

Piety and John Calvin

Matthew James Jones  
080356

Regent College  
Prof. Hans Boersma  
THEO 607: Systematic Theology C  
Pneumatology, Ecclesiology, and Eschatology  
Fall 2005

Word Count: 1962

John Calvin, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant reformer, is probably best known for the acronym TULIP<sup>1</sup> and his theology as set forth in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* but perhaps we should remember Calvin for another reason. Calvin's role as pastor, spiritual leader, and pious Christian should be what he is remembered for along with his theology. Calvin's passion was for the Lord and while that often manifested itself in the form of scholastics and debate, his pious nature and emphasis should not be overlooked.

### **CALVIN'S DISTINCTIVES**

Churchgoers of the reformed tradition will know of Calvin's name and associate TULIP with him. Those five distinct doctrines are what made Calvin different from his Catholic or Anabaptist surroundings, but they were not necessarily the focus of his thought (or even writings). The theological distinctives were ratified at the Synod of Dort primarily to serve as a foundation to argue against the rise of Arminianism within the Protestant Church but were never intended to act as primary theology. Calvin was also well known for his ability to argue his points, most notably in his response to Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto's letter to the Genevans.<sup>2</sup> Calvin's highly influential *Institutes of the Christian Religion* were sustained arguments for his theological understanding (often which took form of arguments or refutations against Catholics or Anabaptists) that provide a framework for Christian living and understanding. Often, again, Calvin's distinctives are focused on when discussing that large work. Finally, I want to mention Calvin's commentaries on the Bible. As with the rest of his work, his commentaries can be narrowed down to argue Calvin's theological beliefs, as I am sure was partially his intent, but they also serve another purpose. The commentaries should be an obvious place where Calvin's

---

<sup>1</sup> Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints.

<sup>2</sup> See *A Reformation Debate*

pious nature and focus on spirituality should be focused on as opposed to dogmatic arguments. While not as obvious as his commentaries, the *Institutes* should also be viewed with that foundation. Theologians such as Warfield have rightly seen Calvin as “the Theologian of the Holy Spirit” because he saw Calvin’s special place given to the Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

## **PIETY**

Before looking at the commentaries, Calvin’s definition of piety should be looked at. In his *Catechism* of 1538, Calvin states that “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.”<sup>4</sup> Calvin even starts the beginning of the *Institutes* with “I call ‘piety’ that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces. For until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the Author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him – they will never yield him willing service.”<sup>5</sup> For Calvin, piety is what guided his life. Knowledge of God brings reverence and worship. That is the foundation for all of Calvin’s scholarly works, not to argue for a particular doctrine, but to understand God better so as to be “nourished by his fatherly care.”

## **CALVIN’S COMMENTARIES**

The introduction to his commentary on the Psalms states this: “The Psalms are replete with all the precepts which serve to frame our life to every part of holiness, piety, and

---

<sup>3</sup> Battles (1996), 31

<sup>4</sup> *Catechism* quoted in Battles (1996), 289

<sup>5</sup> *Institutes* I.ii.1

righteousness, yet they will principally teach and train us to bear the cross; and the bearing of the cross is a genuine proof of our obedience.”<sup>6</sup> Calvin’s commentaries served for him, as they should for us, as a guide for complete living, including piety. Praying and living in the Spirit were directly related to our piety. In his commentary on 1 Thessalonians, Calvin says, “*Rejoice always*. I refer this to moderation of spirit, when the mind keeps itself in calmness under adversity, and does not give indulgence to grief. I accordingly connect together these three things--*to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, and to give thanks to God in all things*. For when he recommends constant praying, he points out the way of rejoicing perpetually, for by this means we ask from God alleviation in connection with all our distresses.”<sup>7</sup> Reading of the scriptures should bring about rejoicing and devotion to God and Calvin wanted his commentaries to both reflect that and encourage it through proper exegesis.

### ***INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION***

Calvin’s *Institutes* are his most often cited works for both dogmatic and pious reasons. He is quite exhaustive in the scope and his intent is for pastors and seminary students to attain a full grasp of what Christendom has to offer. There should be more focus at the church level of Calvin’s desire for people to become more spiritual and pious through the workings of Holy Spirit in scripture. “It is, according to Calvin, not just a function of the intellect but also bears fruit in the heart. In other words, proper knowledge of God affects and involves the entire human person.”<sup>8</sup> The *Institutes*, while often a retort to the Catholic Church, placed the burden of encouraging Christians to become more pious at the feet of the ministers. Calvin did not like the corruption of the church, but that did not mean he wanted to reject all structures. He, as all the

---

<sup>6</sup> *Psalms*, introduction

<sup>7</sup> *1 Thessalonians*, 5.16

<sup>8</sup> Pitkin, 23

reformers did, claimed that the Catholics were the ones who deviated from the tradition of the early church, not the reformers. A version of the church that linked to the tradition of the church fathers was what the reformers wanted. Those in leadership of the church were to strengthen the tradition and encourage piety among the laity. As Calvin placed much importance on scripture and felt that true understanding would bring piety and worship, ministers were to represent what Christ has called us to.<sup>9</sup> Calvin posits that being bound together, teaching and learning from one another, fosters mutual love and likewise God has bound himself to the church and with Christ as our center we are called to seek truth in love and to grow in Him.<sup>10</sup> The church, therefore plays a large role in becoming pious. With the close connection between piety and the church, it makes sense that the sacraments are also quite important for Calvin. “I consider that they [the sacraments] have been instituted by the Lord to the end that they may serve to establish and increase faith.”<sup>11</sup> With a high regard for tradition, the sacraments served for Calvin a connection between all believers and a crucial act of piety.

## THE PIOUS MAN

“Calvin’s pastoral soul and his theology were not two things apart, but different manifestations of his experience of the human relationship with God. The biblical faith must be put into words so that people can know and confess what they experience, so they can teach and minister to others.”<sup>12</sup> Calvin’s heart was for God in whatever form that would take: scholarly or pastorally. Calvin obviously had a strong sense of man’s brokenness but did not want to stay in a place of self loathing. We are justified by faith and that faith involves action. Reverence for

---

<sup>9</sup> Leith, 181

<sup>10</sup> *Institutes* IV.iii.1

<sup>11</sup> *Institutes* IV.xiv.9

<sup>12</sup> McKee, 22

God and leading a pious life was important to Calvin but he was also a realist. “I do not require that the morals of the Christian man be pure and perfect gospel (although such consummation is to be desired and striven for). No, I do not require so strictly, so rigorously, a Christian perfection that I would recognize as Christian only him who has attained it.”<sup>13</sup> He knew that we could not be perfect, but with a healthy spirituality and pious nature we could understand that Christ was perfect for us. That quote highlights Calvin as a true pastor and not just a theologian. A pastor must truly know the struggles and realities of his congregation and not just have some unattainable and lofty goal. Calvin could see the lofty goal and encouraged people to strive towards it but knew that man is depraved and that his role as pastor was to encourage and edify.

Prayer was crucial to piety for Calvin. “We pray His will be done, thus subjecting our will to His, by this bridle restraining it from presuming to control God, but making Him the arbiter, director of all its entreaties. With minds composed to the obedience, letting ourselves be ruled by the laws of divine providence, readily we shall learn to persevere in prayer...”<sup>14</sup> We bend our will out of piety and that is what will bring ultimate good. Like the Psalmist, Calvin often expressed his pious nature in the form of prayers. “May the Lord grant that we may contemplate the mysteries of His heavenly wisdom with truly increasing devotion, to His glory and to our edification.”<sup>15</sup> For Calvin, there was no separation of scholarly and pious pursuits; they were all one in the same. All pursuits should be done in a pious manner with reverence to God.

In looking at Calvin, knowing his journey to the faith would be an important one for understanding his piety, unfortunately there isn't much know about his conversion. Because his

---

<sup>13</sup> Battles (1978), 54-55 quoting Calvin's *On The Christian Life*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 112 quoting Calvin's *On Prayer* (originally from chapter 3 of the 1536 *Institutes* and chapter 20 of book IV of the 1559 edition)

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 132

conversion is not directly known, the focus of his thought should guide us in his understanding of piety. “For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.”<sup>16</sup> Battles suggests that this passage from Romans may be the one that captured Calvin’s heart and mind and brought him to faith as “central themes of Calvin’s piety are the honoring of God and being thankful to him.”<sup>17</sup> Battles goes on to say that Calvin talked of a lifelong process by which the Christian life grows towards perfection through Jesus Christ because of a holiness (and piety) from within.<sup>18</sup> Sanctification and piety are at the heart of Calvin’s writings and were what he strove for as a Christian.

## CONCLUSION

We seen in Calvin not just a master of rhetoric, prose, and theology, but a caring, pious man of God. It is easy to want to think of Calvin in terms of his theological distinctives as they are quite distinct. To a degree, that is reasonable and his distinctives should be analyzed as they serve as crucial theology to many denominations. But if the church only looks to Calvin for those theological issues, they are missing out on much of what Calvin said and had to offer. Looking to his earlier versions of the *Institutes* can be beneficial to see that work in a more pastoral light. Poetry, Psalms, and lyrics are some of the more pastoral ways Calvin shared his theology. His theology doesn’t change, but his piety is more clear in those forms. Reading the various forms of expression from Calvin can also be beneficial if it is difficult to break from a purely theological reading of his primary works. Calvin’s rhetoric and theology are substantive and impressive, but his piety and role as pastor are equally impressive and possibly more

---

<sup>16</sup> NASB, Romans 1:21

<sup>17</sup> Battles (1996), 293

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 298.

beneficial to Christian living. Having a solid theology and foundation is crucial for growth as a Christian, but right devotion, worship, and piety will help keep the focus on God.



## WORKS CITED

- Battles, Ford Lewis. *Interpreting John Calvin*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Piety of John Calvin*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978.
- Calvin, John. *Commentary on the Psalms*. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999. Database on-line.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999. Database on-line.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 2 vols. John T. McNeill, ed. Ford Lewis Battles, trans. Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1960.
- Leith, John H. *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*. Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1989.
- McKee, Elsie Anne, ed. *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*. New York: Paulist Press, 2001.
- Olin, John C., ed. *John Calvin / Jacopo Sadoletto: A Reformation Debate*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966.
- Pitkin, Barbara. *What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin's Doctrine of Faith in Its Exegetical Context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.