

SIN AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO 'TRUE GODLINESS' IN JOHN CALVIN'S INSTITUTES

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This article investigates the understanding of the life of 'true godliness' in Calvin's Institutes. Calvin saw the 'image of God' as perfectly present within humanity at creation as a gracious gift of God. However as a result of humanity's fall into sin 'original sin,' as an inherited depravity that affects and infects all of humanity, renders every person guilty of sin and subject to the punishment of God. Given that all of humanity participates in and is guilty of original sin, the question arises whether Christ's humanity is also affected by this universal problem. Calvin sees Christ's humanity as an exception to the general rule and attributes the uniqueness of Christ's holy human nature to the sanctifying work of the Spirit. Since the corruption of original sin remains in believers an internal battle between the old and new life continues throughout life. Though union with God through Christ does bring about a true godliness within the believer, the righteousness of Christ is the origin and cause of this and not the effort or will of the believer. Neither Christ's atonement nor the sanctifying work of the Spirit are sufficient to complete the task of restoring the image of God in the believer in this life and therefore it is left to death itself to bring that task to completion. Nonetheless the believer may exhibit 'true godliness' defined as 'love for God and neighbour.'

Introduction

John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*¹ has had a profound and lasting effect upon Christian theology. The Reformer Calvin lived and wrote during a critical time in the history of the Church. The 1536 edition of this text was initially a strong polemic

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Edited by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), hereinafter referred to simply as *Institutes*. Whilst it is recognised that the modern academic conventions require gender inclusivity, citations from this text will retain their gender exclusive language.

written in support of a persecuted Protestant church. Through various revisions and updates up until its final form in 1559 it became a document designed for catechetical instruction. 'Thus Calvin's book, at first mainly an apologetic treatise...was transformed by skillful expansion into a compendium of scriptural doctrine for student use.'² In Calvin's own words, 'It has been my purpose in this labour to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word.'³ Of particular significance for this essay is Calvin's other stated purpose referred to in the *Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France*; 'My purpose was solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be *shaped to true godliness*.'⁴ The English word 'godliness' here is the translation of the Latin *pietas*, which appears frequently throughout the *Institutes*. It is also used most frequently to translate the Greek *eusebeia* in the Vulgate (e.g. Acts 3:12, 2 Peter 1:3). In combining these two stated purposes together it may be suggested, therefore, that the overarching purpose of Calvin's *Institutes* is for catechetical instruction in the life of true godliness.

With any investigation into the life of 'true godliness' the problem of sin will need to be addressed at some point. Subsequently, the purpose of this essay is to investigate Calvin's understanding of the life of 'true godliness' and, more specifically, how the problem of sin is stated, addressed, and related to this aim. Given the constraints of this essay the source of Calvin's understanding of this issue will be limited to the *Institutes* alone. Whilst this means that this is not a comprehensive study of Calvin's theology with regard to this particular subject matter it is noted that 'his other writings gravitate and cluster about this work' and therefore it will provide an effective insight into his methodology and task.⁵

The main text of the *Institutes* begins with the words, 'Nearly all the wisdom we possess...consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.'⁶ This theme of *duplex cognitio*⁷ pervades the *Institutes*, as demonstrated by the titles of its first two books; *The*

² John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 126.

³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 9.

⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4. Emphasis added.

⁵ McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, 128.

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.1, see also 1.15.1, 2.1.1.

⁷ Ford Lewis Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, ed. Robert Benedetto (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 149, 245-46.

Knowledge of God the Creator and *The Knowledge of God the Redeemer*. It is significant that the condition of humanity prior to the Fall and unaffected by sin is addressed within Book I in the context of Calvin's discussion outlining the *Knowledge of God*.⁸ Similarly, the condition of humanity after the Fall is dealt with, in its most comprehensive form, in the earliest part of Book II while the absolute sovereignty of God is fresh in the reader's mind.⁹ In the light of the knowledge of humanity's sinfulness the redeeming work of Christ is then explained. 'Sin is seen in the light of the Gospel.'¹⁰

For Calvin, 'man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinise himself.'¹¹ It is clear from the language of 'descending' and 'scrutinising' employed here that the comparison between the knowledge of 'God' and 'self' will reveal a dramatic difference between the two. This is, in essence, the comparison between the holiness and sovereignty of God and the totally destructive effects of sin upon humanity. Ford Lewis Battles suggests that it is this 'intolerable contrast between God's absolute perfection and man's fallenness that initiated Calvin's religious quest.'¹²

The contrast between God's perfection and humanity's sinfulness is an example of the antithetical structure of the *Institutes*. Donald McKim suggests that this method is 'rooted in the Pauline contrast between truth and falsehood.'¹³ The antithetical structure continually contrasts theological polarities, for example, sin and holiness, or the perfection of the pre-Fall condition of humanity and the depths to which it has fallen into sinfulness. It appears both broadly and within individual sections of the text itself.¹⁴ Given the suggestion that Calvin's purpose was for catechetical instruction for the life of true godliness this methodology has been employed to aid Christians to recognise the high expectations of true godliness whilst

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.

⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1 - 2.6.

¹⁰ T. A. Noble, 'The Doctrine of Original Sin in the Evangelical Reformers,' in *European Explorations in Christian Holiness*, ed. Dwight Swanson (Manchester: Nazarene Theological College, 2000), 82.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.2.

¹² Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, 294.

¹³ Donald K. McKim and Ford Lewis Battles, 'The Calvinian Works of Ford Lewis Battles,' in *Interpreting John Calvin*, ed. Robert Benedetto (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 36.

¹⁴ For a detailed outline of this structure see Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, 347-50.

at the same time reveal that, apart from Christ and relying upon their own capabilities, they are completely unable to attain this goal.

Humanity Prior to the Fall

Calvin recognises that humanity was created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), and suggests that the 'proper seat of his image is in the soul.' Furthermore he suggests that this image is a 'spiritual' image.¹⁵ By 'soul' Calvin means humanity's 'immortal yet created essence, which is his nobler part.'¹⁶ In following Plato,¹⁷ Calvin clearly distinguishes the 'body' from the 'soul', referring to the body as the 'prison house' of the soul, yet at the same time he cites 2 Corinthians 7:1 as evidence that sin resides in, and thus needs to be cleansed from, both soul and body.¹⁸

Calvin relies heavily upon Augustine for much of his theology and turns to him, and other Church Fathers, at many points as an authoritative source.¹⁹ Larry Sharp suggests that 'outside the Bible Augustine was Calvin's greatest source.'²⁰ However, at this particular point the two part company. Augustine's suggestion that the soul is a reflection of the Trinity is 'by no means sound' according to Calvin.²¹ Rather, for Calvin, the soul is comprised of the 'mind, by which to distinguish good from evil, right from wrong; and, with the light of reason as guide, to distinguish what should be followed from what should be avoided.' Joined to the mind is the 'will, under whose control is choice'.²² In this way, Calvin paints a vivid picture of the perfection of humanity in its pre-Fall state:

Man in his first condition excelled in these pre-eminent endowments, so that his reason, understanding, prudence, and judgement not only sufficed for the direction of his earthly life, but by them men mounted up even to God and eternal bliss...In this integrity man by free will had the power, if he so willed, to attain eternal life.²³

¹⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.3.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.2.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.6.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.2.

¹⁹ Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 3.

²⁰ Larry D. Sharp, 'The Doctrines of Grace in Calvin and Augustine,' *The Evangelical Quarterly* 52:2 (1980): 84.

²¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.4.

²² Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.8.

²³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.8.

Thus for Calvin the 'image of God' was perfectly present within humanity at creation and was a gracious gift of God. Similarly, humanity was perfectly capable of utilising the gifts and abilities provided to it by God, including free will, to live in the presence of God and to attain to eternal life by its own choice. This high understanding of the original condition of humanity contrasts starkly with Calvin's understanding of the condition of humanity after the Fall.

Humanity after the Fall

From the outset of Book II Calvin echoes again both the famous dictum of the ancient Greeks; 'Know thyself'²⁴ and the commencement to Book I of the *Institutes*; 'With good reason the ancient proverb strongly recommended knowledge of self to man.' Calvin's main concern for his readers at this point is that if the true state of the Christian is not revealed to them then they risk being 'miserably deceive[d]' and may even 'blind' themselves.²⁵ 'Christian self-knowledge has another aim and result, to become aware of sin and, therefore, to be despoiled of all moral confidence in order to find salvation outside oneself.'²⁶ For Calvin, this salvation exists only in Christ and is available only by grace and his outline of the condition of humanity after the fall is designed to cause his readers to come to this conclusion.

The true knowledge of sin should call to mind 'our miserable condition after Adam's fall; the awareness of which, when all our boasting and self-assurance are laid low, should truly humble us and overwhelm us with shame.'²⁷ As Tom Noble suggests 'only when we see our truly miserable condition can we truly approach the Lord with genuine humility and faith.'²⁸

Calvin is clear as to the effects of the fall on all of humanity.

After the heavenly image was obliterated in him, he was not the only one to suffer this punishment - that in place of wisdom, virtue, holiness,

²⁴ T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought* (London: Continuum, 1995), 50.

²⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.1.

²⁶ Parker, *Calvin*, 51.

²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.1.

²⁸ Noble, 'Sin in the Reformers,' 82.

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.²⁹

This is the essence of what is known as 'original sin'. He defines this term in the following way:

Original sin, therefore, seems to be a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which first makes us liable to God's wrath, then also brings forth in us those works which Scripture calls 'works of the flesh' [Gal 5:19]. And this is properly what Paul often calls sin.³⁰

Thus original sin is a depravity that affects and infects all of humanity. It renders every person guilty of sin and subject to the punishment of God. It also produces acts of sin since the nature is totally affected therefore all acts of the depraved nature are sinful as well. 'The testimony of Scripture obliges us to acknowledge that our reason is disabled, and that our heart is so evil that we cannot do anything else but sin.'³¹

Calvin follows Augustine and uses the term *concupiscentia* to describe original sin; suggesting it is 'an appropriate word.' However, Calvin adds the following qualification; 'whatever is in man, from the understanding to the will, from the soul even to the flesh, has been defiled and crammed with this concupiscence...the whole man is of himself nothing but concupiscence.'³² This is a significant development of Augustine's doctrine. Sharp summarises Augustine's teaching at this point in the following way:

God in his mercy takes the good that is in us and makes it better, thus healing our sinful infirmities and rewarding us with eternal life. He takes what righteousness we already have and increases it by his healing grace and thereby we are saved.³³

It is clear that Calvin would consider such an occurrence to be impossible given that the effects of sin are so complete and

²⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.5.

³⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.8.

³¹ François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought* trans. Philip Mairet (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1963), 185.

³² Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.8.

³³ Sharp, 'The Doctrines of Grace in Calvin and Augustine,' 88.

devastating that no righteousness remains at all. As a result Calvin has taken Augustine's teaching at this point and developed it to its logical conclusion.

The meaning of *concupiscentia* should not be limited to only sexual sin or lustful desires. 'Concupiscence is what brings forth evil desire itself.'³⁴ In Calvin's thought it is associated with the Pauline word *sarx* (flesh – e.g. in Romans 8), and so 'our destruction, therefore, comes from the guilt of our flesh.'³⁵

Calvin emphasises that whilst original sin is universal, acts of sin still remain 'voluntary.' That is, each individual is guilty because of his or her own acts of sin, which continues to be a 'necessity' because of inherited depravity. 'I therefore deny that sin ought less to be reckoned as sin merely because it is necessary. I deny conversely... that because sin is voluntary it is avoidable.'³⁶ '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; by the prompting of his own lust, not by compulsion from without.'³⁷ Stated differently, acts of sin voluntarily exist as a result of a person's will, but since that will is totally depraved as a result of the effects of original sin these acts are, by necessity, sinful. Importantly, this means that 'man's ruin is to be ascribed to man alone'. This is significant so that 'we may not accuse God himself' and thus make God the author of sin.³⁸

How Does the 'First Sin' Become 'Original Sin'?

Original sin refers to this general principle, but also more specifically to the original act of sin as described in Genesis 3. Calvin, again following Augustine, accepts that 'pride was the beginning of all evils', but seeks a 'fuller definition' of this. Noting that the first humans were led astray and became disobedient to God, Calvin therefore asserts that 'unfaithfulness...was the root of the Fall.'³⁹

³⁴ Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1959), 54.

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.10.

³⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.5.1.

³⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.3.5. See also David L. Smith, *With Willful Intent: A Theology of Sin* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1994), 76-77.

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.10.

³⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.4.

For Calvin, this first act of sin affected and infected all of humanity. In the tradition of Augustine, Calvin writes against Pelagianism which suggests that sin is transmitted by 'imitation, not propagation'. For Calvin, original sin is transmitted from parent to child by procreation; 'we are corrupted not by derived wickedness, but...we bear inborn defect from our mother's womb. To deny this was the height of shamelessness.' It is clear that there is no person immune from this 'inherited corruption'; 'Therefore, all of us, who have descended from impure seed are born infected with the contagion of sin. In fact, before we saw the light of this life we were soiled and spotted in God's sight.'⁴⁰

Calvin also cites Romans 5:12 to support his understanding of original sin. No one is immune from its effects or removed from the guilty charge associated with it.

Even infants themselves, while they carry their condemnation along with them from the mother's womb, are guilty not of another's fault but of their own. For, even though the fruits of their iniquity have not yet come forth, they have the seed enclosed within them. Indeed, their whole nature is a seed of sin; hence it can be only hateful and abhorrent to God.⁴¹

Therefore everyone is guilty, even children, and this from before they were even born.

Calvin's understanding of sin may be summarised in the following way. Sin appeared in its first instance as a direct result of the free will of humanity, and this 'not from creation but from corruption of nature' brought about by 'rebellion.'⁴² At the heart of this first act of sin was unfaithfulness to God. Since all of humanity ultimately owes its procreation from these now sinful parents they too shared in the effects as well as the guilt of this sin. The effects of sin are totally devastating. There is not one person unaffected by it, and not one part of the human person that remains without this corruption. So too, from the now corrupt and depraved nature flow only sinful and evil actions, even those which appear to be good. This is *concupiscentia*; the evil desires of the corrupt 'flesh' bringing forth sinful acts. As a result sin is now 'an active and dominating

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.5.

⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.8.

⁴² Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.5.1.

force within man'⁴³ which humanity is unable, by its own capabilities and strength, to overcome.

Through this knowledge of 'self' humanity now sees its true and ugly condition in the light of the holiness of God. Sinners are forced to look outside of themselves for redemption from their dire situation. So how is this situation overcome? How is the person touched by a 'zeal for religion' to be 'shaped by true godliness (*pietas*)'?⁴⁴ It is to this that our attention now turns.

***Pietas* in Christ Alone**

Calvin asserts strongly that the only hope for humanity is found in Christ alone. This is the reason he goes to such lengths to emphasise the destructive nature of sin within humanity. 'Let the first step toward godliness (*pietas*) be to recognise that God is our Father to watch over us, govern and nourish us, until he gathers us unto the eternal inheritance of his Kingdom...God is comprehended in Christ alone.'⁴⁵ Christ achieves this as 'Mediator' between God and humanity. He is one at the same time truly God and truly human and therefore able to both overcome death and provide life.⁴⁶ The important question that relates to this particular discussion is, given that all of humanity participates in and is guilty of original sin, is Christ's humanity also affected by this universal problem? If so, how and to what extent? If not, then how did he address the problem of sin? Calvin recognises this dilemma; 'for he could not be exempted from the common rule, which includes under sin all of Adam's offspring without exception.'⁴⁷

Calvin's answer to this very difficult problem suggests that Christ in fact does become an exception to this rule. Citing Romans 8:3-4 as supporting evidence, Calvin suggests that Paul skillfully distinguishes 'Christ from the common lot that he is true man but without fault and corruption.'⁴⁸ Importantly, he distances himself from his Catholic counterparts, as well as the results of a narrow definition of *concupiscentia* as sexual sin, by avoiding the suggestion that Christ was somehow different because of his conception by the

⁴³ Parker, *Calvin*, 52.

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 9.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.6.4.

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.8.7-13; 2.8 - 2.9.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.4.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.4.

Holy Spirit. Rather, Calvin attributes the uniqueness of Christ's holy human nature to the sanctifying work of the Spirit.

For we make Christ free of all stain not just because he was begotten of his mother without copulation with man, but because he was sanctified by the Spirit that the generation might be pure and undefiled as would have been true before Adam's fall.⁴⁹

So, Christ's nature is pure and holy, yet it is still a 'true human nature.' As a result of the sanctification of the Spirit 'no infection came to Christ,' and he 'was exempted from common corruption.' Thus for Calvin, Christ's nature was not sinful but rather sanctified, and as a result his human nature was that of humanity in its pre-Fall condition.

A number of questions arise at this point which remain outside the scope of this essay, but are worthy of note. Firstly, in this model at what point is Christ 'sanctified'? Is Christ's human nature at any point 'sinful'? If not, then why does it need 'sanctifying'? If so, then how is the problem raised earlier actually addressed? Secondly, how would Calvin thus interpret passages such as 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Hebrews 2:17 which suggest that he was made 'to be sin' and 'like his brothers and sisters in every respect' (NRSV) in the light of this understanding of his human nature? Finally, what is the relationship, for Calvin, between the Spirit and Christ in the atonement, given that it is the Spirit who addresses this problem of the sinful human nature at this particular point?

The life of true godliness commences through faith in Christ. '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.' In the moment of conversion the righteousness of Christ is imputed freely to the sinner, 'in order that the sinner, freed from the tyranny of Satan, the yoke of sin, and the miserable bondage of vices, may cross over into the Kingdom of God.'⁵⁰ This occurs so that the Christian may live a life of true godliness, the chief purpose of which is to 'render to God his right and honour, of which he is impiously defrauded when we do not intend to subject ourselves to his control.'⁵¹

Significant, however, is the way that Calvin understands how sin is treated in conversion, as this directly relates to true godliness. In

⁴⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.4.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.1.

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.7.

the believer 'sin ceases only to reign; it does not also cease to dwell in them...some vestiges remain; not to rule over them, but to humble them by the consciousness of their own weakness.'⁵² Therefore it remains that, for the rest of the believer's life, the depraved but defeated nature must continue to be mortified, whilst the new regenerate life in Christ is vivified. 'We continue to be sinners even while we are being progressively sanctified.'⁵³ This is the ongoing work of sanctification by the Spirit in the believer.

Mortification and Vivification

Since sin seeks to please the self, and this stems from unfaithfulness to God, the life of true godliness will require ongoing self-denial. 'Self-denial for Calvin means the mortification of our natural concupiscence, and the denial of all the motions and impulses that arise from the 'flesh.'⁵⁴ It is the 'self-centred principle which Paul called the 'flesh' (Romans 7:15ff.)'.⁵⁵ This, not the devil, becomes the greatest enemy of the believer. 'It is a very hard and difficult thing to put off ourselves and to depart from our inborn disposition...the first step toward obeying this law is to deny our own nature.'⁵⁶ Therefore the old self needs to be mortified and the new life vivified.

Restoration of the 'image of God' in the believer involves this two-fold process of 'mortification' and 'vivification.' Mortification, which includes self-denial as described above;

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, cleanses them of guilt, consecrates them to himself as temples renewing all their minds to true purity that they may practice repentance throughout their lives and know that this warfare will end only at death.⁵⁷

Vivification, on the other hand, is the bringing forth of the image of God in the believer. It is 'the desire to live in a holy and devoted manner, a desire arising from rebirth.'⁵⁸ Since the corruption of

⁵² Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.11.

⁵³ Wendel, *Calvin*, 243.

⁵⁴ Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 57.

⁵⁵ Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988), 189.

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.8.

⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.8.

⁵⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.3.

original sin remains, even though the guilt has been taken away, this internal battle between the old and new life continues throughout life. The prime example of the Christian life, therefore, for Calvin was found in Romans 7.⁵⁹ Remarkably, this has led to one writer suggesting that 'sinners are not divided against themselves, but believers are.'⁶⁰

Is True Godliness Possible?

Sharp has suggested that

For Calvin, justification is God's gift of the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. Through this gift of credited or reckoned righteousness we have a new standing before God, namely the same standing or position as that of Christ. This is not at all an infused righteousness, but an extraneous righteousness accomplished by Christ and totally outside ourselves.⁶¹

However, this does not appear to be an entirely correct summation. Whilst Calvin does speak of the 'free *imputation* of righteousness',⁶² he also speaks of the believer's union with God and reminds the reader that 'holiness must be its bond; not because we come into communion with him by virtue of our holiness! Rather, we ought first to cleave unto him so that, *infused with his holiness*, we may follow whither he calls'.⁶³ Furthermore, Calvin even suggests that godliness 'joins us in true holiness with God when we are separated from the iniquities of the world. When these things are joined together by an inseparable bond, they bring about *complete perfection*.'⁶⁴ This suggests that, for Calvin, union with God through Christ did bring about a true godliness within the believer, however the strong emphasis at all times is upon the righteousness of Christ and not the effort or will of the believer as the origin and cause of this.

⁵⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.11.

⁶⁰ David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 111.

⁶¹ Sharp, 'The Doctrines of Grace in Calvin and Augustine,' 88.

⁶² Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.1. Emphasis added.

⁶³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.6.2. Emphasis added.

⁶⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.7.3. Emphasis added.

Critique of Calvin's Position

There are a number of observations that arise from Calvin's understanding of sin and its relationship to the life of true godliness. Firstly, it has been demonstrated that Christ avoided a depraved human nature as, at some point, he was sanctified by the Spirit. The assumption must be that his nature was sanctified completely from all traces of sin and all of its effects. However, in the life of the believer it is only guilt that is taken away; sin and its effects remain and are mortified throughout the lifetime of the believer. This seems to suggest that Christ did in fact have a different nature from the rest of humanity and this therefore raises questions regarding the efficacy of the atonement. Similarly, there is a stark difference between the sanctification of Christ and the sanctification of the believer. This raises exegetical questions, particularly with regard to passages such as John 17:17-19 which suggest that the sanctification of Christ is that which is provided for the believer.

Secondly, it has been demonstrated that, for Calvin, the guilt of sin is effectively dealt with by the righteousness of Christ, but sin itself remains within believers throughout their lives. The dual process of mortification and vivification are suggested as the means by which the Spirit restores in the believer the image of God, but still the final perfection of this process remains until death. In this regard Calvin again cites Augustine for authority. 'Sin is dead in that guilt which it held us; and until it be cured by the *perfection of burial*.'⁶⁵ This seems to suggest a dangerous conclusion. Namely, that Christ's atonement and the sanctifying work of the Spirit have achieved a lot (for example removing guilt and initiating new life) but both are insufficient to complete the task of restoring the image of God in the believer and therefore it is left to death itself in order to bring that task to completion. This seems to be a major flaw in Calvin's methodology and understanding of the Christian life and actually gives credit to death where it is not due.

Having suggested these difficulties a major point of agreement also needs to be highlighted. It has been suggested that Calvin's purpose in writing the *Institutes* was for catechetical instruction in the life of true godliness. For Calvin, the sum of the life of true godliness is subsumed under the banner of love for God and neighbour.

⁶⁵ Augustine cited in Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.13. Emphasis added.

Now the perfection of that holiness comes under the two headings... 'That we should love the Lord God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength', 'and our neighbour as ourselves'. First, indeed, our soul should be entirely filled with the love of God. From this will flow directly the love of neighbour... In other words here is true piety, from which love is derived.⁶⁶

It would be difficult to find any Christian theologian who would disagree with Calvin at this significant point.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of this essay, Calvin's understanding of sin, its effects upon humanity, and how God through Christ and the Spirit has dealt with this problem have been discussed. It has been shown that Calvin discusses sin in the light of the perfection of God, by means of the antithetical structure of the *Institutes*. The effects of sin upon humanity have led to total corruption of the human nature. No one is devoid of this problem. However, through Christ, God has dealt with the problem and provided a means by which the image of God may be restored in the believer. Christ's human nature was not sinless, but rather sanctified and therefore he was not corrupted by sin, unlike the rest of humanity. Through the gift of Christ's righteousness believers may be united with Christ through the inseparable bond of holiness. This eliminates the guilt of sin, and by the sanctifying work of the Spirit the old corrupted nature is gradually mortified and the new life vivified in the believer. Because of the initiative of God, sin and its effects have been dealt with, the believer is enabled, through Christ and by the Spirit, to live a life of true godliness, which can be summed up in the phrase 'love for God and neighbour.'

⁶⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.51.