

The Piety of John Calvin

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At the time that this book from which this article was taken, *The Piety of John Calvin: An Anthology Illustrative of the Spirituality of the Reformer*, Ford Lewis Battles was visiting professor of church history at Calvin Theological Seminary. He has also taught at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and Hartford Theological Seminary. He received his Ph.D. from the latter school. He has translated the definitive English edition of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the only complete English edition of the *Institution* of 1536, and Calvin's *Commentary on Seneca's "De Clementia."* Among his many other published works is *A Computerized Concordance to Calvin's "Institutes of the Christian Religion."* He is widely recognized as one of the foremost Calvin scholars today.

Introduction

True Piety According to Calvin

Piety Defined in Word and Act

Piety defined by Calvin. In his first *Catechism* (published in French in 1537 and in Latin in 1538), John Calvin defined the untranslatable word *pietas*, which for him was the shorthand symbol for his whole understanding and practice of Christian faith and life:

True piety does not consist in a fear which willingly indeed flees God's judgment, but since it cannot escape is terrified. True piety consists rather in a sincere feeling which loves God as Father as much as it fears and reverences Him as Lord, embraces His righteousness, and dreads offending Him worse than death. And whoever have been endowed with this piety dare not fashion out of their own rashness any God for themselves. Rather, they seek from

Him the knowledge of the true God, and conceive Him just as He shows and declares Himself to be.¹

Calvin more succinctly defined *pietas* in the *Institutes* as “that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces.”² Beside *pietas* he set *religio*: “. . . faith so joined with an earnest fear of God that this fear also embraces willing reverence, and carries with it such legitimate worship as is prescribed in the law.”³ Note that in these definitions of *pietas* and *religio*, a number of other basic terms are interlaced *faith, fear, reverence, love, knowledge*.

To grasp the full amplitude of *pietas*, let us examine a few of the many references to the word scattered through his commentaries and other writings. In the *Commentary on the Psalms* (119:78f.) he taught that the true nature of *pietas* is seen in the two marks of believers: (1) honor, the obedience rendered to Him as Father; (2) fear, the service done Him as Lord.⁴ Distinct from this is the unbeliever’s fear which rests not upon faith (*fides*) but upon unfaith (*diffidentia*).⁵ Knowledge also enters largely into the concept of *pietas*. In the *Commentary on Jeremiah* (10:25) Calvin spoke of knowledge of God (*cognitio Dei*) as the beginning of *pietas*. Calling upon God’s name (*invocatio*) is the fruit of the knowledge of God and is evidence of *pietas*.⁶ In the *Institutes* Calvin spoke of the first step toward *pietas* as “to know that God is a father to us.”⁷ Elsewhere he asserted that there is no *pietas* without true instruction, as the name *disciples* indicates.⁸ “True religion and worship of God,” he said, “arise out of faith, so that no one duly serves God save him who has been educated in His school.”⁹

Calvin also related piety and love (*caritas*). In *Praelectiones in Ezekiel* (18:5) he spoke of *pietas* as the root of *caritas*.¹⁰ *Pietas* means the fear or reverence of God; but we also fear God when we live justly among our brethren.¹¹ This relationship between our reverential attitude toward God and our attitude toward neighbor is further developed in a sermon on Deuteronomy 5:16:

¹ Ed. and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1972), p. 2.

² McNeill-Battles, 1.2.1.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.2.2.

⁴ OC, 32: 249; cf. *Institutes* 3.2.26.

⁵ *Institutes* 3.2.27.

⁶ OC, 38:96.

⁷ 2.6.4.

⁸ *Commentary on Acts* (on Acts 18:22), in OC, 48:435.

⁹ *Commentary on the Psalms* (on Ps. 119:781.), in OC, 3 2:249.

¹⁰ OC, 40:426.

¹¹ See renderings of *hãstd, mansuetus*, etc., where piety is related to the kindness of man (Ps. 16:10, etc.).

And this is why the heathen have applied this word *pietas* to the honor we render to father, mother, and all those in authority over us. *Pietas*, properly speaking, is the reverence we owe to God: but the pagans, although they were poor blind folk, recognized that God not only wills to be served in His majesty, but when we obey the persons who rule over us, in sum, He wills to prove our obedience at this point. And thus, inasmuch as fathers and mothers, magistrates, and all those who have authority, are lieutenants of God and represent His person, it is certain that if one show them contempt and reject them, that it is like declaring that one does not want to obey God at all.¹²

Yet Calvin places *pietas* higher than *caritas*, for God towers over man; still, “believers seriously testify, by honoring mutual righteousness among themselves, that they honor God.”¹³

The connection between the pagan and Christian notions of *pietas* is pursued further in the *Commentary on John*. Here Calvin admitted “that some grains of *pietas* were ever scattered throughout the world” but “that by God, through the hand of philosophers and profane writers, were sowed the excellent sentiments to be found in their writings.”¹⁴ Aratus’s couplet quoted by Paul (who spoke to infidels and men ignorant of true *pietas*) is “the testimony of a poet who confessed a knowledge engraved by nature upon men’s minds.”¹⁵

That Calvin’s youthful classical studies had laid the groundwork for this classical as well as Christian understanding of the word *pietas* is clear from his *Commentary on Seneca’s “De Clementia,”* published in 1532 when Calvin was twenty-two years of age. In explaining the Senecan phrase “nor the piety of his children,” Calvin drew together what we may assume were the chief classical texts that were mingled, after his conversion, with Scriptural and patristic uses to shape the word in his thought. Note that among the pagan classical writers is to be found a quotation from Augustine’s *City of God*. Here are Calvin’s words:

Cicero, Pro Plancio (33.80): What is piety, if not a benevolent gratitude to one’s parents? Quintilian (5.10.12): Just as those things that are admitted by the general consent of mankind, such as that there are gods, and that piety is to be shown to parents. Yet in order that my readers may understand what piety really is, I shall append Cicero’s words from the Topics (2390): Equity is also said

¹² OC, 26:312.

¹³ Ibid. This is the habitual twofold division (God and man) that Calvin applied to the Decalogue (*Institutes* 2.8.11) and the Lord’s Prayer (3.20.35). See below, chap. 2, lines 125ff., 202ff.; also chap. 3, lines 281ff. (note).

¹⁴ *Commentary on John* (on John 4:36), in OC, 47:96.

¹⁵ *Commentary on Acts* (on Acts 17:28), in OC, 48:417.

to have three parts: one pertains to the gods in heaven, the second to the spirits of the departed, the third to men. The first is called “piety,” the second “sanctity,” the third “justice” or “equity.” Thus far Cicero. But since parents are for us so to speak in the place of the gods, to them is diverted what Augustine hints at (DCD, 10.L3): Piety, properly speaking, is commonly understood as worship of God, which the Greeks call *eusebeia*. Yet this *eusebeia* is said to be exercised by way of obligation toward parents also. But we also use the term when we wish to express a particularly forceful love. Cicero (Ep. Fam., 1.9.1): 1 was very much pleased with your letter, which made me realize that you fully appreciate my piety toward you; for why should 1 say “my good will” whenever the term “piety” itself most solemn and sacred as it is, does not seem to me impressive enough to describe my obligation to you?¹⁶

As this collection of classical passages indicates, the words *pius* and *pietas* in classical Latin referred first to the relationship of children to their parents.¹⁷ In the Roman family of the *paterfamilias* and the *materfamilias*, children were expected to fear, honor, obey, and love their parents. *Pietas* bespoke the mutual love and care between parents and their offspring.

The state was, after all (as Aristotle described it in his *Politics*),¹⁸ but the extension of the family. The king or emperor was the *paterpatriae*, the father of his country.¹⁹ Parricide, in Roman eyes the most horrendous crime of which man is capable, and subject to the cruelest and most unusual punishment of all, was extended to assassination of the ruler, as the parent of all.²⁰ *Pietas*, then, in the larger sense summarized all the feelings of loyalty, love of country, and self-sacrifice for the common good which marked Roman citizenship.

The early Christians, whose supreme Ruler and Father was God, without divesting the word *pietas* of its familial and national meaning, carried the word to a higher use. For them the whole complex of relationships between God the Father and His earthly children was summed up in this one word. For Calvin, then, there is in the word the classical overshine of filial obedience. *Pietas* bespeaks the walk of us adopted children of God the Father, adopted brothers and sisters of Christ the Son.

¹⁶ Ed. and trans. Ford Lewis Battles and André Malan Hugo (Leiden: Brill, 1969), pp. 226-29.

¹⁷ Compare Justinian’s comment: “For the power of the father ought to consist in piety, not cruelty.” *Digest* 48.9.5.; cited by Calvin in *Commentary on “De Clementia,”* pp. 254-57.

¹⁸ 1.3-13 (1253 bl-1260 b25); cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.11 (1160 cl). Note is from Calvin, *Commentary on “De Clementia,”* pp. 170f.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on “De Clementia,”* pp. 236-39.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 252-55; cf. pp. 3081.

So far we have dealt mainly with the “inner” meaning of *pietas*. It also had an external meaning for Calvin. In *On the Harmony of the Gospels* (Matt. 12:7 and parallels) he argued, with our Lord, that certain types of manual labor were permitted on the Sabbath — those connected with the worship of God — and spoke of the *officia pietatis*, which we might render “religious duties.” In the same passage Calvin suggested the modern hypocritical connotation of *piety*, speaking of the “hypocrites who pretend *pietas* by outward signs and grievously pervert it by sticking in carnal worship alone.”²¹

Calvin’s meaning will emerge more clearly as we seek out the Scriptural basis of his concept of *pietas*. The New Testament word uniformly rendered by the Latin *pietas* is *eiusebeia*. It is found almost exclusively in the Pastoral and General Epistles, appearing elsewhere in the New Testament only at Acts 3:12. Of the fifteen references in the former, the RSV translates all but three as “godliness.” The word is used in the Septuagint to denote “the duty which man owes to God — piety, godliness, religion.”²² In the Septuagint the word is chiefly found in the Apocrypha.

Piety mirrored in Calvin’s life. If this then is what piety meant for Calvin, we will certainly find in the accounts of his conversion, however meager, help in understanding how this concept was shaped in his own life.

Much ink has been spilled in discussion and speculation on the date, circumstances, and character of Calvin’s decision to accept the Reformation faith. I have dealt with the shape of his conversion in my translation of the *Institution* of 1536.²³ Classic accounts of conversion usually cite some verse of Scripture as triggering the change. Augustine’s experience of “*Tolle, Lege!*” (“Take up and read!”) in the garden near Milan led him through Romans 13:13f. to Bishop Ambrose and Christian baptism. Luther was captivated by Romans 1:17. We have no such definite information on the specific scripture that brought Calvin’s change of heart. A close study of the evidence has, however, led me to suggest that it very probably was Romans 1:18-25. More specifically the text may well have been Romans 1:21 (“ . . . for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened” — RSV).²⁴

²¹ OC, 45:3241.; cf. *Institutes* 1.4.4, where Calvin contrasted true and false *pietas*.

²² Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, ed. and trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1952), p. 326.

²³ In my introduction to *Institution of the Christian Religion . . . 1536*, trans. and an. Ford Lewis Battles (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), pp. xvi ff.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. xvii f.; cf. chap. 2, lines 1-4 (note) below.

The central themes of Calvin's piety are the honoring of God and being thankful to Him; they are interwoven in the recital of his conversion in the preface to the *Commentary on the Psalms*²⁵ and in the account of the Reformed Christian's confession before God's judgment seat in Calvin's *Reply to Cardinal Sadolet*.²⁶

Calvin's new-found faith is early expressed in his preface to the French translation of the New Testament made by his cousin Pierre Robert (Olivétan).²⁷ Almost contemporaneous with this are the early pages of chapter 1, "On the Law," of the 1536 *Institution*. I call this in chapter 2 "The Kernel of Calvin's Faith."

It is the intolerable contrast between God's absolute perfection and man's fallenness that initiated Calvin's religious quest. Like Augustine, he saw no instant perfection succeeding the event of conversion however "*subita*"²⁸ it seemed; there is rather a growth into the Christian life to a perfection beyond death — all the gracious gift of God in Christ. So he begins this "kernel" account of faith with the two knowledges: of God's glory, justice, mercy, and gentleness; and of fallen man's ignorance, iniquity, impotence, death, judgment. In the third place, we are shown the law, the written law of the Old Testament and the inwardly written law of conscience, as God's first effort to bridge the gulf between Creator and created. The law is for us a mirror in which to discern and contemplate our sin and curse. It leads us to the impasse of being called to glorify, honor, and love our Lord and Father, but unable to perform these duties. Therefore we deserve the curse, judgment — eternal death. This was indeed the sequence of Calvin's experience, or more accurately, it was the shape which in retrospect he gave his experience in the light of the Pauline-Augustinian tradition and which he generalized in his teaching.

But the impasse, through God's mercy, is breached; another way is opened to us. It is forgiveness of sins through Christ. Calvin's "kernel," in its fourth and final section, comes back once more to the knowledge of ourselves, of our poverty and ruin. The lesson of this knowledge is that we learn to humble ourselves, cast ourselves before God, seek His mercy. Thus will Christ, our leader, the only Way to reach the Father, bring us into eternal blessedness. Our piety then is our pathway, in grace, from estrangement to reunion with our Creator. It is the way of suffering, but also of joy.

Thus Calvin's conversion took a lifetime to be worked out. We cannot here summarize that brief but crowded life. But we can look at several episodes in it

²⁵ See chap. 1 below.

²⁶ See my introduction to *Institution*, pp. xxiii ff. T. H. L. Parker rejected the passage from Calvin's *Reply to Cardinal Sadolet* as a "source." *John Calvin: A Biography* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 162.

²⁷ Battles, "Introduction," *Institution*, pp. xxiv f.

²⁸ The word *subita* ("sudden, unexpected") has spawned a considerable literature. For discussion see chap. 1, line 257 (note) below.

that will explain why he believed in the third use of the law — its pedagogical use as tutor to converted Christians — and denominated it the law's chief use.²⁹ His life will also exemplify his teaching on calling, that the Christian must, like a sentry, stand guard at his post while he lives.³⁰

First, look at how Calvin was called to his initial ministry in Geneva. His initial vision of the Christian life (like Augustine's) was that of a retired, contemplative, intellectual study of the faith. William Farel, that hot-headed pioneer of the French-language Reformation who was spurned in his invitation to Calvin to work with him in Geneva, a city that had just chosen the Reformed faith, had recourse to imprecation and threat: "You are following," he thundered at Calvin, "your own wishes and I declare, in the name of God Almighty, that if you do not assist us in this work of the Lord, the Lord will punish you for seeking your own interest rather than his."³¹

And so, against his will, Calvin took up the task at Geneva as at the invitation of God Himself. After Calvin's banishment in 1538 from Geneva, Bucer used the same threat to persuade him to assume pastoral and teaching duties at Strasbourg.³²

Calvin was subsequently importuned from his happy pastoral relationship with a tiny French congregation in Strasbourg to return to Geneva.³³ It must be said that the Strasbourg sojourn was crucial in working out pastorally and practically and liturgically the full meaning of *pietas*. In his study of the sufferings of the patriarchs, Calvin mirrored his own *tolerantia crucis*: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the rest, David included, withstood terrible hardships, pain, suffering, because they were on pilgrimage. The hope that was to come fed them on their journey.³⁴ This too was the secret of Calvin's triumphant struggle against the overwhelming odds that faced him and his world. This too kept alive his feeble body, taxed as it constantly was beyond its strength. This too enabled him to maintain a ceaseless literary output of the highest order and one so decisive for posterity.

*Piety in Calvin's view of the Christian life.*³⁵ We have endeavored to define *pietas* in Calvin's own words and his own acts. Let us now turn to the principles of *pietas* as he worked them out in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In doing

²⁹ Calvin called the law the perfect guide to all duties of piety and love. *Institutes* 2.8.51.

³⁰ Cf. *Institutes* 3.9.4; 3.10.6. See chap. 3, lines 2197 (note), 2215 (note) below.

³¹ Beza, *Vita Calvini*, in OC, 21: 125.41ff.; English translation (hereafter ET) by Henry Beveridge in John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), I:xxix.

³² See chap. 1, line 445 (note) below.

³³ See chap. 1, line 469 (note) below.

³⁴ *Institutes* 2.10f.

³⁵ Translated in chap. 3 below.

this, it will be necessary to examine more fully the transition years 1538-1541 of the Strasbourg exile, which we have just now lightly sketched.

The portion of Calvin's *Institutes* on which we would like to concentrate our attention at this time comprises, in the final Latin edition of that book printed in the author's lifetime (1559), chapters 6-10 of book 3.³⁵ One may search in vain the pages of the first edition of that work (1536) for any section corresponding to this one on the Christian life.³⁶ Actually (with some subsequent additions) it dates from 1539, the year of this second Latin edition, and remained in all editions from 1539 to 1554 the final chapter of the *Institutes*. Why was such an important subject so belatedly treated by Calvin?

The clue to the answer lies, I believe, in a comparison of what Calvin wrote before he went to Strasbourg in 1538 and what he wrote after that date. On the one hand, examine the *Institution* of 1536, the *Articles Concerning the Organization of the Church and Worship* of January 1537,³⁷ and the *Confession and Catechism of the Church of Geneva* of 1537-1538.³⁸ On the other hand, examine the *Institutes* of 1539 (in which he placed the treatise "On the Christian Life"); his *Several Psalms and Songs Set for Singing*, also of 1539;³⁹ and his 1540 *Commentary on Romans*. Add to these the literary output immediately following his return to Geneva from Strasbourg in 1541 — that is, the *Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances* of 1541, *The Form of Prayers* of 1542, and the third Latin edition of the *Institutes* (1543). What does a comparison show?⁴⁰ We see a real growth in Calvin the churchman, in his grasp of the practical problems both of individual Christians and of the church as the society of Christians. All of these works are directed to the perfecting either of the Christian life or of the liturgical and disciplinary functioning of the church. Together they mark the significant changes that were later to be incorporated into books 3 and 4 of the 1559 *Institutes*. Both the *Institution* of 1536 and the *Catechism* of 1537-1538 were cast in the traditional catechetical mold: Decalogue, Apostles' Creed, Lord's Prayer, sacraments. In Geneva the efforts to enforce acceptance of the *Confession and Catechism* of 1537-1538, household by household, and oversight of morals, district by district, ended in failure and banishment from the city for both Farel and Calvin, as we have seen, in April 1538. What had gone wrong? Let us quickly review the facts.

³⁶ Section 3.8.1ff. of the 1559 edition of the *Institutes* is hinted at in the 1536 edition. *Institution*, p. 55. See chap. 3, lines 906ff. below.

³⁷ See John Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, ed. and trans. J. K. S. Reid, LCC, vol. 22 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), pp. 47-55.

³⁸ See "Letter" in *Catechism*, pp. vii ff.

³⁹ See chap. 6 below.

⁴⁰ Cf. Ford Lewis Battles, "Against Luxury and License in Geneva," *Interpretation* 19 (1965): 186ff. Further on this, see chap. 3, lines 2008ff. (note) below.

On Sunday, 21 May 1536, the General Council of Geneva had unanimously voted by a show of hands to abolish the Mass and other papal ceremonies and abuses, images and idols, and had sworn with God's help to live in the holy gospel law and Word of God. The duly appointed Reforming pastors, William Farel and John Calvin, had taken their city fathers at their word and had planned literally to transform the city into a gospel community which had its true center in the Lord's table. This was not to be, however. The public documents of 1536-1537, as a consequence, underwent (after Calvin's Strasbourg sojourn) a clarification of disciplinary procedures and a development of church polity in those of 1541-1543. The *Institutes* of 1539 shows a greater maturity and fullness in its understanding of the formation of the individual Christian than does the *Institution* of 1536. Similarly, the next edition, that of 1543, quite surpasses both the first and the second editions in its grasp of ecclesiology. Calvin indeed learned from experience, both in the first two years in Geneva and in the three-year interim in Strasbourg under Martin Bucer's tutelage.

We may infer that the short treatise "On the Christian Life"⁴¹ is in a sense the first fruits of Calvin's reflection on his 1536-1538 failure. He realized, it would seem, that catechetical statements on such topics as faith, repentance, justification, regeneration, election, and related heads of doctrine — however clearly stated — would not suffice to transform men's hearts, even though their minds might give intellectual assent to the new faith. A deeper reflection on the Christological foundations of the Christian life, particularly as they had been set forth by the apostle Paul, was called for. This short treatise supplied the lack we have noted in the 1536 *Institution* and the *Catechism* of 1537-1538.

We must, however, slightly qualify this judgment. The 1536 *Institution* contains certain short blank spaces in the text as printed, called *alinea*, at which points — in later editions — expansions of materials were made. This fact seems to bear out what Calvin himself says of his progress through the various editions of the *Institutes*, as he speaks to the reader in 1559: "I was never satisfied until the work had been arranged in the order now set forth."⁴² Also, the *Catechism* of 1537-1538, while largely an epitome of the prior edition of the *Institution*, does presage important changes to come in the *Institutes* of 1539.⁴³

What then does the short treatise "On the Christian Life" tell us about Calvin's continuing pilgrimage of faith?

⁴¹ See chap. 3 below.

⁴² McNeill-Battles, p. 3.

⁴³ See my preface to *Catechism* (p. x) and the comparative table at the end of that volume.

First, we see further reflection on the contrast between the philosophers and Scripture!"⁴⁴ He had, in his conversion, already rejected the Greek and Latin authors as moral guides. Here the contrast between them becomes sharper and more detailed. But some vestiges of their influence still remain. This can be illustrated by his attitude here expressed toward Stoicism. Rejected are Stoic notions of fate and of the passionless wise man and Stoic strictures against pity. We might here note in passing that even before his conversion Calvin had begun to show such an attitude, as his *Commentary on "De Clementia,"* which we previously quoted, reveals. But the Stoics' call to follow God, their insistence that we are born to help one another, and their preaching of moderation and frugality⁴⁵ are sufficiently close to Calvin's Christian piety to remain a part of his moral teaching.

Second, since penning his first great theological essay of 1536, Calvin had come to know the early church fathers, both Greek and Latin, far better. The homilies of a Basil or of a Chrysostom or the writings of a Cyprian or an Ambrose filled in gaps in his pastoral knowledge. Most important of all, Augustine brought him to a deeper understanding of Paul.⁴⁶ He was therefore in a position in the spring of 1539, after five months as pastor of the French congregation in Strasbourg and a brief visit with Bucer to Frankfurt, to write this portion of his forthcoming second Latin edition of the *Institutes*. On 12 May Calvin began to lecture on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians.⁴⁷ On 16 October he dedicated his shortly-to-be-published *Commentary on Romans* to the Basel savant Simon Grynaeus. This concentration on Pauline studies is reflected in the treatise "On the Christian Life." Not only is it steeped in Paul's thought; Calvin's very purpose smacks of Paul's way of working in the churches: ". . . to show some order whereby the Christian man may be led and directed to order his life aright." This is Calvin's announced intention.

The treatise "On the Christian Life" is a marvel of brevity. After a call to the holiness that God demands of His children, a holiness deep within the heart, Calvin began to describe the lifelong process of growth into Christian perfection in and through Christ.⁴⁸ Here Calvin was consciously standing on a middle

⁴⁴ Cf. *Institutes* 1.15.8. The crucial place of man's fall, not understood by the philosophers, was recognized by Calvin in his understanding of the soul in its present state (1.15.6-8; this is apparent mainly in the 1559 edition but to some extent in the 1539 edition), a reflection of Calvin's conversion insight. Cf. chap. 3, lines 34, 1309ff., 1473ff., 1860ff., and notes, below.

⁴⁵ On Calvin's teaching on frugality and its relation to the "blue laws" of Geneva, see Battles, "Against Luxury," pp. 182ff. See also chap. 3, lines 1953ff. below.

⁴⁶ Referring to the tenth commandment, Calvin said, "It was Augustine who first opened the way for me to understand this commandment." *Institutes* (McNeil-Battles) 2.8.50. See chap. 3, lines 6 (note) and 18 (note) below.

⁴⁷ Cf. chap. 3, line 558 (note) below.

⁴⁸ See chap. 3, lines 1-280 below.

ground between the two-tiered Roman Catholic notion of the Christian life⁴⁹ and the instant perfection he rightly or wrongly inferred from the teaching of the Anabaptists.⁵⁰

He then moved on to describe the Christological pattern as it unfolds inwardly in the heart — “Denial of Self.”⁵¹ The same following of Christ is then traced in the outward life as the “Bearing of the Cross.”⁵²

He next turned to an examination first of the present,⁵³ then of the future life.⁵⁴ I have sometimes asked my students reading book 3 in the *Institutes* to stop after reading chapter 9 and write down their impressions, then go on to chapter 10 and do the same once more. At the end of chapter 9 Calvin sounds like a medieval monk, reflecting on the vanities of the world; at the end of chapter 10, he is clearly free of medievalism! The secret? *It is the hope of the life to come that gives meaning and purpose to the life in which we presently are.*⁵⁵

As one reads these pages, one feels in a field of magnetic force, set between poles. Calvin’s deep religious insight was born in controversy. Constantly he strove to find a middle, Scripturally informed ground between extremes: here it lies between Roman Catholic and Anabaptist. When we study Calvin, we can never flatten out his thought, excerpt it, generalize from it. We must read it in its totality, and within the historical, Biblical, and theological context out of which it came. Our own view and practice of the Christian life, in like manner, must issue from pondering on the deep antinomies of the faith in our own time. Yet there is a great deal that Calvin can say to us about the conduct of the Christian life in this last quarter of the twentieth century. Right in this section, for example, he enunciated a principle of Christian stewardship of nature and of style of living that speaks to our present ecological crisis.⁵⁶ Before the great technological advances of recent centuries, before the present age of extraterrestrial exploration, Calvin knew the planet Earth was what we today call a “closed ecosystem.” Here and elsewhere in his writings he tells us how the creation is to be used by man.

⁴⁹ In *his Reply to Cardinal Sadolet* (1539) Calvin confessed that his own Christian nurture (under the Romanism into which he had been born) was quite inadequate for right worship, hope of salvation, or duties of the Christian life. See *Institution*, pp. xix f. But cf. note 26 above.

⁵⁰ See *Institution*, pp. 375f. (note on line 34, p. 152).

⁵¹ See chap. 3, lines 281-905.

⁵² *Ibid.*, lines 906-1505.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, lines 1506-1952.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, lines 1953-2255.

⁵⁵ See *ibid.*, line 1662 (note) below.

⁵⁶ See *ibid.*, lines 2133ff. (note) below.

Moses now adds, that the earth was given to man, with this condition, that he should occupy himself in its cultivation. Whence it follows, that men were created to employ themselves in some work, and not to lie down in inactivity and idleness. This labour, truly, was pleasant, and full of delight, entirely exempt from all trouble and weariness; since, however, God ordained that man should be exercised in the culture of the ground, he condemned, in his person, all indolent repose. Wherefore, nothing is more contrary to the order of nature, than to consume life in eating, drinking, and sleeping, while in the meantime we propose nothing to ourselves to do. Moses adds, that the custody of the garden was given in charge to Adam, to show that we possess the things which God has committed to our hands, on the condition, that being content with a frugal and moderate use of them, we should take care of what shall remain. Let him who possesses a field, so partake of its yearly fruits, that he may not suffer the ground to be injured by his negligence; but let him endeavour to hand it down to posterity as he received it, or even better cultivated. Let him so feed on its fruits, that he neither dissipates it by luxury, nor permits [it] to be marred or ruined by neglect. Moreover, that this economy, and this diligence, with respect to those good things which God has given us to enjoy, may flourish among us; let every one regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses. Then he will neither conduct himself dissolutely, nor corrupt by abuse those things which God requires to be preserved.⁵⁷

Calvin believed too, as we have said, in gradual growth in the Christian life.⁵⁸ Does not the very writing of this section illustrate his own growth, not to be complete until his death in 1564?

How may we sum up, for our own use, Calvin's teaching on *pietas*, on Christian discipleship? From Calvin's experience, as we have just reviewed it, and from our own experience of trying to live the Christian life in these times, we may infer a few general principles that may assist us in our search of a style of living commensurate with the gospel.

1. One cannot really understand a particular Christian's view of discipleship apart from his times and apart from his own distinctive experience of Christ.
2. Also, certain tacit assumptions which we make in our daily living must be identified, and at least momentarily set aside, if we are to understand a classic theologian's teaching: for example, (1) the myth of human self-sufficiency and of scientific-technological supremacy; (2) the treatment of God as a shadowy concept, not very important for daily life; (3) the notion of the Scriptures as a human book, rather like other books; (4) the rejection of an afterlife and the concentration of all human attention and effort on the present life; (5) the

⁵⁷ *Commentary on Genesis* (on Gen. 2:15), trans. John King, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847-1850), 1:125.

⁵⁸ See notes 48 and 49 above.

emphasis on the production of goods and the notion of man as a consuming animal; and (6) the view of man as a creature whose wants are to be satisfied.

3. Conversely, to understand Calvin's view of Christian discipleship, we must for the moment open our minds to certain basic assumptions that he makes: (1) man's total dependence upon God; (2) nature's being ours to use and enjoy, but with moderation and accountability; (3) God's providential care; (4) the contrast between philosophers and Scripture; (5) the after-life's being not only the goal of the present life, but its nourishment in hope; (6) all goods as the gifts of God's kindness to us; and (7) the account we will at the end render to God of their use.

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