 'the principal part.'⁴⁶ It is the soul which survives when freed from the prison house of the body and it is the soul which bears the image of God. Calvin puts it this way: 'For although God's glory shines forth in the outer man, yet there is no doubt that the proper seat of his image is in the soul.'⁴⁷

Whilst conceding that the image of God is seen or glows in the outward differences between man and the rest of creation, the image of God for Calvin is essentially spiritual. When he moves on to establish what is meant exactly by 'image' or 'likeness' (the two terms meant the same, Calvin believed: see *Comm.* on Gen. 1:26), he does so by arguing that, as the image of God in man has been destroyed by the Fall, 'we may judge from its restoration what it originally had been.'⁴⁸ Referring to Paul, he says we are transformed into the image of God by the gospel. Spiritual regeneration is nothing else than the restoration of the same image. As Paul in Col. 3:10 and Eph. 4:24 describes the renewal of man in terms of 'knowledge' and 'pure righteousness and holiness' respectively, we are to infer from this, argues Calvin, that God's image was visible to begin with in the light of the mind and the uprightness of the heart. He therefore describes the image of God in Adam in this way:

Therefore by this word the perfection of our whole nature is designated, as it appeared when Adam was endued with a right judgment, had affections in harmony with reason, had all his senses sound and well-regulated, and truly excelled in everything good. Thus the chief seat of the Divine image was in his mind and heart, where it was eminent: . . . In the mind perfect intelligence flourished and reigned, uprightness attended as its companion, and all the senses were prepared and moulded for due obedience to reason; and in the body there was a suitable correspondence with this internal order.⁴⁹

Calvin uses very similar words in the *Institutes* to describe the integrity with which Adam was endowed before the Fall. Again he argues that the primary seat of the divine image was in the mind and heart, but on this occasion likens the mind and heart to 'the soul and its powers.'⁵⁰

All this, particularly his comments on Gen. 1:26, bring out very clearly Calvin's understanding of order in human nature, which is a reflection of the image of God before the Fall, and can be summed up in these words of Calvin; 'Now God's image is the perfect excellence of human nature which shone in Adam before his defection.'⁵¹ Calvin then goes on to say 'in order that we may know of what parts this image consists, it is of value to discuss the faculties of the soul.'⁵² Rejecting the Augustinian view that the soul is the reflection of the Trinity because in it reside the understanding, will and memory, he goes on to argue that the human soul consists of only two faculties, understanding and will. Calvin, as we would expect, was also aware of the discussions of the philosophers concerning the nature of the soul, but, for his purposes 'their discussions were too subtle.'⁵³ His prime purpose and

concern was the ‘upbuilding of godliness’ and for this reason he argued that a simpler definition was preferable,⁵⁴ hence his division of the soul into just two faculties, which he describes in this way:

Let the office, moreover, of understanding be to distinguish between objects, as each seems worthy of approval or disapproval; while that of the will, to choose and follow what the understanding pronounces good, but to reject and flee what it disapproves . . . Not to entangle ourselves in useless questions, let it be enough for us that the understanding is, as it were, the leader and governor of the soul; and that the will is always mindful of the bidding of the understanding, and in its own desires awaits the judgment of the understanding.⁵⁵

As far as Calvin is concerned, no power can be found in the soul that does not have reference to one or other of these two faculties. He includes sense, for example, under understanding, and argues that the faculties of the soul are situated in the mind and the heart.⁵⁶ Leith describes Calvin’s understanding of the soul in these terms:

For Calvin the soul is the subject, the I, the self, which is embodied and which expresses itself through the body. The understanding and the will are the primary dimensions of the self.⁵⁷

Calvin was not as aware as the twentieth century theologian now is of the biological processes from which the self emerges and the societal matrix in which it lives. This new knowledge may well illumine the function of the self, but, Leith argues, ‘it does not nullify Calvin’s concern with unique human acts which at least partially unify the energies of life in intentionality and purpose.’⁵⁸

When we move on to consider the effects of the Fall, we see that, for Calvin, the disease of sin overturns the whole man.⁵⁹ Arguing from Scripture, quoting Paul in particular, Calvin concludes that none of the soul remains pure and untouched by sin. Not only does Paul condemn the impulses of the appetite that are seen, but especially emphasizes that the mind is given over to blindness and the heart to depravity.

From this it follows that the part in which the excellence and nobility of the soul especially shine has not only been wounded, but so corrupted that it needs to be healed and to put on a new nature as well. We shall soon see to what extent sin occupies both mind and heart. Here I only want to suggest briefly that the whole man is overwhelmed—as by a deluge—from head to foot, so that no part is immune from sin and all that proceeds from him is to be imputed to sin.⁶⁰

The beginning of the Fall was, for Calvin, the disobedience⁶¹ of the woman to God’s Word through the deceit of Satan. He also links this disobedience to unfaithfulness. The first man turned against God’s authority, not just because of Satan’s flatteries, but because he was contemptuous of truth and so turned aside to falsehood. Unfaithfulness, then, was the root of the Fall and, indeed, Calvin goes so far as to say that ‘the history of the Fall shows us what sin is: unfaithfulness.’⁶² For Calvin this unfaithfulness was not just simple apostasy, but was joined with vile reproaches against God:

These assented to Satan’s slanders, which accused God of falsehood and envy and ill will. Lastly, faithlessness opened the door to ambition, and ambition was indeed the mother of obstinate disobedience; as a result, men, having cast off the fear of God, threw themselves wherever lust carried them.⁶³

God's authority was opposed by Adam, something that he could have done only if he had disbelieved God's Word. The Word of God was, as it were, a bridle to control all passions and in choosing freely to oppose God's authority, Adam extinguished within himself the whole glory of God.

The spiritual life of Adam was dependent upon his relationship to God, but now, being alienated from Him, the inevitable result was the death of his soul. This of course, was not restricted to Adam alone; when he rebelled, his rebellion perverted the whole order of nature in heaven and on earth, and so it was no wonder that for Calvin, his rebellion consigned the whole of Adam's race to the same ruin:

Therefore, after the heavenly image was obliterated in him, he was not the only one to suffer the punishment—that, in place of wisdom, virtue, holiness, truth, and justice, with which adornments he had been clad, there came forth the most filthy plagues, blindness, impotence, impurity, vanity and injustice—but he also entangled and immersed his offspring in the same miseries.⁶⁴

This, of course, is the inherited corruption termed 'original sin,' and sin here is the depravation of a nature previously good and pure.

Calvin's argument as to how and why this sin (depravity of nature) is transmitted from one generation to another falls outside the scope of this thesis. We simply accept his argument, so that we might move on to consider that which has a very real bearing on the subject matter—the nature of original sin.

Put simply, Calvin believed original sin to be a 'depravity and corruption of our nature diffused into all parts of the soul.' The effect of this is twofold: first, it makes man 'liable to God's wrath.' Righteousness, innocence, and purity are the things acceptable to God; but so perverted is the nature of man and so corrupt is he, that he stands rightly condemned and convicted before God, and is now subject even to the judgment of God. Secondly, this depravity of nature brings forth in man what Scripture calls 'works of the flesh' or 'acts of the sinful nature.' This perversity never ceases in man, but continually bears new fruits, such as are listed in Gal. 5:19. The depravity of man's original nature is so deep-rooted that Calvin cannot think of original sin in 'passive' terms as simply the absence of original righteousness which ought to reside in man. The depravity of nature is far more 'active' than that for Calvin, as can be seen from the following quotation:

For our nature is not only destitute and empty of good, but so fertile and fruitful of every evil that it cannot be idle. Those who have said that original sin is 'concupiscence' have used an appropriate word, if only it be added—something that most will by no means concede—that whatever is in man, from the understanding to the will, from the soul even to the flesh, has been defiled and crammed with his 'concupiscence.' Or, to put it more briefly, the whole man is of himself nothing but concupiscence.⁶⁵

In other words, no part of man is immune from sin and all that proceeds from him is to be ascribed to sin, so far reaching are the consequences of the Fall in man himself. Calvin is careful to guard against the accusation that, in some way, God is to be blamed for man's condition. Our destruction, Calvin argues, comes from the guilt of our flesh, not from God. Man has perished solely because he has degenerated from his original condition.⁶⁶ Man's ruin is to be ascribed to depravity of nature so that he may not accuse God, the Author of nature:

Therefore we declare that man is corrupted through natural vitiation, but a vitiation that did not flow from nature. We deny that it has flowed from nature in order to indicate that it is an adventitious quality which comes upon man rather than a substantial property which has been implanted from the beginning.⁶⁷

It has to be conceded that Calvin's doctrine of God's particular providence for the believer, together with his view that election preceded faith, raised the question which Calvin did not solve between the supra- and infra- lapsarian points of view. Calvin is usually claimed as supralapsarian, but it should be noted, as Partee points out that

Calvin taught that sin was *positively* decreed (with the supralapsarian) when he was dealing with the doctrine of God, and *permissively* decreed (with the infralapsarian) when he was dealing with the doctrine of man. However, neither position solves the problem of sin. The supralapsarian view logically requires that God be the author of sin, but both they, and Calvin, deny the result. The infralapsarian view of a *permissive* decree denies God's sovereignty if the emphasis is placed on permission, while if the emphasis is placed on decree leads back to the supralapsarian position.

Partee therefore concludes that 'Calvin can be claimed in some senses for both sides.'⁶⁸

Calvin refers to this corruption as 'natural' in the sense that it now affects all men by hereditary right.⁶⁹ All men are now 'by nature children of wrath' (Eph. 2:3). Not that God is hostile to the noblest of all his creatures, rather he is hostile to the corruption of his work, not the work itself. This corruption is so complete that man has been deprived of freedom of choice and is in total bondage to his corrupt nature and to sin. As we continue to establish Calvin's understanding of 'the Flesh,' we must now consider his explanation of the nature of man after the Fall.

4. Present ('natural') condition of the flesh.

In the first place Calvin argues that man's supernatural gifts were stripped from him. Among these Calvin includes 'faith, love of God, charity towards neighbour, zeal for holiness and for righteousness'.⁷⁰ These have been 'extinguished in him' and can only be recovered through the grace of regeneration. In other words, they are beyond nature. But, in addition to this, Calvin argues that soundness of mind and uprightness of heart were withdrawn at the same time, which he regards as the corruption of the natural gifts:

For even though something of understanding and judgment remains as a residue along with the will, yet we shall not call a mind whole and sound that is both weak and plunged into deep darkness. And depravity of the will is all too well known.⁷¹

Reason, therefore, by which man distinguishes between good and evil, and by which he understands and judges, is not completely wiped out, because it is a natural gift. Man differs from other creatures because he is endowed with understanding, yet what now remains after the Fall is 'choked with dense ignorance, so that it cannot come forth effectively.' In the same way, the will, because it is also a natural gift, 'did not perish, but was so bound to wicked desires that it cannot strive after the right.'⁷² As Calvin himself moves on at this point to give us a fuller explanation of understanding and will, we must ourselves take note of some of his explanation that relates directly to our overall understanding of the flesh.

Common sense, he argues, shows us that there is implanted in human nature a desire to search out the truth. There is a power of perception built into human understanding, which is naturally captivated by love of truth. But this needs to be balanced by the realization that this longing for the truth is far from what it should be. There is a double problem as Calvin sees it. In the first place man's mind is incapable of holding to the right path and repeatedly falls into various errors. Secondly, there is a tendency for this longing for truth to exert itself in investigating secondary rather than primary concerns, or as Calvin puts it 'empty and worthless things.'⁷³

Having said that, lest we should be left with the impression that the human mind and understanding can achieve virtually nothing, Calvin is careful to emphasize that this is not the case, particularly when understanding turns its attention to things below. He even concedes that it can taste something of the things above. In trying to establish more clearly how far the mind can proceed in any matter, Calvin believed it was necessary to set forth a distinction. There is, he said, one kind of understanding of earthly things; another of heavenly.⁷⁴ 'Earthly things' do not directly relate to God or His Kingdom, but belong to the present life and are confined within its bounds. 'Heavenly things' were, for Calvin, 'the pure knowledge of God, the nature of true righteousness and the mysteries of the Heavenly Kingdom'.⁷⁵ Earthly things therefore include government, household management, all mechanical skills and the liberal arts, and, because man is, by nature, a social animal, he tends, through natural instinct, to foster and preserve society. Calvin therefore concludes that there is a seed of political order implanted in all men, 'and this is ample proof that in the arrangement of this life no man is without the light of reason.'⁷⁶ Similarly, understanding as regards art and science is again evidence for Calvin, of reason and understanding having been implanted by nature in all men. All knowledge, he believed, is communicated to us by the Spirit of God, even through the ungodly, according to the character that He bestowed upon each by the law of creation for the benefit of mankind as a whole. All knowledge and understanding however, is unstable and transitory in God's sight Calvin believed, unless a solid foundation of truth underlies it.

But what is of more relevance for this thesis, is the limit of man's understanding as Calvin saw it. What can human reason discern with regards to God's Kingdom and to spiritual insight? Spiritual insight for Calvin consists of 1) knowing God; 2) knowing his fatherly favour in our behalf, in which our salvation consists; 3) knowing how to frame our life according to the rule of his law. It is in these areas that we begin to realize the limitations of human understanding in Calvin's theology. Even the greatest minds were, Calvin believed, 'blinder than moles' when it came to spiritual insight, particularly on the first two points, and concludes that:

human reason, therefore, neither approaches, nor strives toward, nor even takes a straight aim at, this truth: to understand who the true God is or what sort of God he wishes to be towards us.⁷⁷

Arguing from John 1:4-5, Calvin states that whilst the soul of man, even after the Fall, is illuminated by God's light, even with this illumination it cannot comprehend God. The reason for this is because 'man's keenness of mind is mere blindness as far as the knowledge of God is concerned.' 'Darkness' as used by John denies natural man any ability of spiritual understanding, and so Calvin concludes 'flesh is not capable of such lofty wisdom as to conceive God and what is God's, unless it be illumined by the Spirit of God.'⁷⁸ In other words, man's knowledge of God is dependent upon God himself. The mind of man in his natural state is therefore incapable of knowing God and can 'become spiritually wise only in

so far as God illumines it.’⁷⁹ Calvin is therefore emphasizing the importance and centrality of regeneration by the Holy Spirit, if man is truly to know God.

It therefore remains for us to understand that the way to the Kingdom of God is open only to him whose mind has been made new by the illumination of the Holy Spirit.⁸⁰

As we continue our consideration of the limit of man’s understanding in spiritual insight, we must also look at the third aspect of spiritual insight mentioned earlier, namely that of knowing how to frame our life according to the rule of his law, which Calvin also calls the ‘knowledge of the works of righteousness.’ Calvin believed that man has, by nature, law righteousness engraved upon his mind to enable him to be sufficiently instructed in a right standard of conduct by natural law.⁸¹ The purpose of natural law was, for Calvin, to render man inexcusable.

natural law is that apprehension of the conscience which distinguishes sufficiently between just and unjust, and which deprives men of the excuse of ignorance, while it proves them guilty by their own testimony.⁸²

Calvin believed that natural man is so indulgent towards himself and so willing to see himself in a good light, that whenever he commits evil, he will prevent his mind, as much as is possible, from facing up to the reality of his sin. Natural law is therefore the corrective for this tendency in man, so that he is forced to face up to the reality of his condition.⁸³ So strong is this tendency in man, that whilst his intellect may assent, in principle, to a general definition of what is right or wrong, when it comes to a particular case, man will very often convince himself of the correctness of his actions when following what he knows, in general, to be wrong. That is why Calvin could say:

the adulterer will condemn adultery in general, but will privately flatter himself in his own adultery. Herein is man’s ignorance: when he comes to a particular case, he forgets the general principle that he has just laid down.⁸⁴

Even this rule, Calvin argued, is not without exception. There are occasions when man, understanding what is the good, will knowingly, willingly and deliberately rush into doing what is the wrong. The intellect or man’s understanding may see or understand what is better and even approve it, but will, in fact, follow the worse. The only value of understanding in natural man in this aspect of spiritual insight is, for Calvin, that he be convicted by the witness of his own conscience:

It is more than enough if their understanding extends so far that evasion becomes impossible for them, and they, convicted by the witness of their own conscience, begin even now to tremble before God’s judgement seat.⁸⁵

To establish the actual effectiveness of understanding in establishing a true knowledge of righteousness, Calvin refers to God’s law,⁸⁶ which is for him, ‘the pattern of perfect righteousness.’⁸⁷ It is here that the real limitations of understanding become apparent, particularly with regard to the first table of the law.⁸⁸ Whilst natural man has some notion of the spiritual worship of God, yet he will always pervert it with ‘false devisings.’ He therefore concludes:

For they could never be persuaded that what the law prescribes concerning worship is the truth. Shall I then say that the mind that can neither be wise of itself nor heed warnings excels in discernment?⁸⁹

Whilst accepting that man has more understanding of the principles of the second⁹⁰ table (Ex. 20:21ff.) because he is, by nature, as mentioned earlier, a social animal, yet, even here, Calvin detects a ‘failure to endure.’ Natural man for example, reasons that it is both acceptable and correct to avenge certain injuries and injustices, whilst the Word of God in the Decalogue emphasizes that these injuries and injustices are to be born patiently. The limitations of the understanding in the knowledge of the works of righteousness, are for Calvin, all too apparent, and spring from a basic failure in natural man, which he explains in this way:

But in all our keeping of the law we quite fail to take our concupiscence into account. For the natural man refuses to be led to recognize the diseases of his lusts.⁹¹

This failure of understanding in the third aspect of spiritual insight leads Calvin to conclude that the reason of man’s mind, wherever it turns, is ‘miserably subject to vanity.’⁹² Natural man has no spiritual insight within himself. The fact that Paul prayed in Col. 1:9 that they may be ‘filled with the knowledge of God’ points to man being utterly dependent on God giving him that ability through regeneration. Here again we are forced to recognize the limitations of understanding in natural man and the inevitable need for regeneration for true spiritual insight in the theology of Calvin.⁹³ So weak is man’s reason and so easily overwhelmed is it, that, Calvin believed, it is inaccurate to suppose that there is deliberate malice and depravity in all sins, seeing that man falls so often, despite his good intentions. We close this section on understanding by quoting Calvin again, which shows us just how Calvin viewed understanding in natural man and how essential he viewed the need for regeneration:

Our reason is overwhelmed by so many forms of deceptions, is subject to so many errors, dashes against so many obstacles, is caught in so many difficulties, that it is far from directing us aright. Indeed, Paul shows us in every part of life how empty reason is in the Lord’s sight when he denies ‘that we are sufficient of ourselves to claim something as coming from us as if it really did’ (2 Cor. 3:5). He is not speaking of the will or the emotions; but he even takes from us the ability to think how the right doing of anything can enter our minds.

Even man, when he has been reborn, still needs continual direction at every moment. Referring to David and Ps. 51:10, where he prays that a right spirit, lost by his own fault, be restored, Calvin concludes his examination of the understanding with these words:

For it is the part of the same God to restore that which he had given at the beginning, but which had been taken away from us for a time.⁹⁴

Having therefore considered understanding as a faculty of the soul, we must now move on to consider the second, namely the faculty of the will, upon which freedom of decision depends. Choice, for Calvin, always belongs to the sphere of the will rather than to that of the understanding.⁹⁵

Whilst philosophers teach that all things seek the good through a natural instinct, which is a view that meets with general approval, it does not, Calvin argued, have anything to do with the uprightness of the human will. For choice to be really free, it must arise, not out of an

inclination of nature, but from a deliberation of the mind. Free will is only truly active when reason considers alternative possibilities. Man in fact, rather like the animals, follows the inclinations of his nature without reason.

Therefore whether or not man is impelled to seek after good by an impulse of nature has no bearing upon freedom of the will. This instead is required: that he discern good by right reason; that knowing it he choose it; that having chosen it he follow it.⁹⁶

Calvin argued that, in practice, no matter how much man may desire to follow the good, he still does not follow it. Eternal blessedness for example, is pleasing and acceptable to all men, yet none, in their natural state, aspire to it. The desire for well-being in no way proves freedom of the will. But what we must now seek to establish, is whether the will is so corrupt that it can produce only evil, or is there still some part that remains unimpaired, which may produce good desires?

Calvin answers this by considering the argument of some (Origen, Chrysostom and Lombard in particular), who claim that there is a faculty in the soul which voluntarily aspires to good, but which is too feeble to become established. Their argument is based on what Calvin considered to be a perversion of the teaching of the Apostle Paul in Rom. 7. They consider man in 'mere nature' whereas Paul is discussing the 'Christian struggle . . . which believers constantly feel in themselves in the conflict between flesh and spirit'.⁹⁷ Those who take this line of argument overlook the fact that the spirit comes, not from nature, but from regeneration. This 'dual nature' in the Christian is of vital importance to our understanding of the Christian's conflict with the flesh and we will be expanding on this a little later. At this point we simply continue to follow Calvin's line of argument concerning the will in nature, and notice, as he refers to a number of Scriptures, including Christ's saying: 'Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin' (John 8:34), that he concludes:

We are all sinners by nature; therefore we are held under the yoke of sin. But if the whole man lies under the power of sin, surely it is necessary that the will, which is its chief seat, be restrained by the stoutest bonds.⁹⁸

Calvin acknowledged that free will can be defined in terms of the voluntary character of the will.⁹⁹ He did not believe the Fall destroyed the will and hence its voluntary character. What Calvin attempts to do is to set the voluntary character of the will against the compulsion of the will. Under the heading 'The Will as Voluntary', Leith in his article expands on this by saying:

The will is free in the sense that the origin of its actions is in itself. There is no other necessity for sin than that which exists in the corruption of the will. Hence, necessity and free assent exist together. Freedom is part of the nature of the will, and it cannot possibly be taken away. The compulsion of the will refers to some external hindrance, power or drug that coerces the will.¹⁰⁰

It is interesting to note that in response to the Libertines, a pantheistic sect, who argued that man was not responsible for his actions, Calvin replies with a very vigorous defence of the freedom of the will. Without this freedom of the will, there are three consequences for Calvin: i) There would be no difference between God and the devil; ii) men would no longer have any conscience to avoid evil, and would simply follow their own sensual desires; iii) that everything would have to be judged as good.¹⁰¹ But, in his other writings, particularly in the *Institutes*, Calvin was concerned, not with the Libertines, but with those who wanted to 'minimize the bondage to the will's own sinful necessity or to exalt human capacities for

good before God.¹⁰² Hence the reason for his derisory comments to those who advocated freedom of the will:

A noble freedom, indeed—for man not to be forced to serve sin, yet to be such a willing slave that his will is bound by the fetters of sin!¹⁰³

Whilst it is true to say that Calvin repeatedly attacked the term ‘free will,’ his opposition to it was ‘not as unequivocal as is often supposed.’¹⁰⁴ His attitude to free will was however, complex and Lane makes the point that to understand Calvin on this, his teaching ‘must be examined in the context of the different phases of man’s existence.’¹⁰⁵ Lane goes on to examine these different phases (Man as Created; The Fall; Man as Fallen; Christian Man; and Man in Glory) in an attempt to answer the question: ‘Did Calvin believe in free will?’ The conclusion Lane comes to, is that even Calvin himself could not give a clear and unequivocal answer to this question, because at different stages in man’s history, different degrees of freedom are conceded to the will. He goes on to say:

Calvin’s teaching on free will is very close to that of Augustine. Perhaps the greatest difference is one of attitude. Augustine, while clearly teaching the bondage of the will and the sovereignty of grace, took great care to preserve man’s free will. Calvin was much more polemical in his assertion of human impotence and was reluctant to talk of free will. What Augustine had carefully safeguarded, Calvin grudgingly conceded.¹⁰⁶

We are beginning to see the comprehensiveness of the term ‘flesh’ in the theology of John Calvin. That we might be left in no doubt as to what it actually includes, Calvin goes so far as to say that the ‘whole man is flesh.’¹⁰⁷ He does not accept that the flesh pertains only to the sensual part of the soul. Christ’s words that a man must be reborn (John 3:3) because he ‘is flesh’ (John 3:6) proves for Calvin, that the flesh pertains even to the higher part of the soul. The soul of man needs, therefore, not to be reformed but wholly renewed:

Now the soul is not reborn if merely a part of it is reformed, but only when it is wholly renewed. The antithesis set forth in both passages (in John 3 above) confirms this. The Spirit is so contrasted with flesh that no intermediate thing is left. Accordingly, whatever is not spiritual in man is by this reckoning called ‘carnal.’ We have nothing of the Spirit, however, except through regeneration. Whatever we have from nature, therefore, is flesh.¹⁰⁸

So corrupted and contaminated is the flesh that it is futile for man to seek anything good in his nature. The soul is ‘utterly devoid of all good’¹⁰⁹ and this perversity of nature applies to all mankind. And whilst Calvin argues that this perversity of nature is restrained by God in unregenerated man, it is not purged from within. The disease of the soul is only cured by God in the elect. Prior to regeneration, the will is hopelessly in bondage to sin, incapable of moving toward good or applying itself to the good. Man, for Calvin, is deprived, not of will, but soundness of will. It is therefore devoid of freedom and ‘is of necessity either drawn or led into evil.’¹¹⁰

We see here the irony of man’s condition brought about by his rebellion. Seeking freedom man is now enslaved. ‘Desirous of a freedom apart from obedience, Adam enslaved himself to sin. His freedom from God’s will was a freedom from righteousness.’¹¹¹ Calvin himself expresses this irony in these terms:

The liberty of the flesh . . . frees us from obedience to God, only to put us in bondage to the devil. It is, therefore, a despicable and accursed liberty, which triumphs in our destruction with unrestrained, or rather frenzied, violence.¹¹²

Man is therefore captive to, rather than master of, this liberty, ‘because all that he wills and accomplishes is by necessity determined to be disobedient.’¹¹³ It was through ‘freedom’ that man came to be in sin, but the corruption which followed as punishment in fact turned freedom into necessity. At this point we need to note Calvin’s differentiation between the necessity and compulsion of sinning:

The chief point of this distinction, then, must be that man, as he was corrupted by the Fall, sinned willingly, not unwillingly or by compulsion; by the most eager inclination of his heart, not by forced compulsion; by the prompting of his own lust, not by compulsion from without. Yet so depraved is his nature that he can be moved or impelled only to do evil. But if this is true, then it is clearly expressed that man is surely subject to the necessity of sinning.¹¹⁴

By necessity of the will Calvin means that the will must be itself, that the will cannot escape itself and that by its own power it cannot change its direction, particularly in man’s relation to God. Putting it simply, ‘an evil will cannot become through its own efforts a good will.’¹¹⁵ Calvin went to these lengths to distinguish between necessity and the compulsion of the will, because he believed ‘that those who grasped it would not be so appalled by his denial of free will.’¹¹⁶ The following quote of Calvin’s highlights his understanding of the complexity of the human situation:

Thus the soul, in some strange and evil way, under a certain voluntary and wrongly free necessity is at the same time enslaved and free: enslaved because of necessity; free because of will. And what is at once stranger and more deplorable, it is guilty because it is free, and enslaved because it is guilty, and as a consequence enslaved because it is free.¹¹⁷

The necessity of the will is, in fact, a neutral term for Calvin. It simply means that ‘the will must be itself, that it cannot escape itself.’ So whenever Calvin denies free will to man, he is talking of the inability of the ungodly person, whose life is turned in upon itself, to change the direction of his life by his own effort. ‘A self-centred person . . . cannot become through his own efforts God-centred.’¹¹⁸

We must be careful at this point however, not to limit Calvin’s understanding of the flesh to purely the soul or the spirit. Commenting, for example, on 2 Cor. 7:1 where Paul talks of ‘defilement of flesh and spirit,’ Calvin says ‘for here *flesh* means body and *spirit* means soul.’ In other words, the Christian is to be pure from defilement of all kinds in every aspect of his flesh,

. . . not only inwardly where God alone can discern them, but also outwardly where they come under the observation of men. It is as if he (Paul) had said, ‘We should not only have consciences that are pure in God’s sight, but we should also consecrate to Him our whole body and all our members so that no impurity can be seen in any part of us.’¹¹⁹

Having mentioned this so that we may understand fully the gamut of the term ‘flesh’ in the thinking of Calvin, we must not lose sight of the fact that the root of all defilement, both in the body and the soul, ‘proceed from the evil and corrupt affections of the heart.’ Calvin brings this out clearly when he says:

It is . . . imprecise to say that an evil eye comes out of the heart, although in reality there is nothing absurd or ambiguous in saying that an impure heart contaminates the eyes, so that they are the ministers or instruments of evil desires. But Christ is not restricting the evil which is in man to open sins, but says that the witness and fruit rests in the sins themselves, so that He may the more clearly teach that man's heart is the seat of all evils.¹²⁰

Thus far we have seen that the soul, which bears the image of God in the two faculties of understanding and will, is now hopelessly corrupted through the Fall. This includes both the sensual part of the soul and also the higher part; this, together with the body as 'flesh', establishes very clearly that, for Calvin, the whole man, in his nature is 'flesh' and opposed to the things of God. We sense in Calvin a fundamental distrust towards man-not as sinner, but as man. We shall not be surprised therefore, if 'man's body proves the weakest soldier in the Militia Christi, the most vulnerable to the attacks of the forces of evil.'¹²¹

5. Salvation of the flesh

How then can man be set free from this bondage to sin in his flesh? It is this that we must now briefly consider. As we have seen, natural man, or the flesh, is at enmity with God. An intermediary is needed to restore peace. For man's salvation it was necessary that the Mediator¹²² be both true God and true man.¹²³ In seeking to explain why it was 'necessary', Calvin simply states that it 'stemmed from a heavenly decree, on which men's salvation depended'.¹²⁴ The situation would have been hopeless unless the very majesty of God descended to man, since it is not in his power to ascend to God. Christ, of course, is that mediator, and it was, as Calvin puts it:

necessary for the Son of God to become for us 'Immanuel, that is, God with us' (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23), and in such a way that his divinity and our human nature might by mutual connection grow together.¹²⁵

The mediator's task was to restore man to God's grace, to enable children of men to become children of God. Who would have done this, Calvin argues,

had not the self-same Son of God become the Son of man, and had not so taken what was ours as to impart what was his to us, and to make what was his by nature ours by grace?

A little later, Calvin puts it this way; 'ungrudgingly he took our nature upon himself to impart to us what was his, and to become both Son of God and Son of Man in common with us.'¹²⁶ Through this divine transaction, man is assured of the inheritance of the heavenly kingdom as the Son of God, to whom it wholly belongs, has adopted him as brother.

It was also imperative that man's Redeemer should be both true God and true man, because it was also his task to swallow up death, conquer sin and rout the powers of world and air. Who but God himself could achieve this?

It was his task to swallow up death. Who but the Life could do this? It was his task to conquer sin. Who but very Righteousness could do this? It was his task to rout the powers of world and air. Who but a power higher than world and air could do this? Now where does life or righteousness, or lordship and authority of heaven lie but with God alone?¹²⁷

The other requirement of man's reconciliation¹²⁸ with God, was that man, who by disobedience had become lost, 'should by way of remedy counter it with obedience, satisfy God's judgment, and pay the penalties for sin.'¹²⁹ Therefore Christ came as true man and took the place of Adam in obeying the Father, to present man's flesh as the price of satisfaction to God's judgment, and, in the same flesh, paid the penalty that man deserved:

In short, since neither as God alone could he feel death, nor as man alone could he overcome it, he coupled human nature with divine that to atone for sin he might submit the weakness of the one to death; and that, wrestling with death by the power of the other nature, he might win victory for us.¹³⁰

The union of the two natures is therefore essential in the theology of Calvin, so that death itself can be vanquished. What has been said so far can perhaps best be summarized in these words: 'he who had to be man to die had to be God to conquer death.'¹³¹ Our common nature with Christ is therefore now the pledge of fellowship with the Son of God, and clothed with man's flesh the Son of Man 'vanquished death and sin together that the victory and triumph may be ours.'¹³²

We begin to see the importance of the death of Christ and what it achieved in the theology of John Calvin. For the purposes of this paper in particular, 'we must remember how important this victory over death is to Calvin.'¹³³ The assurance of man's salvation lies on two foundations: death has been conquered and life has been gained.

Paul, therefore, teaches us that our faith is supported by both of these through the Word of the Gospel, for Christ has swallowed up death by dying, and by rising again He received life into His power. The benefit of Christ's death and resurrection is now communicated to us by the Gospel.¹³⁴

We see too, the importance of Christ as mediator being both true God and true man, notably because of what was achieved for man through the flesh of Christ. This is particularly apparent in Calvin's commentary on the 'Bread of Life' passage in John Chapter 6. From the above quotation we noted that it was by rising again that he received life into His power. In his commentary on John, we see that for man to experience this life he must turn to Christ who is 'the quickening bread by which our souls are nourished.'¹³⁵ Man therefore must 'eat' of this quickening bread, which, for Calvin, was simply an exhortation to faith. Life resides in Christ's flesh and must be drawn from it by faith. Whereas death came to man through his flesh, life now comes to man through the flesh of the Son of Man. Calvin comments on this transformation in this way:

It is a wonderful purpose of God that He has set life before us in that flesh, where before there had only been the material of death.

The 'flesh of Christ' becomes a key phrase for us, particularly when thinking of the Christian's conflict with the flesh. Christ's flesh becomes, for Calvin, the channel by which life is poured out to man.

For as the eternal Word of God is the fountain of life, so His flesh is a channel to pour out to us the life which resides intrinsically, as they say, in His divinity. In this sense it is called life-giving, because it communicates to us a life that it borrows from elsewhere. This will not be at all obscure if we consider what is the reason for life, namely, righteousness. Although righteousness flows from God alone, we shall not have the full manifestation of it anywhere

else than in Christ's flesh. For in His flesh was accomplished man's redemption; 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; finally, having overcome death, it was received into the heavenly glory. Therefore it follows that in it are placed all the parts of life, so that none can rightly complain that he is deprived of life because it is hidden and far off.¹³⁶

The above quotation states very clearly what the death of Christ actually achieved.¹³⁷ Everything needed for the salvation of man has been accomplished through His death. It therefore follows, that for these benefits to become effective, notably man's participation in the sanctification of Christ, which is of particular relevance to the Christian's conflict with the flesh, union with the human nature of Christ is absolutely essential. The death and resurrection of Christ is of no advantage unless He also ingrafts man into His body to communicate the benefits gained to him. Calvin describes this in terms of a 'second blessing':

This should be carefully noted, for just as we must look exclusively to Christ for salvation, so He would have died in vain and for nothing if He did not call us to share in his grace. So even after salvation is procured for us by His death, the second blessing still remains to be given, that He should insert us into His body and communicate His benefits to us that we may enjoy them.¹³⁸

As with the Christian's conflict with the world, we note again the centrality, in Calvin's theology, of union with Christ in the conflict with the flesh. Calvin prefers to use the term 'in Christ', rather than the term 'by Christ' used by some (Erasmus in particular), because he believed it conveys more clearly 'the ingrafting by which we are made one with Christ.'¹³⁹ This union, as noted in the previous section, is effected by faith alone and cannot be experienced apart from faith. It is also effected by the sacraments which are given to faith and which must be regarded as concrete and visible. The Sacraments are particularly powerful signs for the Christian in his conflict with the flesh. The Lord's Supper is a 'repeatedly-given sign to us that we live by continually drawing life from our union with the human nature of Christ,¹⁴⁰ a reminder, in other words, that the Christian is not separated from Christ, but is so united with Him that there is nothing of His own which He does not wish to communicate to him. Just as the Lord's Supper shows that God continually supplies us from Christ with the food which sustains our life, so Baptism is to be seen as the sign that we have been ingrafted into the body of Christ.

Nor must we overlook the work of the Holy Spirit in uniting us to the human nature of Christ. Any union between Christ in heaven and man here on earth is such a mystery that it cannot be conceived by the human mind. For Calvin it is the Holy Spirit alone who can effect this union, making it possible for heavenly things to be grasped by human minds. When speaking of this union between Christ and His people, Calvin, on occasions, talks of the Holy Spirit bringing Christ down into the lives and hearts of His people, although, as Wallace points out, 'he seems to prefer to speak of the Holy Spirit as raising men up from earth to Heaven, there to dwell with Christ and there to partake of Christ.'¹⁴¹ The Holy Spirit is, for Calvin, both the link which binds the godly to Christ and also the channel through which everything Christ has is made available to man.

We must, at this point, also stress the importance of faith in the Christian's conflict with the flesh. It is faith that enables man to partake of the life made available through the death of Christ, because it is faith that 'engrafts us in the body of Christ'¹⁴² which in turn enables us to receive and benefit from His gifts.¹⁴³ What is of importance for this particular thesis, is that,

for Calvin, the depth and power of our union with Christ is ‘determined by the measure of our faith.’¹⁴⁴ This is not to undermine what has already been said about the Holy Spirit being the sole bond between Christ and His People, because ‘faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit.’¹⁴⁵ It is the Holy Spirit who creates faith in the heart of man which unites him to Christ. Therefore, ‘it is equally true that we are united to Christ by the Holy Spirit alone and by faith alone.’¹⁴⁶ Calvin in fact, uses the same language in linking union with Christ to faith as he does in linking it to the Holy Spirit. He says, for example, that it is the function of faith ‘to transfer to us what belongs to Christ,’¹⁴⁷ giving us a free participation in His benefits. It is by faith therefore, that man is united to God and it is faith that makes it possible for God to dwell in man. We should also note

that the movement of faith in thus laying hold of what is in Heaven and bringing it down to earth is reciprocal, in Calvin’s thought, to the movement of the Holy Spirit who brings the heavenly grace of Christ down into the human heart, and raises our hearts up into Heaven in response to His grace.¹⁴⁸

The fruit of faith for Calvin is twofold: justification and sanctification.¹⁴⁹

Christ was given to us by God’s generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us in faith. By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ’s blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ’s spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.¹⁵⁰

Together, justification and sanctification comprise a twofold cleansing: a purity which is imputed to us in our justification and an actual purity which comes by the process of sanctification and reformation of life. Justification takes place at the moment when faith is created in the heart of man, and it is this once-for-all justification¹⁵¹ which, Calvin believed, gives us the right to claim as our own the full perfect righteousness of Christ.¹⁵² Sanctification on the other hand, he believed, was a gradual process, by which man, in the course of time, becomes more and more conformed to Christ:

We should infer from Christ’s words that sanctification is not instantly completed in us on the first day, but that we advance in it through the whole course of our life until at last God puts off our flesh and fills us with His righteousness.¹⁵³

Sanctification for Calvin is the consecration and dedication of both body and soul to God. The importance of our union with Christ, to make sanctification possible, is brought out most clearly when we realize that, as Christ himself was sanctified in consecrating himself to the will of the Father through the sacrifice of the cross, so too our sanctification is made up of the offering of ourselves to God as a sacrifice through which His will is accomplished. Our sanctification is, therefore, the fulfilment of Christ presenting us in His own person to the Father in His sacrifice.¹⁵⁴ This is spelt out by Calvin in his commentary on John 17:

It is because He consecrated Himself to the Father that His holiness might come to us. For as the blessing is spread to the whole harvest from the first-fruits, so God’s Spirit cleanses us by the holiness of Christ and makes us partakers of it. And not by imputation alone, for in that respect He is said to have been made to us righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30); but He is also said to have been made to us sanctification, because He has, so to say, presented us to His Father in His own person (*in sua persona*) that we may be renewed to true holiness by His Spirit.¹⁵⁵

As sanctification therefore involves the offering of what is pure and holy, and as the will of man and subsequently the will of this world is contrary to the will of God, sanctification implies both the renouncing of the world and the cleansing of ourselves from the corruptions and pollutions of the flesh. This cleansing work was, for Calvin, solely the work of God. As Wallace puts it:

Therefore it is God who sanctifies us by regenerating our hearts, by renewing us in every part of our being, by mortifying within us the lusts of the flesh which are so contrary to His will, by framing our hearts into obedience to His law, and by more and more making us outwardly Christian.¹⁵⁶

6. Sanctification of the flesh

We have established so far, that through the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ and by union with Him through faith and the working of the Holy Spirit, victory has been won for the Christian in his conflict with the flesh. We must now move on to see how that victory is to be worked out in practice in the Christian life, and in particular consider the meaning of sanctification¹⁵⁷ in relation to the flesh. So that we might remind ourselves of what Calvin has in mind when he talks of sanctification, it might be helpful to examine his comments on 1 Thess. 5:23, where Paul says ‘and the God of peace sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved entire, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ The first point Calvin makes is that the word sanctification includes the whole renewal of man. ‘Spirit and soul and body’ is therefore given that we might know what is meant by the sanctification of the whole man. It is, he argues, when man is ‘kept *entire*, or pure and undefiled, in spirit, soul and body, until the day of Christ.’ He then goes on to this division of man into his constituent parts:

In some instances a man is said to consist simply of ‘body’ and ‘soul’, and in this case soul denotes the immortal spirit which dwells in his body. But since the soul has two particular faculties, the understanding and the will, Scripture quite frequently represents these two parts separately when it wants to express the power and nature of the soul. In that case ‘soul’ is used to mean the seat of the affections, so that it is the part which is opposed to the spirit. When, therefore, we hear the term ‘spirit’, we are to understand it to denote reason or intelligence, as on the other hand by the term ‘soul’ is meant the will and all the affections.

Arguing from the above Calvin is then able to conclude:

We now see how well everything corresponds. Only if a man harbours no fancy in his mind, has no ambition in his heart, and does nothing with his body that is not approved by God, is he pure and entire. Because Paul in this way commits to God the keeping of the whole man with all its parts, we are to infer from this that unless we are guarded by His protection, we are exposed to countless danger.¹⁵⁸

The above quotations elucidate for us the comprehensiveness of sanctification in Calvin’s theology. The whole of man in his nature or flesh is to be renewed. And, as man is renewed in his flesh, then the disorder or disunity which is his nature through the Fall, is gradually replaced by order and harmony through his union with Christ. We now move on, therefore, to consider the main areas in which man’s nature is to be renewed, that he may be ‘pure and entire’ or, to put it another way, that the image of God may be restored in him. This process

of renewal or restoration brings the Christian, as we shall see, into direct conflict with the flesh.

We have already established that when Calvin wishes to vary his language he uses many other terms to describe the process of sanctification (see note 157). An alternative term that he frequently uses, is the term ‘repentance’, and as we begin to appreciate his understanding of the term, we will, in turn, begin to see its relevance to the Christian’s conflict with the flesh. We mentioned earlier the essential work of the Holy Spirit to bring about faith by which man is engrafted into the body of Christ, and repentance, for Calvin, is born of faith.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, the sum of the gospel he argues, ‘is held to consist in repentance and forgiveness of sins’, and of particular interest to us, is the link in his theology between repentance and newness of life.

Now both repentance and forgiveness of sins—that is, newness of life and free reconciliation—are conferred on us by Christ, and both are attained by us through faith.

Repentance is the vehicle by which man may ‘cross over into the Kingdom of God’, and its importance in the Christian’s conflict with the flesh in Calvin’s theology is brought home in these words:

... no one can embrace the grace of the gospel without betaking himself from the errors of his past life into the right way, and applying his whole effort to the practice of repentance.¹⁶⁰

We must also note the essential link in his theology between repentance and union with Christ in whom man recognizes God’s grace:

... When we refer the origin of repentance to faith we do not imagine some space of time during which it brings it to birth; but we mean to show that a man cannot apply himself seriously to repentance without knowing himself to belong to God. But no one is truly persuaded that he belongs to God unless he has first recognized God’s grace.¹⁶¹

So important is repentance for Calvin and so high a view does he have of the term, that he can actually state that ‘the whole of conversion to God is understood under the term repentance.’ The reason for his high view of repentance and its relevance for our purpose in the Christian’s conflict with the flesh becomes very apparent when we take note of his definition of the term:

The meaning is that, departing from ourselves, we turn to God, and having taken off our former mind, we put on a new. On this account, in my judgement, repentance can thus be well defined: it is the true turning of our life to God, a turning that arises from a pure and earnest fear of him; and it consists in the mortification of our flesh and of the old man, and in the vivification of the Spirit.¹⁶²

He then goes on to expand on this definition so that we can be in no doubt about his meaning. The ‘turning of our life to God’ involves a transformation, not only in outward works, but in the soul itself, because only when the old nature is put off ‘does it bring forth the fruits of works in harmony with its renewal.’¹⁶³ ‘Earnest fear of God’ is necessary because the mind of the sinner will only incline to repentance after it has been aroused by thinking upon the divine judgment. There is a certain obstinacy in human nature and the depravity of that nature ‘compels God to use severity in threatening us.’¹⁶⁴

It is perhaps surprising to hear Calvin speaking only of the fear of God's judgment as the basis of sanctification. He apparently discounts the knowledge of the love of God in Christ, for example, as an alternative basis of sanctification, which would appear to be a more compelling incentive for holiness than fear.

In fact, precisely on the grounds of all that Calvin has said about faith and the love of God, God's mercy and love can be the only motivation for sanctification.¹⁶⁵

'Mortification of the flesh' is necessary because of the perversity and evil of the flesh which is hostile to the things of God. The flesh therefore must be destroyed:¹⁶⁶

Nor can we think of the flesh as completely destroyed unless we have wiped out whatever we have from ourselves. But since all emotions of the flesh are hostility against God (*cf.* Rom. 8:7), the first step toward obeying his law is to deny our own nature.

This mortification is not purely negative¹⁶⁷ in Calvin's theology. The duty outlined above is of no value unless the mind and heart are positively inclined towards righteousness, judgment and mercy. That comes about, Calvin argues, when the Spirit of God so imbues our souls with both new thoughts and feelings, 'that they can be rightly considered new.' Mortification is absolutely essential for Calvin because of the low view he has of man in his nature.¹⁶⁸ Man in his nature is 'turned away from God' and unless there is self-denial 'we shall never approach that which is right.' Both the enormity of the task and the essentiality of the process were all too apparent for Calvin. He realized the difficulties and the conflict that were inevitably an integral part of the process:

Indeed, the very word 'mortification' warns us how difficult it is to forget our previous nature. For from 'mortification' we infer that we are not conformed to the fear of God and do not learn the rudiments of piety, unless we are violently slain by the sword of the Spirit and brought to nought. As if God had declared that for us to be reckoned among his children our common nature must die!¹⁶⁹

For us to understand fully the necessity for the severity of Calvin's tone, we must take into account Calvin's teaching about the concupiscence of the human mind and heart. As we do so, we shall then more readily appreciate the importance that he attaches to mortification in the Christian's conflict with the flesh.

We noted earlier that Calvin said 'the whole man is of himself nothing but concupiscence.'¹⁷⁰ The human heart as a result of the sin of Adam has become totally disordered in all its affections, purposes and faculties. But more than that, it has also become possessed by an active principle called 'concupiscence' or 'perversity'. It follows from this that in its natural state it is now a 'positive and most productive source of evil.'¹⁷¹ If, as Wallace points out, we try to understand and define the workings of concupiscence in the heart in psychological terms, we shall make very little progress. For this principle of concupiscence in man's being, works deeper than 'the moral philosopher or the psychologist can probe.' Its workings can only be understood as they are revealed 'through the Word.'¹⁷² Paul, for example, 'finally perceived that he was sinner, when he saw that concupiscence, from which no human being is free, was prohibited by the law.' This sin of concupiscence which is 'secret and deeply hidden' is also the source of sin:

God, however, in this precept goes to the heart of our concupiscence, which, because it is more concealed than the will, is not reckoned as a vice. Not only was it pardoned by the

philosophers, but at the present time the Papists fiercely maintain that in the regenerate it is not a sin. Paul, however, says that he had found the source of his sin in his hidden disease.¹⁷³

The point we need to stress is that Calvin is not suggesting that concupiscence is to be identified with mere lust, evil desire or appetite. He is pointing to something far more sinister and powerful—that it brings forth evil desire itself.¹⁷⁴ We begin to see therefore, that concupiscence for Calvin is;

Something deeper than an evil will, something more fugitive and unformed than an evil desire, and though it is as closely related to the activity of the mind as to the will and the emotions, it cannot be defined in terms of the working of the mind either.¹⁷⁵

In other words, as was mentioned earlier, ‘the whole man is of himself nothing but concupiscence.’ Whatever is in man, from the intellect to the will, from the soul to the flesh, ‘has been defiled and crammed with this concupiscence.’¹⁷⁶ This concupiscence resides ‘particularly in the *flesh*’¹⁷⁷ and the resulting tendency of human nature is therefore ‘always to fight against God.’¹⁷⁸ And when, in addition to all this, we realize that the flesh, with its concupiscence, is still vitally active, even in regenerate man, we can begin to understand the severity of Calvin’s tone, referred to earlier, when he said ‘our common nature must die!’ Wallace summarizes Calvin’s teaching in the following words, which bring out very forcefully the essential role of mortification and self-denial in the Christian’s conflict with the flesh. So crucial is this in our understanding of Calvin’s theology, that I quote Wallace at length:

So active even in the regenerate man does the ‘flesh’ remain with its concupiscence that he must never allow his natural tendencies to have any serious part in the decisions which he has to make in shaping his way of life. Nothing could be more fatal for a Christian man than to give loose rein to any of his natural desires or thoughts or impulses. To follow nature is to go clean against God. To try to satisfy our natural cravings is to proceed to drown ourselves in an insatiable gulf. Man’s natural tendency of mind and heart and will is to bind himself down in affection to this earth and thus to make it impossible for him to rise upwards to his true destiny in the Kingdom of God. The way dictated by nature is the way to death and destruction.¹⁷⁹

The foregoing consideration of the power of concupiscence within the flesh enables us to appreciate the importance of both mortification of the flesh and vivification of the spirit, the two component parts of repentance.¹⁸⁰ Both these things happen to man by participation in Christ and is the means whereby the image of God is restored in man.

Repentance is therefore the essential ‘root’ from which mortification and vivification proceed. Calvin in fact interprets ‘repentance as regeneration, whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God,’ a process which Calvin saw as both slow and continual:

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

The goal or purpose of the Christian life is for more and more of the image of God to shine in the believer. In other words, there is a very definite place for growth in the Christian life and on-going repentance throughout the Christian life is the key to ensure that growth took place:

In order that believers may reach this goal God assigns to them a race of repentance, which they are to run throughout their lives.¹⁸¹

Calvin is very careful to emphasize this process of growth into the image of God, to guard against the doctrine of sinless perfection.¹⁸² Those who are regenerate in Christ are, Calvin believed, freed¹⁸³ from bondage to sin. Having established that, Calvin also stresses that the believer does not experience freedom¹⁸⁴ in the sense that he will no longer be troubled by the flesh. Whilst the believer is in the flesh, he will be continually troubled by the flesh. This will not only 'exercise' the Christian, but will also make him very much more aware of his own weakness. There remains in the believer 'a smouldering cinder of evil', which Calvin still regarded as sin,¹⁸³ and which, he also believed, remained with the believer until death:

We, on the other hand, deem it sin when man is tickled by any desire at all against the law of God. Indeed, we label 'sin' that very depravity which begets in us desires of this sort. We accordingly teach that in the saints, until they are divested of mortal bodies, there is always sin; for in their flesh there resides that depravity of inordinate desiring which contends against righteousness.¹⁸⁴

Calvin pursues the same line of argument in his commentary on James. He claimed that the papists showed their ignorance when, seizing upon James 1:15, they sought to prove that 'filthy, criminal and unspeakable desires are not sins, so long as one does not fall in with them.' Calvin's understanding of the text is that James is not arguing over the moment of sin's inception, but rather of its 'coming to maturity.' Thus Calvin concluded:

. . .we refute their foolish notion of taking from these words the sense that there is no mortal sin, until it breaks out into (what they call) an external act. This is not James's point, either: he is concentrating on the fact that the root of our destruction lies within Ourselves.¹⁸⁴

In Calvin's theology therefore, the believer is still a sinner and a sinner he remains in this mortal life. Yet, of course, there are passages in the Scriptures which appear to suggest the opposite. In Eph. 5:26-27 for example, it is said that God purges his Church of all sin, but this statement, Calvin argues, refers not to the substance of sin, but rather 'to the guilt of sin'.¹⁸⁸ Therefore 'it is certain that whosoever will be a Christian is bound to be a sinner.' The Christian is not himself without 'spot and wrinkle,' so he must be cleansed little by little. The thrust of Calvin's argument can best be summarized in his exhortation at the end of his fortieth sermon on Ephesians:

Let us take heart to fight against all our vices and to yield ourselves obedient to our God. And let us use force and violence to subdue all our passions and lusts, until we have gotten the upper hand over evil, though we do not cease to commit it. Although sin dwells in us, yet let it not reign in us.¹⁸⁹

We begin to see the truth of Hall's comment about Calvin seeing everything as a 'battle area.' From the above observations we could perhaps conclude that one of the most severe battle areas for Calvin is actually within man himself. Man appears to be 'his own worst enemy'¹⁹⁰ because of the struggle within him between the new man and the old. Man certainly is in conflict with himself and but for the regenerating work and power of the Holy Spirit would be defeated, but 'the Spirit dispenses a power whereby they may gain the upper hand and become victors in the struggle.' Victory in this struggle is therefore assured in Calvin's theology, but lest man should become overconfident in his own ability, or end up with a

wrong understanding of his true condition, even in Christ, Calvin adds the proviso: ‘But sin ceases only to reign; it does not also cease to dwell in them.’¹⁹¹

The victory that is now possible for the Christian is not simply the work of the Holy Spirit in isolation. The Spirit’s power is effective in the life of the Christian because the ‘old’ man has first been crucified with Christ. Man begins to be ‘old’ when regeneration begins and the old nature is gradually put to death. Mortification and vivification are therefore both rooted and grounded in the believer’s participation in the cross and the death of Christ. In Calvin’s theology there appears to be a direct correlation between the death of the old man and new life. Man’s willingness to die to his old nature in turn determines the renewal into true life. But renewal itself is only possible because the ‘old man’ has been fastened to the cross of Christ, ‘for by its power he is slain.’ The purpose of this destruction is that man may no longer be in bondage to sin:

as long as we are children of Adam and no more than men, we are so completely held in bondage to sin that we can do nothing but sin. But when we are ingrafted into Christ, we are delivered from this miserable constraint, not because we at once cease to sin altogether, but in order that we may finally become victorious in the conflict.¹⁹²

The conflict within the believer is an unavoidable consequence of regeneration and is brought out very clearly in Calvin’s commentary on Romans 7. When Paul says that ‘in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing’ Calvin argues that the correction ‘in my flesh’ is included by Paul to guard against insulting ‘the grace of God which also dwelt with him, but was no part of his flesh.’ In other words, Paul is acknowledging that there was a part of him that was ‘exempt from depravity and therefore not carnal.’ The term ‘flesh’ now refers to everything that is in man by nature *except* the sanctification of the Spirit. Whereas before regeneration the soul was referred to as ‘flesh’ in the believer, both ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’ are terms which must now be applied to the soul:

by the term *spirit*, which is usually contrasted with flesh, he means that part of the soul which the Spirit of God has purified from evil and so refashioned that the image of God shines forth within it. Both terms, therefore, *flesh* and *spirit*, are applicable to the soul. The one relates to that part which has been regenerated, and the other to that which still retains its natural affection.¹⁹³

If the soul is now comprised of both flesh and Spirit, it follows that the believer is a ‘twofold creature’. We can begin therefore, to understand the nature of the division in godly minds, which Calvin describes in this way:

The law calls a man to the rule of righteousness; iniquity, which is the tyrannical law of Satan, arouses him to wickedness. The spirit leads him to render obedience to the divine law; the flesh draws him back in the opposite direction.¹⁹⁴

The above quotation highlights the ‘most baffling problem that every Christian has to face’¹⁹⁵ The more zealous the Christian is in wanting to bring his life under the control of God, the more rebellion is there to the will of God aroused within the Christian by concupiscence. The Christian life is quite simply a battle,¹⁹⁶ ‘not simply with self, but with “our own nature,” whose affections and impulses tend always to lead us astray.’¹⁹⁷

It is obvious, therefore, that progress in the Christian life is not going to be attained through ‘a quiet and passive yielding to the influence of the Spirit, as He quietly moulds our whole

being into a blessed and harmonious unity with His will and purpose.’ God’s grace and man’s nature, or the Spirit and the flesh, never come together in harmony—they are, in fact, diametrically opposed to each other. The painful truth for the believer in his Christian life is that

the more God obtains the control of our lives the more inward opposition to His rule is aroused within us and therefore the more we are forced to deny the perverse and rebellious natural inclinations which rise up at the presence of God. Only through such self-denial can we be said to be allies of God.¹⁹⁸

As it is the two faculties of the soul, understanding and will, which are so opposed to the Spirit of God, we must now consider the role of self-denial or mortification in the reforming of those two faculties which make up the flesh in Calvin’s theology.

7. Renewal of the mind

The motivation for self-denial is quite simply the fact that ‘we are not our own but the Lord’s.’ In one short paragraph in the *Institutes*, Calvin reminds us three times that ‘we are not our own.’ Therefore we should not let our reason or our will ‘sway our plans and deeds,’ nor should we seek after ‘what is expedient for us according to the flesh,’ but rather we should ‘forget ourselves and all that is ours.’ If, conversely, we are God’s, ‘let us therefore live for him and die for him’ and ‘let his wisdom and will . . . rule all our actions.’ The Christian is therefore to

apply the whole force of his ability in the service of the Lord. I call ‘service’ not only what lies in obedience to God’s Word but what turns the mind of man, empty of its own carnal sense, wholly to the bidding of God’s Spirit.

Calvin here is advocating Paul’s teaching of the renewal of the mind. Far from holding reason up as the governing principle in man, as the philosophers did, Christian philosophy on the other hand,

bids reason give way to, submit and subject itself to, the Holy Spirit so that the man himself may no longer live but hear Christ living and reigning within him.¹⁹⁹

Unless our carnal reason is literally dethroned there can be no room for the wisdom of God. What this actually entails is suggested in Calvin’s definition of true religion, which he described in terms of our being heartily ready to follow the will of God and ‘only he can do this who has renounced his own point of view.’²⁰⁰ R.S. Wallace argues that in Calvin’s theology

a sure test as to whether a man has denied himself is whether he has renounced his own views and indeed his own doubts, and has accepted in their place the wisdom of God revealed in the Gospel. Ignorance of God is therefore due to a refusal to renounce the self-life and self-love.²⁰¹

The man who therefore prefers to hold on to his doubt, his false ideas and his unbelief is a man who is in rebellion against God. These things spring from the carnal mind which is naturally opposed to faith. What the Christian can know with certainty, through the Word of God, is that God is always near and victorious and that ‘judgement of faith’ has to be continually held up to ‘oppose and wrestle against the weakness and judgement of the

flesh.²⁰² We must also take into account that the Christian's temptation to doubt and unbelief comes into being, not just through the weakness of the flesh, but also through the activity of the devil, who comes to the Christian in the midst of his conflict and makes 'faithless insinuations suggesting that God has withdrawn the support of his Spirit and instigating us to despair.' This strategy of Satan's will be examined in greater detail in Part Three of this paper. The point is however, that the Christian has been given the necessary means by which he can overcome the despair which results from such assaults of doubt and unbelief. Self-denial, faith and prayer all have their crucial part to play, as can be seen from the following quotation of Wallace, based on Calvin's commentaries on Psalms 49:7 and 77:43:

Against such temptation to despair our faith must stand and refuse to yield. It becomes us to wrestle against despair, in order that our sorrow, incurable though it may seem, may not shut our mouths and keep us from pouring out our prayers before God.²⁰³

In addition to this, the Christian life also involves a constant refusal to allow the mind to go beyond the bounds of the Word of God 'into speculation over useless questions.' The Christian is therefore called to exercise continual examination and restraint of the natural activity of his mind, to ensure that it is brought into subjection to Christ. To quote Wallace again:

This is no easy thing to do, for the carnal reason always seeks to take control even of the children of God, and it can be overcome only by constant dependence on God's grace, and by stern discipline.²⁰⁴

It is perhaps impossible to overestimate the importance Calvin attaches to the renewal of the mind. He views control of the mind as crucial for the Christian in his struggle with the flesh, hence his strong emphasis on the importance of discipline and self-denial. Because of the importance of the mind in the Christian's struggle, it is essential for the Christian to use his mind to think about God's Word. So intense is the struggle, that to overcome, the Christian must, in fact, allow the Word of God to dominate his thinking. It is in this way and this way alone, that the Christian can truly know God, and knowledge of God, was, for Calvin, essential for the Christian to truly love God. Knowledge of God, therefore, comes before love and if a Christian's love of God was weak then, Calvin would argue, his knowledge of God must be only partial.²⁰⁵

In stressing the importance of true knowledge of God through his Word, Calvin was not advocating simply the accumulation of knowledge. He argued that if the mental faculties were surrendered to the Word of God, then the other faculties would be drawn into love and obedience. Knowledge of God therefore, was intensely practical²⁰⁶ as far as Calvin was concerned, as ultimately it would have a sanctifying effect on the life of the Christian in his struggle with the flesh. Sanctification of the thoughts is also of supreme importance because it is through the mind that Satan seeks to attack the Christian to lead him into error. The Christian whose mind is fixed on the Word of God and who knows God is, therefore, equipped to withstand the evil insinuations of Satan.

The Christian, then, is to use his mind and to involve it in meditating on the things of God. The hearing of the Word of God preached is therefore important, provided the word preached was not received in a superficial manner, but is 'allowed deeply and constantly to influence the mind and heart of the Christian.'²⁰⁷ Again we see the practical outworking as the mind is

renewed; the mind renewed by the Word of God was to bring about the sanctifying work in the heart.

The use of the mind in meditating on the things of God, resulted in Calvin advocating meditation on a number of major themes, including the future life, the love of Christ, the passion and death of Christ, and creation itself.²⁰⁸ Calvin also argued for the importance of meditating on ‘those aspects of God’s dealings with us that help to make us fear God.’²⁰⁹ The Christian is to take into account the wrath of God and by so doing will be forced to think about the consequences of sin. But to guard against the danger of dwelling on the anger of God and cultivating a wrong fear of God, Calvin is careful to ground the right fear of God in a confidence also in the mercy and goodness of God.²¹⁰

Using the mind to meditate on God’s word is also to be accompanied by self-examination. As our sins are brought to mind, we are to think about them ‘in order that we may be driven not to despair but to increased watchfulness over our lives.’²¹¹ Again we note the importance of the renewal of the mind in Calvin’s theology because of its practical outworking leading to a sanctified life. The self-examination he advocated was, of course, not to be according to our own standards, but always according to the teaching of the Word as to what is sin in the sight of God.

The mind, then, is, for Calvin, a battleground and, in order to overcome, Christians ‘must enforce and constrain themselves to do violence against a mortal enemy.’ Whilst acknowledging that of all our enemies the devil is the chief, Calvin also lists our thoughts (as well as our affections and desires) as ‘enemies that labour to bring us to destruction.’²¹² Hence the importance of self-denial in the battle area of the mind. Not that Calvin was advocating self-denial in the sense of the Christian battling in his own strength, because, for Calvin, self-denial primarily means

communion by faith with the death of Christ through the Holy Spirit, for it is through such communion that we are given the power to die inwardly with Christ and to mortify concupiscence.²¹³

Self-denial in this sense therefore releases this power in the Christian, enabling his mind to be renewed, an essential work, for without it man cannot enter the Kingdom of God. As Calvin himself reminds us:

However much we may flatter ourselves, Christ’s words are still true, that the whole man must be born again if he wishes to enter the Kingdom of God, for in both mind and heart we are entirely alienated from the righteousness of God.²¹⁴

8. Conversion of the will

We commented earlier on the importance of true order in Calvin’s theology. Conversion of the will, to be properly understood, must be set within that context. The perfect fulfilment of the law was, for Calvin, the restoration of true order in the life of man:

a true harmony between the outward life and the feelings of the heart, and a true relationship between the fulfilment of our duty towards God and our duty towards man—between the first table and the second table, between holiness and justice.²¹⁵

To be able to respond to the law wholeheartedly shows true integrity of heart which Calvin viewed as ‘perfection.’²¹⁶ This perfection however, is not the striving to attain certain virtues, as though that is the goal for which the Christian should be reaching; rather it is ‘a truly balanced and ordered life,’ as opposed to ‘a life with certain outstanding features.’²¹⁷ Calvin, in fact, is always careful to guard against a one-sided and unbalanced cultivation of virtue, hence the importance of love which, for Calvin, was the bond of perfection. Only where love reigns is it possible for there to be the restoration of true order. Commenting on Colossians, Calvin sums it up in these words, when explaining how Christians may live perfectly among themselves: ‘. . . other things will be in a good state in our life, if love is strong among us.’²¹⁹

Restoration of true order in the life of man is, however, impossible for natural man because of the state of the will. The will was, for Calvin, quite simply evil. The will therefore has to be changed or converted. In fact Calvin argued that the ‘good work’ referred to in Philippians 1:6 ‘denotes the very origin of conversion itself, which is in the will.’ This conversion of the will is wholly God’s work and is, from beginning to end, supplied by God’s grace:

If, therefore, a stone is transformed into flesh when God converts us to zeal for the right, whatever is of our own will is effaced. What takes place is wholly from God. I say that the will is effaced; not in so far as it is will, for in man’s conversion what belongs to his primal nature remains entire. I also say that it is created anew; not meaning that the will now begins to exist, but that it is changed from an evil to a good will. I affirm that this is wholly God’s doing . . .

Calvin was very careful to emphasize man’s total dependence upon God for the conversion of the will. ‘Everything good in the will is the work of grace alone.’ There is nothing for man, of himself, to glory in, ‘for the whole of salvation comes from God.’²²⁰

Nothing good therefore, ‘can arise out of man’s will until it has been reformed,’²²¹ regeneration or conversion being the work of the Spirit in the elect ‘to direct and regulate man’s will.’ The beginning of regeneration is simply ‘to wipe out what is ours.’ At first sight, this statement appears to be somewhat at odds with what Calvin is saying in *Institutes* 2:3:6. Aligning himself very much with the teaching of Augustine on the will, Calvin maintains that the two ideas are, in fact, in ‘substantial agreement’:

the will of man is said to be restored when, with its corruption and depravity corrected, it is directed to the rule of righteousness. At the same time a new will is said to be created in man, because the natural will has become so vitiated and corrupted that he considers it necessary to put a new nature within.²²²

The conversion that Calvin has in mind can be best summed up in the words of Ezek. 36:26, from which we learn that the Lord will take from his people their ‘heart of stone’ and give them ‘a heart of flesh.’ Conversion, as was noted earlier in this paper, is therefore grounded in election and so Calvin can conclude that ‘only in the elect does one find a will inclined to good.’²²³ It is impossible to talk of conversion without also referring to the need for true repentance. The two were inextricably bound together in the theology of Calvin. In fact, Calvin goes so far as to define repentance as ‘exclusively an affair of the heart, an inward and hidden renewal of the man.’²²⁴ Repentance, however, was, for Calvin, more than just an inward change; from this inner renewal of the man springs an outward amendment²²⁵ of life which Calvin viewed as the fruits of inward repentance. It can be seen, therefore, that Calvin’s doctrine of election, including the conversion of the will, is absolutely crucial to his understanding of the restoration of true order in the life of man. Without the conversion of the will there cannot be true harmony between the outward life and the feelings of the heart.

Calvin, however, did not believe that this harmony automatically and inevitably followed once the will was converted, because he was too well aware of the corruptions of man's nature and the allurements of the flesh. Whilst he never underestimated the corruptions of man's hearts and minds, he laid greater emphasis on the power of the Word of God to discipline and control the mind and heart of man.

The Word of God, Calvin believed, worked deep within the hearts of those who 'esteem', 'love', and 'delight' in the Word to bring about the reformation of our lives: 'so that it may not only subdue us to obedience by constraint, but also allure us by its sweetness',²²⁶ to 'overcome all the allurements of the flesh'.²²⁷

So powerful is the Word of God that it can not only deliver us from worldly desires, such as an unholy love of money, but also create in us a holy love for the Law itself, and, as we mentioned earlier, perfect fulfilment of the Law was, for Calvin, the restoration of true order in the life of man.

We mentioned earlier, in the section on 'Renewal of the Mind',²²⁸ the importance of knowledge in the theology of Calvin, because it draws other faculties and powers into love and obedience. It is important that we seek to clarify what Calvin meant by knowledge, to guard against concluding that, perhaps, he had in mind a cold, formal intellectualism, with the mind somehow divorced from the heart and will. Nothing in fact, could be further from the truth; knowledge of God is, for Calvin, primarily a matter of the heart rather than the intellect and is something, for it to be effective, that has to 'take root in the heart.'²²⁹ Calvin here is talking of the place of knowledge and the function of the heart in terms of faith. We see from *Inst.* 3:2:36 that faith is, for Calvin, very much a 'matter of the heart.' What the mind has absorbed through the Word of God has to be poured into the heart itself. Only then is the Word of God 'an invincible defence to withstand and drive off all the stratagems of temptation',²³⁰ thus enabling man to live a well ordered life.

It is important, therefore, to notice the importance Calvin also attached to the work of the Holy Spirit, in conjunction with the Word of God, in the conversion of the will, particularly because of its practical outworking. The Word of God only becomes efficacious for faith through the work of the Holy Spirit. Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Word can achieve nothing. Faith, for Calvin, is more than just human understanding; it is not enough for the mind alone to be illuminated by the Spirit of God, 'unless the heart is also strengthened and supported by his power.' Calvin therefore, never advocated knowledge in isolation; it is always knowledge linked to 'confidence and assurance of heart.'²³¹ The Christian life, as has been noted before, is always 'practical' in Calvin's understanding:

For it is a doctrine not of the tongue but of life. It is not apprehended by the understanding and memory alone, as other disciplines are, but it is received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds a seat and resting place in the inmost affection of the heart.

The progression mentioned earlier is therefore continued and completed; what the mind has absorbed has to be passed into the heart itself and then 'pass into our daily living.'²³² The will therefore is always 'mindful of the bidding of the understanding' and in its own desires 'awaits the judgement of the understanding,' as Calvin always viewed the understanding as 'the leader and governor of the soul.'²³³

We mentioned a little earlier (see p. 215) that Calvin aligned himself very closely with the teaching of Augustine. We should, in closing this section, note that Calvin was very heavily influenced by Augustine to arrive at his overall understanding of the conversion of the will. Calvin, in *Inst.* 2:3:13 and 14 refers repeatedly to Augustine and is in substantial agreement with his teaching on the will. Augustine taught that the will was totally dependent upon grace to ‘bring about every good work in us.’²³⁴ The emphasis that Augustine placed on grace in the conversion of the will is an emphasis that Calvin himself underlines.²³⁵

Calvin also aligned himself with Augustine in saying that man’s will is not eliminated, but is wholly dependent upon grace. In *Institutes* 2:3:14 he refers to Augustine to support his argument: ‘Elsewhere he [Augustine] says that will is not taken away by grace but is changed from evil into good and helped when it is good.’ By this Calvin believed that Augustine was emphasizing the work of grace on the heart, rather than man being borne along by some ‘outside force.’ In other words, man is ‘so affected from within that he obeys from the heart.’

We noted earlier (see p. 216) Calvin’s strong emphasis on man being totally dependent upon God for the conversion of the will and that there is nothing for man, of himself, to glory in. Here Calvin also appears to have been influenced by Augustine.

He was, in fact, very ‘Augustinian’ in the way in which he stressed that, for grace to be truly grace, it must, of necessity, be devoid of any dependence or emphasis on works or merit. He therefore refers again to the teaching of Augustine to emphasize the total dependence of man on the grace of God:

by the Lord’s free mercy it is converted to good, and once converted it perseveres in good; the direction of the human will toward good, and after direction its continuation in good, depend solely upon God’s will, not upon any merit of man.²³⁶

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Endnotes:

- 1) ‘Calvin’s view of man is perhaps more indebted to the insights of the philosophers than any other area of his thought . . . However, to think that Calvin’s anthropology is basically philosophical ignores or dismisses his criticism of the philosophers and the totality of the position he occupies.’ Partee, C. *Calvin and Classical Philosophy*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977, p. 51.
- 2) Allen, D., *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, London: SCM Press, 1985, p. 19.
- 3) For an outline of the complexities see Allen, *op. cit.* pp. 9-59. Cf. also G.C. Field, *The Philosophy of Plato* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 79-91.
- 4) ‘Calvin . . . praises Plato’s belief in the immortality of the soul, and on the basis of that doctrine is often considered “Platonic”’, Partee, *op. cit.* p. 55. Cf. *Institutes* 1:15:6. He does however only commend ‘part of the Platonic view of the soul . . . as an example that some kind of ‘natural’ understanding of the immortality of the soul could be found in Platonism’ Partee, *op. cit.* p. 62.
- 5) Field, *op. cit.* p. 88.

- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- 7) It is perhaps interesting to note, as Partee points out, that the distinctions between Platonism and Neoplatonism was not recognized until the nineteenth century. *Cf.* Partee, *op. cit.*, p. 108.
- 8) Field, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
- 9) Rist, J.M. *Plotinus: The Road to Reality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967, p. 113.
- 10) *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 11) *Cf. Institutes* 1:15:6.
- 12) Rist, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
- 13) *Ibid.*, for a detailed account of how Plotinus understood the nature and functions of soul, pp. 84-102.
- 14) It should be noted, though, that Plotinus also ‘specifically denies the resurrection of the body’, Partee, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
- 15) Meyendorff, J., *Byzantine Theology. Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, London: Mowbray, 1975.
- 16) *Ibid.*, p. 140f.
- 17) *Ibid.*, pp. 140-142.
- 18) Sullivan, J.E., *The Image of God. The Doctrine of St. Augustine and its Influence*, Dubuque, Iowa: The Priority Press, 1963, p. 14.
- 19) Partee, *op. cit.*, p. 111: ‘Whilst Augustine, whose conversion to Christianity and Platonism was almost simultaneous, is an enthusiastic Platonist, Calvin separates himself from Augustine on this point by criticizing Augustine as excessively Platonic’.
- 20) *Institutes* 1:15:4.
- 21) Partee, *op. cit.*, p. 51; ‘The differences between Calvin and the philosophers are as striking as the similarities. Calvin makes a sharp distinction between the natural and the redeemed man, and he teaches the resurrection of the body as well as the immortality of the soul.’
- 22) *Ibid.*, p. 53: ‘For Calvin, unlike the philosophers, the image of God is not to be understood primarily in terms of nature but in terms of the restoration of corrupted nature’.
- 23) *Commentaries*. Genesis 9. 6.
- 24) Niesel, W., *The Theology of Calvin*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1956, p. 69.
- 25) *Comm.*, 2 Cor. 3. 18. For Calvin the divine similitude in man consists not just in the fact that man is endowed with understanding and will, ‘but in the fact that these faculties in original man were directed wholly towards knowledge of and obedience to God’. In other words, body and

soul are natural gifts, 'whereas similitude to God is a supernatural gift . . . restored to us in Christ', Niesel, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

- 26) Prins, R. 'The Image of God in Adam and the Restoration of Man in Jesus Christ. A Study in Calvin', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 25 1972, p. 43.
- 27) *Ibid.*, p. 44, This contradiction, Prins suggests, is a result of Calvin's method in *Institutes* 1:15:4 where he sought to derive the contents of the image from the restoration of the corrupt image. The problem arises because of the way in which he mingled creation and restoration, resulting in Calvin's double use of the word restoration. 'It is true that Paul too speaks about the restoration of the image of God, but he never means a restoration to Adam. When Paul looks behind, it is always in contrast, never in comparison or anticipation. Indeed, Paul is continually skipping forward, once he has set the image as a brilliant stone in his prose, to Christ, resurrection and heaven'.
- 28) Milner, B.J., *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977, p. 24. He claims, for example, that there is a very definite humanistic note in Calvin's anthropology because of his general agreement with the philosophers on the nature of man, except on one decisive point—the fall. He therefore goes on to say that, 'It is not the case, then, that Calvin has filled a humanistic framework with specifically Christian substance—just the reverse: he has rather given to the biblical term a humanistic, philosophical content.'
- 29) *Institutes* 3:6:5, note 9.
- 30) Partee, *op. cit.*, p. 63f. 'Calvin regards soul as an immortal yet created essence . . . the soul dies. . . Immortality, then, for Calvin is not a natural characteristic as it is with Plato'. See also Niesel, *op. cit.*, p. 66, and Torrance, T.F., *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1949, p. 26.
- 31) *Institutes* 1:15:2.
- 32) *Ibid.*, 3:25:3.
- 33) Partee, *op. cit.*, p. 56. It is true that both Calvin and Plato each teach a separation of body and soul, but while Calvin teaches the immortality of the soul, he also believes in the resurrection of the body, which Plato did not.
- 34) *Institutes* 3:25:3, note 5.
- 35) Partee, *op. cit.*, p. 65: 'Contemporary theology sees a sharper distinction between the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body than Calvin perceives, but this fact does not make Calvin Platonic. Calvin looks at the subject of soul and body, immortality and resurrection through the "spectacles of Scripture". The lens of Calvin's spectacles were certainly tinted by Platonism here, but the source of Calvin's view of soul and body is the Scripture.'
- 36) *Institutes* 4:1:1.
- 37) *Cf.*, for example, *ibid.*, 3:6:2 and 3:6:3.
- 38) Partee, *op. cit.*, p. 61. There are those who charge Calvin with 'fundamental Platonism', which, Partee claims, is difficult to sustain. He argues that Calvin was influenced not so much by 'philosophical Platonism' but by 'the common "theological Platonism" of so much of Christian

thought from the Greek fathers through Augustine and the Renaissance Platonists.’ We should not, therefore, be surprised that ‘aspects of Calvin’s doctrines “resemble” Plato’s’.

- 39) *Ibid.*, p. 91: ‘Calvin uses philosophy, not as a source for the truth, but as a learned adjunct to the explanation of the Christian faith’.
- 40) *Ibid.*, p. 15: ‘In expounding his Christian philosophy, Calvin accepts some of their (the classical philosophers) views and rejects others. Calvin’s use an evaluation of the classical philosophers is instructive not only as an illustration of his Christian humanism but as an important part of his theology.’
- 41) Berkouwer, G.C., *Man: The Image of God*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962, pp. 67-118.
- 42) Wallace, R.S., *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1959, p. 104.
- 43) *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- 44) Hall, C.A.M., *With the Spirit’s Sword. The Drama of Spiritual Warfare in the Theology of John Calvin*, Zurich: P.G. Keller, 1963, p. 47. The conscience was, for Calvin, ‘the source of knowledge of right and wrong which survives man’s Fall and over which man does not possess control. Calvin’s repeated reference to the captivity and liberation of the conscience stresses its role as weapon and prize of spiritual warfare’. See also Niesel, *op. cit.*, p. 102f.
- 45) *Institutes* 1:15:2.
- 46) *Loc. cit.*
- 47) *Ibid.*, 1:15:3.
- 48) *Commentaries*, Genesis 1:26. Partee, *op. cit.*, p. 54: ‘The image of God in Adam is known from the image of God in the second Adam. Christ is the most perfect image of God and if men are conformed to him, they are restored to God’s image’.
- 49) *Commentaries*, Genesis 1:26.
- 50) *Institutes* 1:15:3.
- 51) *Ibid.*, 1:15:4.
- 52) *Loc. cit.*
- 53) Leith, J. H., ‘The Doctrine of the Will in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*’ in Gerrish, B.A., ed., *Reformatio Perennis*, Pittsburg: The Pickwick Press, 1981. p. 50.
- 54) *Institutes* 1:15:7.
- 55) *Loc. cit.*
- 56) *Ibid.*, 2:2:2.
- 57) Leith, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

- 58) *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 59) *Institutes* 2:1:9.
- 60) *Ibid.*, 2:1:9.
- 61) Van Buren, P., *Christ in our Place: The Substitutionary Character of Calvin's Doctrine of Reconciliation*, Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1957, p. 28. Since God's will for men is obedience and since the fearful situation of man has arisen from his disobedience, Calvin's first answer to the question of how Christ 'has destroyed the enmity between God and ourselves' is 'that he has accomplished this for us by the whole course of His obedience'. Calvin sees the obedience of Christ in three areas of His work: His incarnation. His earthly life and His death.
- 62) *Institutes* 2:1:4. Whereas Augustine considered the pride of man to be the root of all evil, Calvin disagreed with him believing that the root of the problem lay much deeper in unbelief. Cf. Niesel, *op. cit.*, p. 81.
- 63) *Institutes* 2:1:4.
- 64) *Ibid.*, 2:1:5.
- 65) *Ibid.*, 2:1:8.
- 66) *Ibid.*, 2:1:10.
- 67) *Ibid.*, 2:1:11.
- 68) *Op. cit.*, p. 144.
- 69) 'Hereditary right' in the sense that original sin devolves upon us because we are all represented in Adam according to the will of God. Calvin did not think in terms of any physical process such as biological heredity. Cf. Niesel, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-88.
- 70) *Institutes* 2:2:12.
- 71) *Loc. cit.*
- 72) *Loc. cit.*
- 73) *Loc. cit.*
- 74) *Ibid.*, 2:2:13.
- 75) *Loc. cit.*
- 76) *Loc. cit.*
- 77) *Institutes* 2:2:18.
- 78) *Ibid.*, 2:2:19.
- 79) *Ibid.*, 2:2:20.
- 80) *Loc. cit.*

- 81) *Cf. Commentaries* Romans 2:14-16; McNeill, 'Natural Law in the Teaching of the Reformers', *Journal of Religion* Vol. 26, 1946, pp. 168-182.
- 82) *Institutes* 2:2:22.
- 83) *Cf. Niesel, op. cit.*, p. 102f.
- 84) *Institutes* 2:2:23.
- 85) *Ibid.*, 2:2:24.
- 86) For a further account of the role of the law of God in Calvin's theology, see Niesel, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-103.
- 87) *Institutes* 2:2:24.
- 88) For Calvin's divisions of the Decalogue into two tables, see *Institutes* 2:8:11.
- 89) *Ibid.*, 2:2:24.
- 90) Even making allowances for man's 'failure to endure', Helm sees this understanding of the principles of the second table as the 'positive aspect of Calvin's teaching on natural law'. Many Calvinists, following the lead of Abraham Kuyper, have stressed that Calvin taught a doctrine of common grace and have often stressed this in opposition to the idea that Calvin appeals to natural law, Helm goes on to say that they are not, in fact, being faithful to Calvin. See 'Calvin and Natural Law', *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 2, 1984, pp. 5-22.
- 91) *Institutes* 2:2:24.
- 92) *Ibid.*, 2:2:25.
- 93) Niesel makes the point that it is this part of the soul, man's understanding 'which most of all seems to have been spared injury . . . which most needs renewal'. This is not to be understood as an improvement of existing faculties; 'rather a new creation'. Niesel, *op. cit.* p. 90.
- 94) *Institutes* 2:2:25.
- 95) *Cf. ibid.*, 2:2:4.
- 96) *Ibid.*, 2:2:26.
- 97) *Ibid.*, 2:2:27.
- 98) *Loc. cit.*
- 99) *Cf. ibid.*, 2:2:6-7.
- 100) Leith, *op. cit.* p. 54.
- 101) For full details of this argument see *ibid.* pp. 54, 55.
- 102) *Ibid.*, p. 55.

- 103) *Institutes* 2:2:7.
- 104) Lane, A.N.S., 'Did Calvin Believe in Freewill? *Vox Evangelica* Vol. XII. 1981, p. 72.
- 105) *Loc. cit.*
- 106) *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 107) *Institutes* 2:3:1.
- 108) *Loc. cit.*
- 109) *Ibid.*, 2:3:2.
- 110) *Ibid.*, 2:3:5.
- 111) Conditt, M.W., *More Acceptable than Sacrifice. Ethics and Election as Obedience to God's Will in the Theology of Calvin*, Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt Kommissionsverlag, 1973, p. 19.
- 112) *Commentaries* Romans 6.20.
- 113) Conditt, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
- 114) *Institutes* 2:3:5.
- 115) Leith, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
- 116) *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- 117) *Institutes* 2:3:5.
- 118) Leith, *op. cit.* p. 56.
- 119) *Commentaries*, 2 Corinthians 7.1.
- 120) *Ibid.*, Matthew 15.19.
- 121) Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
- 122) 'The gift of the Mediator is the realization of God's eternal love and therefore the final revelation of God's eternal will', van Buren, *op. cit.*, p. 8. *Cf. Commentaries*, 1 John 4.10.
- 123) For a summary of Calvin's understanding of Christ being both true God and true man, see Niesel, *op. cit.*, p. 111f.
- 124) *Institutes* 2:12:1.
- 125) *Loc. cit.*
- 126) *Ibid.*, 2:12:2.
- 127) *Loc. cit.*

- 128) Man is the object of this reconciliation, not God. He is the activator of the reconciliation of sinful men to Himself. God in fact chose to remove every obstacle in the way of His care for us (cf. *Institutes* 2:17:2). Therefore ‘the gift of reconciliation reveals the true nature of God’, van Buren, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
- 129) *Institutes* 2:12:3.
- 130) *Loc. cit.*
- 131) Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 107.
- 132) *Institutes* 2:12:3.
- 133) Hall, *loc. cit.*
- 134) *Commentaries* Romans 10.6.
- 135) *Ibid.*, John 6. 48.
- 136) *Ibid.*, John 6. 51.
- 137) The extent of the atonement in Calvin’s theology is a matter of scholarly debate. There are those such as Kendall who conclude that universal atonement is fundamental to Calvin’s doctrine of faith and assurance. Then there are those such as Lethuen who argue that Calvin does not commit himself to the extent of the atonement. There are also those such as Helm who conclude that Calvin believed that Christ died for the elect alone. What can be said with certainty is that the emphasis in Calvin’s teaching is on the unity of the death and resurrection of Christ and upon the idea that Christ’s intercession flows from his sacrificial death, which, according to Calvin, was offered to all. ‘More than that is difficult to state with certainty. For, since Calvin did not fully or consistently develop his teaching on this subject, we should hold our evaluations of it to be somewhat tentative, especially when they differ from his own emphasis’, M.C. Bell, ‘Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement’, *The Evangelical Quarterly* Vol. LV, 1983, p. 123. In his later article also discussing the extent of the atonement, Nicole does tentatively suggest that ‘on balance . . . definite atonement fits better than universal grace into the total pattern of Calvin’s teaching’, Nicole, R., ‘John Calvin’s View of the Extent of the Atonement’, *Westminster Theological Journal*. Vol. XLVII. 1985. No. 2, p. 225. And so the debate continues!
- 138) *Commentaries* 2 Timothy 1.9.
- 139) *Ibid.*, Romans 6.11.
- 140) Wallace, R.S., ‘A Christian Theologian: Calvin’s Approach to Theology’, in *The Challenge of Evangelical Theology. Essays in Approach and Method*. ed. N.M. de S. Cameron, Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1987, p. 19.
- 141) *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 142) *Institutes* 3:2:30.
- 143) ‘Faith is the sign of incorporation in the fullest sense of the word’, van Buren, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
- 144) Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

- 145) *Institutes* 3:1:4.
- 146) Wallace, *loc. cit.*
- 147) *Commentaries* Acts 15.9.
- 148) Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
- 149) Justification and sanctification were, for Calvin, *non separatio sed distinctio*. See Milner, *op. cit.*, p. 165ff. Justification and sanctification are the inevitable ‘consequences of incorporation with Christ’, van Buren, *op. cit.*, p. 109. We are to avoid all attempts to consider one as independent of the other ‘for to separate them is to tear Christ apart’. *Ibid.* p. 108. Calvin can say this because he sees both justification and sanctification in Christ Himself as our substitute. We receive His righteousness and holiness because we are united to Him by His Spirit.
- 150) *Institutes* 3:11:1.
- 151) Calvin was also careful to stress that the blessing of justification was to be received not once, but held on to throughout life, so in that sense is continual, *cf.*, *Institutes* 3:124:11. Even the saints have need of the daily forgiveness of sins and it is ‘this alone (that) keeps us in God’s family,’ *Commentaries* 1 John 1.7. See also Milner, *op. cit.*, p. 166.
- 152) *Cf. Institutes* 3:11:11.
- 153) *Commentaries* John 17.17.
- 154) ‘Because sanctification is based on Christ as our Substitute, the life of holiness means a conformity to the life of Christ, and the outstanding characteristic of Christ is His death and Resurrection. Sanctification must entail, therefore, the conformation of our lives to the death and Resurrection of Christ’, van Buren, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
- 155) *Commentaries* John 17. 19.
- 156) Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
- 157) When Calvin wishes to vary his language, he ‘uses many other terms such as repentance, mortification, new life, conversion, regeneration, to denote exactly the same as he means by the word sanctification’, *loc. cit.*, p. 25.
- 158) *Commentaries* 1 Thessalonians 5. 23.
- 159) Repentance for Calvin was seen as a consequence of faith, which was very much in line with the theology of the other Reformers, with the exception of Luther who argued that repentance preceded faith.
- 160) *Institutes* 3:3:1.
- 161) *Ibid.*, 3:3:2.
- 162) *Ibid.*, 3:3:5.
- 163) *Ibid.* 3:3:6.
- 164) *Ibid.*, 3:3:7.

- 165) Van Buren, *op. cit.*, p. 112.
- 166) The whole purpose of the death of Christ and therefore our mortification ‘is that we might have new life, reconciled to God’, van Buren, *op. cit.*, p. 116.
- 167) ‘Mortification is the character of life of believers in their time between the victory of Christ and its full revelation’, *loc. cit.*
- 168) ‘Our mortification is not so much a matter of our following the example of Christ as it is a work of God in us’, van Buren. *op. cit.*, p. 115.
- 169) *Institutes* 3:3:8.
- 170) *Ibid.*, 2:1:8.
- 171) Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
- 172) *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- 173) *Commentaries* Romans 7:7.
- 174) *Cf. Commentaries* James 1.15, and Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 55f.
- 175) *Loc . cit.*
- 176) *Institutes* 2:1:9.
- 177) *Cf. Commentaries* Romans 7:7:8; *Institutes* 2:1:9. ‘Particularly in the “flesh” ‘because, as Wallace goes on to explain, “flesh” in the Bible means everything which is natural to man or whatever man is born with. Not only the gross bodily activities which man has in common with the animals but also all the ‘higher’ activities of affection and mind by which nature guides and directs man’s life are ‘of the flesh’, and are thus completely perverted by concupiscence’ (Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 55). Calvin, therefore, to guard against the tendency to link concupiscence with only the ‘inferior appetites’ (*cf. Institutes* 2:1:9) which induce man to sensuality, sought to locate the residing-place of concupiscence within the flesh as a whole. In other words, ‘particularly’ in the sense of pertaining to a single thing.
- 178) Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
- 179) *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 57.
- 180) These two component parts of repentance consist of a ‘dying and rising that reveals that sanctification is the consequence of incorporation into our Substitute’, van Buren, *op. cit.*, p. 110.
- 181) *Institutes* 3:3:9.
- 182) All the Anabaptist statements, for example, regarding the Christian life ‘emphasize perfectionism’, Blake, W., *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals* Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981, p. 248. For a fuller account of the difference between Calvin and Anabaptists on perfectionism, see *Ibid.*, pp. 248-252.

- 183) Nor are we to think of the Church as being sinless. 'Insofar as sin remains, even though it be forgiven daily, it becomes necessary for Calvin to direct our attention once more to God's demand for righteousness and to our obedience,' Milner, *op. cit.*, p. 188. Hence the importance of repentance/sanctification for the restoration of the image of God and true order.
- 184) For an outline of Calvin's understanding of Christian freedom see Niesel, *op. cit.*, p. 140f.
- 185) Calvin differs from Augustine on this point. Augustine accepted that believers were bound by inordinate desires, but he would not describe them as 'sin'. He usually preferred to talk in terms of 'weakness'. Calvin, on the other hand, clearly viewed even these inordinate desires as 'sin'.
- 186) *Institutes* 3:3:10.
- 187) *Commentaries* James 1. 15.
- 188) *Institutes* 3:3:11.
- 189) *Sermons* Ephesians 5. 25-27.
- 190) Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
- 191) *Institutes* 3:3:11.
- 192) *Commentaries* Romans 6.6.
- 193) *Ibid.*, Romans 7.18.
- 194) *Ibid.*, Romans 7.22.
- 195) Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
- 196) 'The life of holiness, therefore, is a life of combat, but because we are one with the "Author of Holiness", our holiness may not be called into question by our failures, for we know that our conformation to our Lord, which is only begun here, will be finally perfected,' van Buren, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
- 197) Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
- 198) *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 199) *Institutes* 3:7:1.
- 200) *Commentaries* John 7.17.
- 201) Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
- 202) *Ibid.*, p. 256.
- 203) *Ibid.*, p. 257.
- 204) *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- 205) *Cf. Ibid.*, p. 218.

- 206) 'Calvin's interest in ethics is theological. That is to say, his concern is man's obedience to the revealed will of God.' Partee goes on to draw out an interesting comparison between Calvin's thought in that 'he sees the faithful man dealing with God and the world in the context of grace and obedience' and the philosopher 'who deals with God and the world in the context of reason and duty,' *op. cit.*, p. 66.
- 207) Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 219.
- 208) Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 219-220.
- 209) *Ibid.*, p. 221.
- 210) Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 223-225.
- 211) *Ibid.*, p. 226.
- 212) *Ibid.*, p. 229.
- 213) *Loc. cit.*
- 214) *Commentaries* Romans 12:2.
- 215) Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
- 216) Cf. *Sermons* Ephesians 4. 23-26.
- 217) Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
- 218) 'For Calvin the standard of ethical conduct is love', Partee, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
- 219) *Commentaries* Colossians 3. 14.
- 220) *Institutes* 2:3:6.
- 221) *Ibid.*, 2:3:8.
- 222) *Ibid.*, 2:5:15.
- 223) *Ibid.*, 2:3:8.
- 224) Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 95.
- 225) Calvin was well aware that the philosophers were serious in their attempts to discover the basis of the moral life. Cf. Partee, *op. cit.*, p. 75, 'Nevertheless, the philosophers who see man only in the context of nature, and do not know nature as redeemed in Christ, err in trying to locate the relation between God and man's conduct,' *ibid.*, p. 76.
- 226) *Commentaries* Psalms 19. 10.
- 227) *Ibid.*, 112. 1.
- 228) Page 231.
- 229) *Institutes* 1:5:9.

230) *Ibid.*, 3:2:36.

231) *Ibid.*, 3:2:33.

232) *Ibid.*, 3:6:4.

233) *Ibid.*, 1:15:7.

234) *Ibid.*, 2:3:13.

235) *Cf. Ibid.*, 2:3:6-14.

236) *Ibid.*, 2:3:14