John Calvin, Practical Theologian: The Reformer’s Spirituality

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**Introduction**

In the sixteenth century the terms *piety* and *spirituality* were not synonyms, and piety was the preferred term among Protestants because they associated spirituality with Roman Catholic mysticism, as exemplified in Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), Teresa of Avila (1515–82), John of the Cross (1542–91), and others. *Pietas* signified worship primarily, and its secondary meaning was reverence toward parents and other authorities and charity toward needy people. Service toward one’s neighbor was deemed a proper expression of piety.

*Spirituality* denoted virtues, and it included preaching, instructing, and praying. To be spiritual was the opposite of being carnal, and spiritual people, in the view of medieval Catholicism, were those who exceeded the ordinary requirements of religion to rise above earthly affections in order to obtain purity by following the example of Christ. Much of the practice of spirituality so construed occurred in monasteries, so laymen had little to do with it. Even parish priests experienced only occasional contact with it. The Protestant Reformers challenged this forcefully by postulating a theology without the sacred/secular, clergy/laity dichotomy that dominated medieval religion. The theology of the Reformers produced a fundamentally different understanding of spirituality, but suspicion toward Roman Catholic practice led Protestants to use terms such as *piety, devotion, or holiness* rather than spirituality. The Reformers maintained that God’s grace transforms lives and makes believers love God and their neighbors. Sound doctrine then leads to holy living.

French authors of the seventeenth century made the term spirituality popular in religious literature, and many stressed a radical distinction between material and spiritual life, that is, between body and soul. This encouraged perpetuation of the medieval idea that people could best cultivate the health of their souls by withdrawing from society into communities maintained by religious orders of monks or nuns. To Protestants that was unacceptable, since their doctrine of the priesthood of all believers implied a denial of secularity as such and entailed bringing all aspects of life into the context of holiness or spirituality. The Reformers abandoned the medieval conception of the Christian life as an ascetic retreat from the world, and they emphasized living by God’s Word in all circumstances under all conditions. As John Calvin (1509–64) said, “the whole life of Christians ought to be a sort of practice of godliness.” It is obvious, medieval and Reformation conceptions of spirituality were conflicting and contradictory.

**Spirituality and the Holy Spirit**

In an essay entitled “John Calvin, the Theologian,” Princeton scholar Benjamin B. Warfield (1851–1921) asserted:

> It is probable that Calvin’s greatest contribution to theological science lies in the rich development . . . which he was the first to give—to the doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit. . . . The *Institutes* is . . . just a treatise on the work of God the Holy Spirit in making God savingly known to sinful man, and bringing sinful man into holy communion with God.4

The honor and glory of God were Calvin’s foremost concerns, and he believed Christians must pursue true godliness, which “consists of a pure . . . zeal which loves God as a real Father and looks up to him as a real Lord; it embraces his righteousness and detests offending him more than it does dying.”5 When believers regard God in this way, they honor and glorify him.

Calvin understood the human condition well, so he realized that no person, however devout, could love God adequately. God, however, works in his elect in two ways; within, through his Spirit; without, through his Word. By his Spirit illuminating their minds and forming their hearts to the love and cultivation of righteousness, he makes them a new creation. By his Word, he arouses them to desire, to seek after, and to attain that same renewal.6
To his fellow believers Calvin wrote, “The increase, as well as the commencement of everything good in us, comes from the Holy Spirit.” Again, Calvin wrote, “God gives us the Spirit as our teacher in prayer, to tell us what is right and [to] temper our emotions.”

Throughout his writings Calvin extolled the work of the Holy Spirit, whom he identified as both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ, and urged Christians not to separate the Word from the Spirit, as some radicals were then doing. Spirituality requires the objective truth of divine revelation, for that is the basis for subjective life and its development. The Holy Spirit leads believers to embrace sound doctrine, and that doctrine must regulate all of life. Book III of the Institutes of the Christian Religion reminds readers that books I and II deal with the knowledge of God objectively, as Creator and Redeemer, while conferring the subjective knowledge of God is the work of the Holy Spirit. While philosophers acclaim human reason as the supreme guide for life, Christians must subject reason to revealed truth, which requires reason to “yield, retire, give place to the Holy Spirit [and] subject itself to his direction.”

Calvin maintained that true holiness requires separation from sinful practices by living “under the government of his [God’s] Holy Spirit,” who is “the fountain of all holiness, all righteousness, and, in short, all perfection.” Therefore, “until our minds become intent upon the Spirit, Christ, so to speak, lies idle because we coldly contemplate him as outside ourselves—indeed, far from us.” The union of believers with Christ is due to the work of the Holy Spirit, who illuminates the Word and grants faith. Union with Christ then leads to assurance of salvation and confidence in God.

Appreciation for the Word of God requires the action of God’s Spirit to regenerate and convince people to believe Scripture. Although Scripture is inherently true and self-authenticating, the witness of the Holy Spirit is necessary before people will concur with its teachings. No one will invest faith in the Word without the Spirit’s witness persuading him. God’s special revelation is the basis for true piety, for it is the authority for all of life, for doctrine and practice, but only the Spirit of God can convince people this is so. The Spirit provides the “efficacious confirmation of the Word.” The Spirit does not add to the revelation of the Bible but speaks by means of the written Word and enables readers to receive its message as authentic. There could be no spiritual life without regeneration, which is the work of God the Holy Spirit. Those whom the Spirit regenerates exercise saving faith in Christ, because of God’s gift through his Spirit, who is “not only the initiator of faith, but [the one who] increases it by degrees until by it he leads us [the elect] to the kingdom of heaven.”

Spirituality and the Christian Life

John Calvin referred to his Institutes of the Christian Religion not as a summa theologae, but as a summa pietas, for he was concerned to promote both sound doctrine and sincere piety. For the Reformer of Geneva theology was not an academic pursuit for scholars alone but an undertaking essential for the wellbeing of all believers. Calvin therefore united doctrine and spirituality and had no place for an uninformed piety that does not seek to know God through faithful study of his Word. Theology and spirituality belong together. It is proper to distinguish between them; it is wrong to separate them. The Christian life begins at regeneration, when the Holy Spirit imparts his transforming power, and it continues as the Spirit directs believers to the means of grace by which they seek holiness as long as they live. Spirituality then encompasses the entire experience of Christians, as they conduct their pilgrimage to the City of God.

While they remain on earth, the people of God must remember their primary citizenship is in the kingdom of heaven, to which they owe ultimate loyalty. Like the Apostle Paul (Phil. 1:21–26), believers will long for eternal repose with Christ, but they must accept the duties of Christian living upon earth until God calls them to their heavenly home. Calvin called for careful balance when Christians consider life on earth in the light of eternity, and he urged them to meditate on eternity as a beneficial way to perceive the present life properly. As he stated the matter, Let believers accustom themselves to a contempt for the present life that engenders no hatred for it or ingratitude against God. . . . We must . . . become so disposed that we count it [earthly life] among those gifts of divine generosity which are not at all to be rejected.

To maintain contempt for the world means to learn to pass through this world as though it is a foreign country, treating all earthly things lightly and declining to . . . set our hearts upon them. . . . If we . . . are strangers in the world, we will use the things of this world as if they belong to someone else—that is, as things that are left to us for a single day.
Calvin did not advise disgust with God’s creation but rather urged Christians to admire the divine handiwork and to enjoy its wholesome benefits, for God made such things attractive precisely so humans would enjoy them.20 The Reformer held, however, that believers are moving away from creation as it is now, stained with sin, so he did not promote vigorous efforts to improve society, except in those areas such as Geneva, in which Christians had control.21

As John Calvin understood it, the Christian life is like a term of military service in a hostile land. When the pressures of that experience tempt believers to lose heart, they should regard heaven as their “homeland” and earth as a “place of exile.” They must hate the present life to the degree that it subjects them to temptation and sin.22 Christians should bear in mind that their trials draw them away from concern with the present world and excite their desire for immortality, even though the evil remaining within them still inclines them toward earthly concerns. They must focus on eternity while they endure real pain, sorrow, and a variety of problems. Assurance that God controls all things should cheer them in the midst of their trials. In particular, they should reflect upon Christ’s triumph over sin and death and remember he has made them participants in his victory.23

In order to succeed in the Christian life, believers require clear instruction from God’s Word, and Calvin wrote extensively to meet that need. Although he was a profound scholar, the Reformer had the heart of a pastor who fervently desired that professing Christians would enjoy all the fruits of the Holy Spirit to empower them to attain genuine spirituality. Calvin defined spirituality or piety as “reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces.”24 That is, piety is an attitude produced by reflection on the gifts of God. People who know God savingly will cherish him and his Word and seek to please him according to biblical precepts, for the Word of God is not given to teach us how to talk, or to make us eloquent or skillful in debate, but to reform our lives, so that the world may know that our desire is to serve God, to give ourselves wholly to him and live in conformity with what pleases him. If we want to know whether a man has profited by the gospel or not, let us take note of his life.25

Calvin therefore assigned great importance to the role of Scripture in the development of spirituality, which involves both private study of the Word and attendance at the public proclamation of its truths through preaching and counseling believers. The Holy Spirit creates faith in the Word of God and faith in the God of the Word, and piety requires Christians to organize their lives around Scripture, applying its teachings to all of their activities. Piety must be anchored to the Word, so believers must attend public worship to hear the Word, and they must reinforce that with personal study and meditation. Reciting Scripture in song is one valuable way to promote spiritual growth, and the Reformed church services in Calvin’s era featured vigorous congregational singing, especially of the Psalms, which the reformer called “prayers of the Spirit.”26

Spirituality is a product of apprehending the proper knowledge of God and of one’s self, and that knowledge comes from the Word of revelation, which requires regular study to obtain divine instruction.27 John Calvin was a biblical rather than a speculative theologian. Sola Scriptura was his formal principle, so the teaching of the Bible determined the character of his doctrine of piety.28 He was not a remote academic figure, detached from ordinary people and the temptations and obstacles they had to confront. His method of exposition was to teach believers so as to prepare them for Christian living in the real world.

**Mystical Union**

Perhaps the most prominent feature of Calvin’s view of spirituality was his concept of unio mystica (mystical union) with Christ. Some scholars contend this is the central theme of the Reformer’s theology. Whether or not a single doctrine dominated his thinking, the concept of union with the Savior appears often in Calvin’s writings, regardless of the main subject he was addressing, so it must have been one of his foremost concerns. Although he did not explain this doctrine fully (perhaps because it is inexplicable), he considered it a reality and contended that some appreciation for it is essential for godly living.29

In medieval thinking about union with Christ, pantheism sometimes appeared, at least by implication, as writings of some Rhineland mystics illustrate.30 Calvin was, however, careful to maintain belief in the Creator/creature distinction while espousing his belief that the Holy Spirit unites Christians with Christ, and this union with the Savior is the source of all benefits he bestows. A person cannot be justified (declared right with God) if he does not demonstrate the effects of grace in his life, and no one could experience real love for God apart from the presence of Christ dwelling within him.231
Although Calvin referred to the union of the elect with Christ as *unio mystica*, that term could be misleading. In the French version of his works, he wrote *union sacrée*, which better expresses his meaning. Calvin used *mysticus* to signify mysterious, secret, or wonderful, terms appropriate for describing the communion Christians enjoy with their Lord. The Reformer did not intend to imply absorption into Christ or the loss of the believers’ identity in eternity.

According to Calvin, justifying faith leads to intimate fellowship with Jesus Christ. The reformer expressed his understanding in this way.

Most people consider fellowship with Christ and believing in Christ to be the same thing; the fellowship we have with Christ is the consequence of faith. In a word, faith is not a distant view, but a warm embrace of Christ, by which he dwells in us, and we are filled with the divine Spirit.

Faith assents to the message of Scripture because the Holy Spirit illumines human minds to believe it and to embrace Christ, the object of faith. This faith establishes an eternal bond between God and his people, as his Holy Spirit resides within them. In Calvin's words:

> Not only does he [Christ] cleave to us by an invisible bond of fellowship, but with a more wonderful communion; day-by-day he grows more and more into one body with us until he becomes completely one with us.

Spirituality entails intimacy between God as the object and believers as subjects. As Calvin put it to readers of his *Institutes*, “you must possess Christ, but you cannot possess him without being made partakers in his sanctification.” In other words, God never bestows the grace of justification without the grace of sanctification, a subjective experience that leads Christians to progress in spirituality toward its completion in eternity.

Calvin understood spirituality to involve deep personal communion with Christ as the fruit of justifying grace, so he scorned those people who claimed to possess faith while failing to demonstrate its reality in their lives. In pointed terms he exclaimed:

> We detest these trifling sophists who are content to roll the gospel on the tips of their tongues when its efficacy ought to penetrate the inmost affections of the heart, take its seat in the soul, and affect the whole man a hundred times more deeply than the cold exhortations of the philosophers.

Warnings to people whose faith is only cerebral or academic abound in Calvin’s writings, for he knew that a formal faith of the intellect alone could not lead to godly living. Contrary to popular myth, he was not an austere person with a countenance of stone and a heart of ice. Rather he understood the complexity of human nature, and he maintained that love for Christ must involve the emotions as well as the will. True faith then is not only, but fiducia fidei—a continuous trusting relationship with the Savior as empowered by the Holy Spirit. “The certainty of faith is knowledge, but [it] is acquired by the teaching of the Holy Spirit, not by the acuteness of our own intellect.” Since John Calvin emphasized the necessity of an intimate relationship with Christ, he did not hesitate to compare that to a marriage, as the Apostle Paul had done. Commenting on Ephesians 5:29, the Reformer wrote:

> The strong affection that a husband ought to cherish toward his wife is exemplified by Christ, and an instance of that unity which belongs to marriage is declared to exist between himself and the church. This is a remarkable passage on the mysterious intercourse we have with Christ.

Jesus, then, communicates not only his favor and benefits, but himself. More than fellowship (*societas*), it is comparable to the marital union. It may also be compared to eating, for Jesus said, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35). This eating requires faith, and faith leads to communion with the Savior.

For faith does not merely look at Christ . . . but embraces him that he may become ours and dwell in us. . . . So it is true that we may eat Christ by faith alone, provided we grasp at the same time how faith unites us with him.

While Calvin was careful to ascribe the work of salvation entirely to God, he understood that divine grace does not negate the personal responsibility of believers to discipline themselves so as to promote their own spirituality. Participation in Christ begins at regeneration, and thereafter God’s law informs believers who God is and what he requires of them, so they can live with God and serve him. As the Reformer put it, “we are consecrated to God in order that we may . . . think, speak, meditate, and do nothing except to his glory.” This will often require deliberate denial of oneself, and it means believers will submit their affections to their Lord, along with all of their possessions. This will happen only where “inward mortification” occurs, because concupiscence, the root of all sin, is always present, even in the lives of saints. Concupiscence is lust, which “remains in a regenerate man, a smoldering cinder of evil which
desires continually to leap forth to allure . . . him to commit sin." As one skillful student of Calvin has remarked, "the mortification of concupiscence . . . involves the denial of all impulses of the flesh," and "sinful self-love is the direct result of concupiscence." Calvin admonished his readers:

It is of no slight importance for you to be cleansed of your blind love of self that you may be made more nearly aware of your incapacity, . . . that you may learn to distrust yourself, that you may transfer your trust to God. Christians, of course, experience inner tensions because their efforts at self-denial conflict with their natural desires. To meet the challenges from evil tendencies, they must be ruthless and resolute in dealing with them. In Calvin's words, "we must labor and fight and apply our utmost energy, and we must begin with self-denial." No passive reliance upon divine aid is proper, but believers must take action against themselves when temptations appear, for the Christian life is a relentless warfare against sin.

However valiantly God's people seek to suppress the evil still within them, they cannot prevail without their Lord's assistance. God knows their frailty, so he has provided them with "the continued working of the Spirit by which he gradually mortifies the relics of the flesh and renews in them [the elect] a celestial life." The Holy Spirit binds believers to Christ, who is in heaven. The Spirit alone can unite heaven and earth, and he raises Christians to heaven to commune with Christ, so they have ready access to the Savior's help, as they struggle with temptation.

6. Calvin, Institutes, II:5.5.
12. Calvin, Institutes, III:1.3.
15. Ibid., I:9,3.
16. Ibid., III:2.33.
17. This is an insight of Paul Chung, Spirituality and Social Ethics in John Calvin (Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 2000), 8.
19. Quoted from the Geneva Catechism by McGrath, Spirituality in An Age of Change, 135.
20. Chapter 10 of book III in the Institutes deals with this matter.
23. Ibid., III:8, 9–11; III:9, 103, 5–6.
25. Calvin, Grace and Fruits, 188.
27. Calvin, Institutes, I:2,1.
38. Ibid., III:6,4.
41. Ibid., 322–23.
45. Ibid., III:3,10.

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