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Calvin's only prayer: piety and pastoral care in early Reformed thought and practice

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Many of the sixteenth-century Reformers were pastors before being anything else. Despite this, it can be easy for us to miss the extent to which practices of piety dominated their personal and theological lives. In this article we will briefly detail the emphasis early Reformed authors placed on piety and pastoral care. We will identify this trait in the works of Ursinus and Bullinger, after which we will focus specifically on Calvin's treatise On the Christian Life.

REFORMERED TRADITION • JOHN CALVIN • HEINRICH BULLINGER • ZACHARIAS URSINUS • PIETY • PASTORAL CARE • CHRISTIAN LIVING

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Introduction

Throughout the sixteenth century, Switzerland endured several outbreaks of plague. It had already taken its toll on the Swiss Reformers: both Zwingli and Oecolampadius lost children to the sickness. Calvin spoke of how he 'was so affected both in mind and spirit, that I could do naught but lament and bewail'.[1] When the plague reached Geneva in October 1542, Calvin wrote the following to his friend Pierre Viret:

> The pestilence [rages] here with greater violence, and few who are at all affected by it escape its ravages. One of our colleagues was set to be apart for attendance upon the sick … If anything happens to him I fear I must take the risk upon myself, for, as you observe, because we are debtors to one another, we must not be wanting to those who, more than any others, stand in need of our ministry … [So] long as we are in the ministry, I do not see that any pretext will avail us, if, through fear of infection, we are found wanting in the discharge of our duty when there is most need of our assistance.[2]

According to contemporary reports, the civil authorities of Geneva had to compel Calvin *not* to minister to the sick and dying.[3] One is reminded of a comment made many centuries later by J. D. Benoit, regarding Calvin's *Institutes*: '[It] is not only the book of a theologian; it is the book of a man who even before he became a pastor was haunted by a concern for souls.'[4]

Anecdotes such as the one narrated above are remarkably common. It is reported, for example, that Zwingli perished at the Battle of Kappel (1531), not as a result of engaging the enemy in combat (for he did not carry a weapon) but because he was struck by a projectile while ministering to a fallen soldier.[5] The point here is not to prop up a naive Protestant hagiography. Rather, it is to underline the beating, pastoral heart of many sixteenth-century Reformers and the extent to which practices of piety dominated their personal and theological lives. Yet for a variety of reasons this 'beating heart' can easily be drowned out by other concerns. It might be assumed that the scholasticism of later centuries was also typical of sixteenth-century Protestantism, or that the stereotype of Calvinism as dour and heartlessly puritanical holds true for Calvin and his contemporaries. It would be a tragedy if we lost sight of the fact that the Reformers were almost always pastors before anything else, such that the fruit of their scholarly labours was often flavoured by that same concern for piety.[6]

The Reformed prioritising of piety and pastoral care

Over the last few decades a great number of texts have been published concerning the place of piety and pastoral care in early Reformed thought. For Calvin alone we could mention Manetsch's *Calvin's Company of Pastors* (2013), McKee's arrangement of Calvin's *Writings on Pastoral Piety* (2001), Battles' *The Piety of John Calvin* (1978) and Richard's *The Spirituality of John Calvin* (1974). For our purposes it must suffice to perform a general sketch of how many Reformed authors privileged these themes. To do so we will very briefly examine how Bullinger, Ursinus and Calvin perceived the theological task.

Consider Heinrich Bullinger (1504–75), minister of the Church of Zurich and successor to Zwingli. Although an exact model of his theological method is difficult to establish (he was not overly concerned with prolegomena), at one point in his *Third Decade* Bullinger discusses the role of doctrine:

> The greatest offence is that which doth arise of wicked doctrine, directly contrary to the true doctrine of the holy gospel. The next to this is that offence which doth arise of foolish and unseasonable doctrine; which, though it be derived out of the word of God, is notwithstanding either unaptly uttered, or unwisely applied. For the preacher may sin either by too much suffering or lenity; or else by too much sharpness and overthwart waywardness, so that the hearers being offended do wholly draw back from all hearing of the gospel.[7]

Bullinger constructs a distinction between 'wicked doctrine' (that which is contrary to creedal orthodoxy) and 'foolish doctrine'. Bullinger would regard the former as unbiblical, whereas the latter need not be. Doctrine can be foolish *and* be scriptural. Its folly derives from it being 'unseasonable'; disconnected from the ordinary congregation. It fails to assist God's people in their living out of the Christian faith. This is offensive, says Bullinger, because the spiritual life of the ordinary Christian is neglected, ignored or abused. If it is *bad* doctrine that leads a congregation wayward in their *religiosity*, then it is *good* doctrine that leads them forward in their *piety*.[8]

Also consider Zacharias Ursinus (1534–83), the co-author of the Heidelberg Catechism and a student of Melanchthon. Ursinus begins his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism by outlining the definitional features of a true and living Church.[9] In the commentary's opening sections he states that there are

'three marks by which the church is known: purity of doctrine – the proper use of the sacraments, and obedience to God in all parts of this doctrine, whether of faith or practice'.[10] This for Ursinus is the defining characteristic of church life: sound doctrine must be soundly practised. Orthodoxy must be combined with orthopraxy. Ursinus even describes formal theological training as pastorally directed, with at least two distinct applications. First, the systematic student of doctrine is herself blessed by a 'full and easy understanding of 'the whole system of theology'.[11] According to Ursinus, it is not only intellectually advantageous to pursue theological instruction – it is personally and spiritually beneficial when rightly pursued. Ursinus also assumes that theological students will be able to apply what they have learned *when* they become servants of God's people.[12] The emphasis is deliberate: Ursinus presents pastoral ministry as the rightful conclusion to a person's theological education. The latter is inextricable from the former.

We have already seen how Calvin, too, was concerned for pastoral realities. The *Institutes* contains no detailed methodological preface or introduction. What we find instead is more akin to the sage advice of a pastor-theologian. Here are Calvin's words to the reader, written 1 August 1559:

> I shall think my work has appeared at an opportune time as soon as I perceive that it has borne some richer fruit for the church of God than heretofore. *This is my only prayer* … [It] has been my purpose in this labour to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word, in order that they may be able both to have easy access to it and to advance in it without stumbling.[13]

In the wider Reformation tradition, *pietas* came to be generally associated with the cultivation of godly knowledge and practice,[14] but it was a category of special concern for Calvin. By his own admission, Calvin's 'only hope' was that his work would cultivate the piety of God's people. Indeed, his theology in the *Institutes* is self-defined as the pursuit of 'God knowledge', which in itself is gained through pious devotion.[15] In his words to the reader, Calvin even asks for the reader's prayers,[16] and in his *apologia* to King Francis I he writes that his only 'purpose was solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true Godliness'.[17]

Calvin on the principles of piety and pastoral care

Commenting on the text of 1 Timothy 4:7–8,[18] Calvin wrote:

> Godliness is the beginning, middle and end of Christian living. Where it is complete, there is nothing lacking … Thus the conclusion is that we should concentrate exclusively on godliness, for when once we have attained to it, God requires no more of us.[19]

We have already sketched how Bullinger, Ursinus and Calvin prioritised piety and pastoral care in their conceiving of the theological task. Now we will consider how Calvin handled this specifically. To wit: how should the believer 'concentrate exclusively' on godliness? We will consider Calvin's short treatise *On the Christian Life*. 'I am not unaware', Calvin writes, 'that in undertaking to describe the life of the Christian, I am entering on a large and extensive subject, one which … is sufficient to fill a large volume.'[20] He continues:

> Doctrine is not an affair of the tongue, but of the life; is not apprehended by the intellect and memory merely, like other branches of learning; but is received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds its seat and habitation in the inmost recesses of the heart … To doctrine in which our religion is contained we have given the first place, since by it our salvation commences; but it must be transfused into the breast, and pass into the conduct, and so transform us into itself, as not to prove unfruitful.[21]

Calvin's concern in this treatise is to describe how doctrine might be 'transfused into the breast'. To do so he characterises Christian spirituality in four distinct ways. First, he describes the believer's life as a life lived in union with Christ; second, as a life of self-denial; and third, as a life lived in answer to the vocational call of God.

In the *Institutes*, Calvin writes that if we remain separate from Christ, then 'nothing which he suffered and did for the salvation of the human race is of the least benefit to us' – therefore, in order 'to communicate to us the blessings which he received from the Father, he must become ours and dwell in us'.[22] The doctrine of the believer's union with Christ is a staple of Reformed teaching on Christian spirituality. The Heidelberg Catechism (XXX), for example, describes the believer as a 'partaker' of Jesus' anointing,[23] and the Westminster Confession

of Faith (1647) extols the believer's participation in Christ such that the saints have fellowship with Christ in his 'grace, sufferings, death, resurrection and glory'.[24] This spiritual union of the believer with Christ is reliant upon the Reformed understanding of Word and Spirit,[25] and is reflected even in Calvin's eucharistic theology.[26] In his treatise *On the Christian Life*, however, the doctrine of *Unio cum Christo* serves a distinct purpose:

> When mention is made of our union with God, let us remember that holiness must be the bond; not by the merit of holiness we come into communion with him (we ought rather first to cleave to him, in order that, pervaded with his holiness, we may follow whither he calls) but because it greatly concerns his glory not to have any fellowship with wickedness and impurity.[27]

The logic here is reminiscent of that of Paul in his letter to the Corinthians.[28] Calvin is content not simply to describe the believer's union with Christ but to observe its consequences. The Christian lives her life in holy obedience to the One with whom she has been united. Nevertheless, Calvin is keen to maintain a careful tension between perfectionism (on the one hand) and a kind of antinomianism (on the other). 'I insist not so strictly', he writes, 'on evangelical perfection', even if such an aspiration is worth pursuing.[29] If an impeccable record of obedience is required then 'all would be excluded from the Church'. Rather, Calvin is keen for the believer simply to fix their eyes on Christ and be 'sincerely devoted to God in the cultivation of holiness'.[30] Christian piety is found in that tension between an earnest desire for holiness and an acceptance of being created in futility (*simil iustus et peccator*), flowing from a spiritual union with Christ.

Calvin next presents Christian spirituality as consisting in self-denial. This is not at all exclusive to Calvin's thought or to Reformed theology in general. Luther's seventh mark of the Church, for example, is the cross of temptation and persecution.[31] Nevertheless, Calvin's presentation is threefold. First, Christian piety consists of self-denial in so far as it is also robustly theocentric: '[We] are not to seek our own, but the Lord's will, and act with a view to promote his glory … [To] be so trained and disposed as to consider that his whole life has to do with God.'[32] Warfield once quipped that Reformed thought is 'born of the sense of God' – that God fills the whole horizon of the Reformed theologian's thinking.[33] All Christian traditions are theocentric, of course, but Warfield meant to suggest that theocentricism is a particular emphasis of the Reformed

tradition. The first question of the Westminster Larger Catechism illustrates this well: 'Q: What is the chief end of man?' 'A: To glorify God and to enjoy him forever.'[34] Here in his treatise on the Christian life, Calvin is keen to apply this same point to the believer. To deny oneself means (at least in part) to observe the Lord's will with a view to promote his glory. Second, Calvin suggests that a believer's self-denial not only involves the glorification of God but love for neighbour: 'self-denial has respect partly to men and partly (more especially) to God … [for] Scripture enjoins us, in regard to our fellow men, to prefer them in honour to ourselves'.[35] Finally, the believer's life of self-denial consists in suffering for the gospel. This is said to function forensically, testing God's people and 'putting them to the proof'; it is said to improve our fellowship with Christ, and it also serves to provide an 'ocular demonstration of our weakness'.[36]

While discussing the Christian life of self-denial, Calvin writes the following:

> [In] seeking the convenience or tranquillity of the present life, Scripture calls us to resign ourselves, and all we have, to the disposal of the Lord, to give him up the affections of the heart, that he may tame and subdue them … [If] we believe that all prosperous and desirable success depends entirely on the blessing of God, and that when it is wanting all kinds of misery and calamity await us, it follows that we should not eagerly contend for riches and honours … [We] should always have respect to the Lord, that under his auspices we may be conducted to whatever lot he has provided for us.[37]

Here we are confronted by a central aspect of Calvin's account of Christian piety – namely, the significance of divine vocation. In the *Institutes* he writes how each individual 'has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post', and that from this we can be encouraged, for 'no task will be sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it'.[38] This component proved critical for early Reformed spiritual direction. Instead of encouraging a kind of passive fatalism, this charged the Reformed account of Christian piety with a profound sense of agency. In the words of Michael Walzer, the Calvinists came to see themselves 'as divine instruments and theirs was the politics of wreckers, architects and builders – hard at work upon the political world'.[39] As Hambrick-Stowe has observed, while Luther might have laid great emphasis on the doctrine of justification, the Reformed tradition has typically emphasised the experience of sanctification (hence Calvin's emphasis on the *tertium usis legis*).[40]

Calvin's description of one's divine calling tallies with this exact emphasis. Christian piety (according to Calvin) is not just a matter of prayer nor is it restricted to the cloister. The believer experiences the grace of God in real, tangible terms: the farmer at his plough and the scholar with her pen are interacting with the gracious call of God upon their lives. Their daily occupations are not *distractions* from God's work of grace; they *are* God's work of grace, to be handled with diligence and joy.

Conclusion

In the years after the Reformation, the Reformed vision of Christian piety continued to make an impact within the Reformed tradition. The following century saw Bayly's *The Practice of Piety* (1613), Hooker's *Brief Exposition of The Lord's Prayer* (1645), and Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor* (1656). We might also include Mason's *Spiritual Treasury* (1803) and Pink's treatise on sanctification. Even Schleiermacher (who in many respects diverged considerably from the Reformed consensus) established 'Piety' as a major theological category in *The Christian Faith* (1830). This impact is in no small part attributable to the clarity with which early Reformed thinkers articulated the importance of Christian piety. As stated above, practices of piety dominated their personal and theological lives. In the words of Calvin, 'doctrine is not an affair of the tongue, but of the life'.

Notes

1. John Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin – Compiled by the Original Manuscripts and Edited with Historical Notes by Dr. Jules Bonnet – Vol. 1*, ed. J. Bonnet, trans. D. Constable, Edinburgh: Thomas Constable and Co. [1528–45] 1855, p. 286.
2. *Letters of John Calvin*, p. 334.
3. *Letters of John Calvin*, p. 334.
4. J. D. Benoit, as quoted in I. J. Hesselink, 'Calvin's Theology', in D. K. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 77.
5. Raget Christoffel, *Zwingli; Or, The Rise of the Reformation in Switzerland – A Life of the Reformer, With Some Notices of his Time and Contemporaries*, trans. J. Cochran, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1858, pp. 454–455.
6. Cf. Dennis E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994, p. 104 – 'I find Calvin's "burning interest" to be precisely "Christian experience". Almost immediately in Book I of the *Institutes*, Calvin makes it clear that he wants nothing to do with

any purely intellectual knowledge of God; that, indeed, the promotion of piety is what concerns him most deeply' (emphasis original).

7. Heinrich Bullinger, *The Decades of Henry Bullinger: Minister of the Church of Zurich – Third Decade*, ed. T. Harding, trans. H. I. Harding, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [*c.* 1550] 1850), p. 316.
8. This brings Richard Muller to the conclusion that in this and elsewhere, Bullinger 'demonstrates an ability to draw on scholastic definition while maintaining the mood of an instruction in piety'. Cf. Richard Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2008, pp. 42–43.
9. A habit shared by his reformatory colleagues. Calvin, for example, listed reverent preaching, the hearing of the gospel and the obedience to the two sacraments as the marks of a true Church (*Institutes* IV.I.11), whereas Luther listed the presence of the word, the sacraments, church discipline, the presence of biblical ministers and church offices, prayer, public worship and the 'cross' of temptation and persecution. Cf. Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 146.
10. Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Willard, Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1985, p. 2.
11. Ursinus, *The Commentary*, pp. 9–10.
12. Ursinus, *The Commentary*, p. 10.
13. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion – Volume One*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press [1559], 2006, p. 4.
14. Charles Hambrick-Stowe, 'Piety', in D. K. McKim (ed.), *The Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology – The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, pp. 170–171.
15. Cf. John McNeill, 'Introduction', in J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion – Volume One*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press [1559], 2006, pp. li–lii: '[Calvin] was not, we may say, a theologian by profession, but a deeply religious man who possessed a genius for orderly thinking and obeyed the impulse to write out the implications of his faith. He calls his book not a *summa theologiae* but a *summa pietatis*. The secret of his mental energy lies in his piety; its product is his theology, which is his piety described at length.'
16. Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 5: 'Farewell, kindly reader, and if you benefit at all from my labours, help me with your prayers before God our Father.'
17. Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 9.
18. 'Have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives' tales. Train yourself in godliness, for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come' (1 Tim 4:7–8, NRSV).
19. J. Calvin as quoted in J. R. Beeke and S. B. Ferguson (eds), *Reformed Confessions Harmonized – With an Annotated Bibliography of Reformed Doctrinal Works*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999, p. 126.

20. John Calvin, *On the Christian Life*, trans. H. Beveridge, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library [*c*. 1540] 1845), p. 5.
21. Calvin, *On the Christian Life*, p. 7.
22. Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 537.
23. Heidelberg Catechism, Q 32.
24. Westminster Confession of Faith, Q 26:1–3.
25. Cf. J. T. Billings, 'United to God through Christ: Assessing Calvin on the Question of Deification', *Harvard Theological Review* 98(3) (2005), and Tamburello, *Union with Christ*.
26. Cf. John Calvin, 'Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of our Lord and Only Saviour Jesus Christ', in J. K. S. Reid (ed.), *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, [1541] 2006.
27. Calvin, *On the Christian Life*, p. 6.
28. 'Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!' (1 Cor. 6:15, NRSV).
29. Calvin, *On the Christian Life*, p. 7.
30. Calvin, *On the Christian Life*, p. 7.
31. Cameron, *The European Reformation*, p. 146.
32. Calvin, *On the Christian Life*, p. 10.
33. Benjamin Warfield, *Calvin as a Theologian and Calvinism Today*, London: Sovereign Grace Union, 1951, p. 17.
34. Westminster Confession of Faith, Q 1.
35. Calvin, *On the Christian Life*, p. 11. The Reformer, however, issues the following caveat: 'Those duties, however, are not fulfilled by the mere discharge of them, though none be omitted, unless it is done from a pure feeling of love. For it may happen that one may perform every one of these offices, in so far as the external act is concerned, and be far from performing them aright. For you see some who would be thought very liberal, and yet accompany everything they give with insult … [From] Christians something more is required than to carry cheerfulness in their looks' (p. 13).
36. Calvin, *On the Christian Life*, p. 17.
37. Calvin, *On the Christian Life*, p. 14.
38. Calvin, *Institutes*, pp. 724–725.
39. Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 3.
40. Hambrick-Stowe, *Piety*, p. 171.