

THEOLOGIAN OF THE HOLY SPIRIT: A PENTECOSTAL ANALYSIS
OF JOHN CALVIN'S PNEUMATOLOGY

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For many evangelicals, the name John Calvin is virtually synonymous with his doctrines of election and predestination. To be sure, these emphases stand among his most impactful contributions to Christian theology; yet for all the attention Calvin has commanded through, for example, his soteriology or ecclesiology, is it possible that his work on such topics has led to a relative neglect of his pneumatology? From Calvin's conversion where God brought his mind to a "teachable frame" to his conviction that only the Spirit's power may enable one to accept the gospel, the Holy Spirit is no mere appendix to his larger theology.¹ Joel Beeke charges that an "experiential effect of the Spirit permeates Calvin's theology, giving life to it. For Calvin, experiencing the work of the Spirit is more important than attempting to describe the essence of the Spirit, since the latter remains a mystery that we can never fully grasp."²

Few could argue that the meteoric rise of the Pentecostal movement has triggered a renewed emphasis within the church on the Holy Spirit. In an article focusing on spiritual gifts, a key distinctive of Pentecostal spirituality, Presbyterian Yang-En Chen claims it has "rapidly reinvented Christianity and redefined and even reshaped the physical map and the existential

1. Evans ("John Calvin: Theologian," 85–86) asserts, "Calvin was pre-eminently a theologian of the Holy Spirit because of the incandescence of his personal piety, the manner in which he advanced the frontiers of pneumatology, and on account of the sheer consistency of his teaching."

2. Beeke, "The Holy Spirit," 373.

characteristic of World Christianity.”³ Though he charges Reformed preaching with becoming “formalized,” he also claims that “Charismatic movements often neglected the Word of God to the extent of focusing primarily and often exclusively on the gifts and power of the Spirit while overlooking the Person and Work of the same Spirit.”⁴ Some Pentecostals have suggested as much. Andrew Gabriel writes, “For all their talk about the Holy Spirit, one might think that Pentecostals have a well-developed pneumatology. Instead, historically, Pentecostals have tended to focus on interpreting their experiences of the Spirit—such as Spirit baptism or the gifts of the Spirit—rather than on developing a formal and comprehensive pneumatology.”⁵ Likewise, Scott Ellington suggests that the lack of one leading figure, like a Calvin, has on occasion led Pentecostalism to assume contradictory positions, rather than develop consistently with its own theological principles.⁶

Interestingly, it was around the same time period when Pentecostalism was birthed that the staunchly conservative B. B. Warfield labelled the French Reformer “The Theologian of the Holy Spirit.”⁷ This may intrigue many within Pentecostalism, where conversation surrounding the Spirit often tends towards tongues, prophecy, and healing—commonly labelled by some as the “miraculous” gifts.⁸ Certainly, this renewed emphasis on the Spirit and an openness to see him work in such ways should be celebrated. Yet, this paper will argue that Pentecostals would also be well served by deeper discussion of the Spirit’s work in areas that are often overlooked—many of which Calvin speaks to at

3. Cheng, “Calvin on the Work,” 173–74.

4. Cheng, “Calvin on the Work,” 174.

5. Gabriel, “Pneumatology: Eschatological Intensification,” 206.

6. Ellington, “Scripture: Finding One’s Place,” 67.

7. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 484–85. Warfield originally made this statement in a 1909 address, “Calvin as a Theologian.”

8. Warfield claimed that Calvin’s pneumatology was so pivotal to the *Institutes* that it was “accordingly, just a treatise on the work of God the Holy Spirit.” See Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism*, 374.

length.⁹ It will consider his doctrines of sanctification, union with Christ, and spiritual gifts, along with other aspects of his theology to demonstrate how the Spirit proves to be crucial in every aspect of his wider vision—and, by extension, every facet of the Christian life. There are few dialogue partners who would better serve today's Pentecostal church than this "Theologian of the Spirit." Thus, this paper contends that it would do well to draw on his insight to gain a more robust understanding of the oft-neglected third person of the Trinity.

Spoken by God: The Inspiration of Scripture

The Holy Spirit's role in scriptural inspiration stands as a hallmark of Calvin's pneumatology. Understanding the context in which Calvin lived is crucial to comprehending him in the present. A key point of contention between sixteenth-century Catholics and Protestants concerned the doctrine of Scripture, especially which books should be considered inspired. Though Calvin concurred with Rome on the divine inspiration and infallibility of Scripture, they differed regarding its authority in relation to the church.¹⁰ According to his opponents, Scripture was authoritative because it had been verified as such by Rome; therefore, the church held the authority to determine not only which books were divinely inspired, but also the correct interpretation of those books.¹¹ Taken to its logical conclusion, the Catholic Church asserted that its interpretation of Scripture alone was authoritative and thus, binding. Although the issues of canonicity and ecclesiastical authority, not the Spirit *per se*, divided the two camps, the pneumatological implications inherent in the debate are obvious. Calvin found the Catholic view to be a slight against the Spirit who had inspired the Word; Scripture, and its canonicity, were

9. See Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder*, 153. The author notes that this omission is true even of many who draw on Calvin for inspiration, and labels looking only to the illumination of Scripture as the Spirit's true work, as some Calvin devotees do, a "reductionist tendency."

10. Lopes and Da Conceicao, "Calvin, Theologian," 40–41.

11. Lopes and Da Conceicao, "Calvin, Theologian," 41–42.

not to be judged by the church. Rather, Calvin said, the church must submit itself to Scripture, which by its nature authenticates itself.¹² He claims:

But there has very generally prevailed a most pernicious error, that the Scriptures have only so much weight as is conceded to them by the suffrages of the Church; as though the eternal and inviolable truth of God depended on the arbitrary will of men . . . Thus sacrilegious men, while they wish to introduce an unlimited tyranny, under the name of the Church, are totally unconcerned with what absurdities they embarrass themselves and others, provided they can extort from the ignorant this one admission, that the Church can do everything.¹³

In other words, Calvin viewed the Catholic position as a capitulation to tyranny in the church and a grave slight against God by making his Word depend “on the arbitrary will of men.” When his opponents retorted that the church, under the Spirit’s guidance, compiled the books of the canon, Calvin responded that the church possessed authority only to the extent that it aligned with the Word.¹⁴ The church did not decide which books were divinely inspired, but recognized which books were inspired by the Spirit and submitted to them accordingly. Therefore, the Spirit’s role in inspiring the Scriptures leads to the conclusion that God and his Word alone hold authority. The church is simply to recognize and submit to that which the Spirit has established. Calvin did not consider himself innovative on this point; quoting from Eph 2:20, he claimed to stand in the apostolic tradition.¹⁵ Thus, Calvin is sometimes credited with reemphasizing the link between the Spirit and Word that had been neglected in medieval theology.¹⁶ “For Calvin,” Chen writes, “the Word and the Spirit of God are the two pillars of the Christian life . . . churches’ lives

12. See Calvin and Sadoletto, *A Reformation Debate*, 15.

13. Calvin and Sadoletto, *A Reformation Debate*, 31.

14. Lopes and Da Conceicao, “Calvin, Theologian,” 41. Note here how Calvin’s ecclesiology is also inherently linked both to his pneumatology and doctrine of Scripture.

15. For an in-depth discussion of Calvin’s indebtedness to the patristic authors, as well as his zeal to remain consistent with their teaching, see Lane, *John Calvin: Student*.

16. Lopes and Da Conceicao, “Calvin, Theologian,” 40.

have to be implemented within the balancing and interlinking relationship between the Word and Spirit.”¹⁷

Calvin’s position on inspiration also makes it clear that the Spirit intended for the Word to be accessible to all, including the unlearned, not to remain the property of ecclesial authorities.¹⁸ Calvin considered this practice an insult to the Spirit, as if the Lord were incapable of making his will clear to the ordinary believer. Certainly, Calvin would never encourage an individualistic mentality all too common in the modern western church. He, as a pastor, profoundly grasped the church’s need of faithful and committed clergy.¹⁹ A pastor, according to Calvin, bears the unique responsibility of nourishing his congregation through exposition of the Word. His quarrel, rather, was with the notion that any individual or body could claim their interpretation as infallible in the sense that the Scriptures were infallible, for only the latter are inspired by the Spirit. Though Calvin hardly holds a reputation for elevating subjective experience in his theology, it is striking how mystical he can sound on this issue.²⁰ His primary argument in defending the inspiration of the Word is that Scripture, by its very nature, testifies that it is true. Calvin claims that “Scripture bears upon the face of it as clear evidence of its truth, as white and black do of their colour, sweet and bitter of their taste.”²¹ Far from beginning his appeal by pointing to some outside standard—like alignment with scientific discoveries or consistency with textual criticism²²—Calvin appeals to the character of Scripture as proof of divine inspiration. He claims this is reinforced on the heart by a “secret testimony of the Spirit,” and at one point declares that “the testimony of the Spirit is superior to reason.”²³ This quotation comes as a rebuttal from Calvin to those who insist that Christians bear responsibility to “prove that Moses and the prophets were divinely inspired.” It bears noting

17. Cheng, “Calvin on the Work,” 174.
18. Zachman, *Reconsidering John Calvin*, 21.
19. Godfrey, *John Calvin: Pilgrim*, 20.
20. Zachman, *Reconsidering John Calvin*, 41–42.
21. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.1.
22. Quigley, *The Sovereign Spirit*, 26.
23. See Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.4.

that some Pentecostals have lamented the impact of traditional Calvinistic exegesis on their movement; for instance, Kenneth Archer contends “The Princeton scholars drank deep from the well of Enlightenment thinking,” as “They embraced Baconian Common Sense Realism and wed it to the traditional Reformed doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture.”²⁴ Interestingly, then, given his elevation of the Spirit’s testimony to the believer in confirming the truth of the Word, Calvin appears far more open to subjective experience in his approach to understanding Scripture than many of his Reformed heirs. Therefore, he may prove a more fitting conversation partner for Pentecostals who seek to construct a hermeneutic unique to their pneumatologically driven tradition. Given the emphasis Calvin grants to order elsewhere in his theology,²⁵ his admission concerning Scripture and reason is noteworthy, and should make readers reconsider the myth of Calvin as a detached scholar, not an engaged pastor.

The Creator of Faith: Illumination and the New Birth

Beyond inspiration, Calvin taught that the Spirit alone could enable one to receive the revelation contained in Scripture. Not only would the Word be of no effect, but even Jesus’s life and work would be of no advantage to humanity if not for the Spirit opening hearts to the gospel.²⁶ It is not just that the Spirit inspires the truth contained in Scripture, but that he also persuades the reader of that truth.²⁷ In discussing the Spirit’s role in the hermeneutical task, Bradley Noel points to this aspect of Calvin’s thought, observing that “We are unable to believe that (the Word of God) is such without the inner witness of the Holy Spirit to its authenticity.”²⁸ In his commentary on John, wherein he discusses Christ’s promise to send the Spirit, Calvin states:

24. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic*, 57.

25. Osterhaven, “John Calvin: Order,” 24.

26. Kim, “Reformed Pneumatology,” 172.

27. Beeke and William, *Calvin: Theologian and Reformer*, 25.

28. Noel, *Pentecostal and Postmodern Hermeneutics*, 149.

Christ is not here speaking about secret revelations, but about the power of the Spirit, which appears in the external teaching of the Gospel and in human speech. How can someone's voice penetrate minds, take root there, and eventually produce fruit, making hearts of stone into hearts of flesh and renewing the people themselves, unless the Spirit of Christ makes the Word alive? Otherwise, it would be a dead letter and an empty sound.²⁹

Calvin, though a firm believer in scriptural authority, taught that without the illumination of the Spirit, the Word remains a "dead letter." Even faith itself may only be wrought in the heart once the Spirit illuminates the Word.³⁰ Helm describes Calvin's view as similar to intuition or a "gut feeling"—a heartfelt assurance from the Lord that this is truly his testimony.³¹

Illumination, for Calvin, is not just intellectual comprehension. It involves submission to the truth of Scripture revealed by the Spirit. It is worth recalling Calvin's experience; as a Catholic earlier in life, granting sole authority to the testimony of Scripture seemed absurd to him until the Spirit illuminated the Word, testifying to its authority.³² Linked to this notion is Calvin's doctrine of conversion; namely, that the Spirit imparts the gifts of repentance and faith, as they cannot flow from the unregenerate heart.³³ Calvin teaches that, "those whom God is pleased to rescue from death, he quickens by the Spirit of regeneration; not that repentance is properly the cause of salvation, but because, as we have already seen, it is inseparable from the faith and mercy of God."³⁴ So clearly does he see regeneration as preceding repentance and faith that he explicitly denies repentance is the "proper cause" of salvation. While regeneration will not fail to produce repentance and faith, the Spirit effects new birth before the sinner demonstrates either.³⁵ This, for Calvin, is simply the logical conclusion of Paul's argument in 1 Cor 2:14 that

29. Calvin, *John*, 309.

30. McKim, *Calvin and the Bible*, 221.

31. See Helm, *Calvin at the Centre*, 72–73.

32. Beeke and William, *Calvin: Theologian and Reformer*, 25–27.

33. Helm, *Calvin at the Centre*, 208.

34. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.21.

35. Helm, *Calvin at the Centre*, 199.

humanity is incapable of understanding the things of God. If it is impossible for the unregenerate to comprehend the gospel, it follows that the Holy Spirit must regenerate them prior to the expression of repentance and faith.³⁶ Though most Pentecostals would undoubtedly reject his monergistic doctrine of predestination,³⁷ his emphasis on the Spirit's work in illumination, repentance, and faith might provide fresh insight for a movement that highly values a personal conversion experience.

Finally, given Calvin's concern with the primacy of the Word in the church—and the complementary roles of the Word and the Spirit—his understanding of how the two work together in conversion must be noted. Scripture emphasizes the essential role of the preached Word as noted by Paul in the inquires of Rom 10:9, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" What, then, of Calvin's repeated assertions that the Spirit acts prior to repentance and faith in regeneration? One must recall that he consistently declared the Word would be of no effect without the testimony of the Spirit. Of Paul's discussion of faith in Rom 10, Calvin declares:

There is an inseparable relation between faith and the word, and that these can no more be disconnected from each other than the rays of light from the sun . . . In this, therefore, whether God uses the agency of man, or works immediately by his own power, it has always been by his word that he manifests himself to those whom he designs to draw to himself. Hence Paul designates faith as the obedience which is given to the gospel.³⁸

Thus, God has ordained the Word to be the means by which the Spirit draws the sinner. The latter makes the former come alive; when the Word is illuminated by the Spirit, only then can the sinner properly understand the gospel and respond.³⁹ The faith

36. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.34.

37. Although it should be noted that exceptions do exist. See, for example, Emerick, "Predestination and the Freedom."

38. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.6.

39. Quigley, *The Sovereign Spirit*, 67–68.

he creates manifests itself as “a free promise in Christ . . . revealed to our minds and sealed on our hearts, by the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁰

Apprehended by Faith: Justification and Union with Christ

On the surface, the forensic view of justification that characterizes classic Reformation theology may seem somewhat binitarian; the Father and the Son are clearly in view, but what role is there for the Spirit? The answer to this question lies in the third book of his *Institutes*, which Calvin begins with a chapter entitled “The Benefits of Christ Made Available to Us by the Secret Operation of the Spirit,” where he says, concerning the Spirit’s witness of Christ:

The Spirit testifies concerning him, that we might not lose the benefits of the salvation which he has purchased. For as there are said to be three witnesses in Heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Spirit, so there are also three on earth, namely, water, blood, and Spirit. It is not without cause that the testimony of the Spirit is twice mentioned, a testimony which is engraved on our hearts by way of seal, and thus seals the cleansing and sacrifice of Christ.⁴¹

The Spirit’s role, then, is to apply the benefits which Christ has purchased, justification among them. Calvin notes that while the Spirit is responsible for the faith that leads to justification, he is also responsible for testifying that the righteousness of Christ is solely responsible for their hope before God.⁴² “All I say” Calvin declares “is that no righteousness can be found where the Spirit, whom Christ received in order to communicate it to his members, reigns not.”⁴³ By focusing on how the Spirit applies the benefits purchased by Christ, Calvin maintained a robust, forensic view of justification while still highlighting the work of the Spirit in redemption. He concludes, in true trinitarian form, “Christ, as he is God and man, justifies us . . . this work is

40. Quigley, *The Sovereign Spirit*, 67.

41. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.

42. Quigley, *The Sovereign Spirit*, 87.

43. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.2.

common also to the Father and the Holy Spirit; finally, that the righteousness of which God makes us partakers is the eternal righteousness of the eternal God.”⁴⁴ It might be granted that Calvin’s persistent emphasis on the work of Christ makes the Spirit’s work appear rather peripheral in comparison. For Calvin, the pneumatological dimension of justification lies in actualizing Christ’s work. His role, while indispensable, is not front and center. Yet, whether directly or not, Calvin’s position served to impact other aspects of his pneumatology in a profound sense; he reserves some of his strongest language in arguing for the doctrine of justification by faith alone for his theology of union with Christ. The Holy Spirit’s role in uniting believers with Jesus is inseparable from justification for Calvin,⁴⁵ as it is only through him that they enjoy right standing before God.⁴⁶

The theme of “participation” in Christ permeates Calvin’s theology;⁴⁷ not only does he devote an entire section of his *Institutes* to discussing how the Spirit unites believers with Christ, but he argues that this union expressed itself through the sacraments of communion and baptism as well.⁴⁸ Peter Ross contends, in his 2019 work on Calvin and Pentecostalism, that Christ is so joined to his people that “every godly thought or act of the believer is . . . a work of Christ through the Spirit, so allowing the Spirit to work in believers.”⁴⁹ Calvin’s theology is deeply Trinitarian; Julie Canlis outlines two “significant innovations in Calvin’s doctrine of the Spirit” in her book *Calvin’s Ladder*. The first is the bond between God and his people, as she notes that for Calvin the Spirit is “the self-gift of God to us,”⁵⁰ and “the point of contact”⁵¹ between God and humanity. The second is

44. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.9.

45. For a Pentecostal perspective on this matter see Macchia, *Justified in the Spirit*, 58–62. Macchia notes that “Calvin even made union with Christ through the indwelling of the Spirit theologically prior to justification” (58).

46. Billings, *Calvin, Participation*, 71.

47. Billings, *Calvin, Participation*, 69–70.

48. Billings, *Calvin, Participation*, 71.

49. Ross, *Pneumatology and Union*, 48.

50. Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 97.

51. Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 97.

how Calvin points to the Spirit as the bond between the Father and Son, not the “divine substance.” The Spirit is responsible for “conceiving, anointing, and empowering Jesus’ mission.”⁵² Thus, in every aspect of redemption, the Spirit plays an integral role. So keen is Calvin to integrate the work of the Son with the Spirit that he declares the latter’s cleansing of the soul is vital to ensure the blood of Christ is not shed in vain:

If the shedding of his sacred blood is not to be in vain, our souls must be washed in it by the secret cleansing of the Holy Spirit. For which reason, also, Paul, speaking of cleansing and purification, says, “but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11). The whole comes to this that the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually binds us to himself.⁵³

He goes on to note that, just as the Spirit unites the believer with Christ in the first place, so he is also responsible for maintaining that union, declaring “By the same grace and energy of the Spirit we become his members, so that he keeps us under him, and we in turn possess him.”⁵⁴ In fact, Ross goes on to highlight the Spirit’s role in self-denial in Calvin’s thought, explaining that “The motive for obedience lies with Christ through the union.”⁵⁵ Calvin points to passages such as Rom 6 and John 15 to substantiate his view; in the former case he argues the “grafting” into Christ Paul speaks of is a “secret union” brought about by the Spirit of God, just as he argues in the latter passage that Jesus and his disciples act as a vine and branches only through the working of the Holy Spirit in their hearts,⁵⁶ referring to this concept as the *Unio Mystica*. As much as any topic, this one highlights Calvin’s pastoral heart; because of the Spirit’s work, Jesus is no longer at a distance. Even when we do not sense him, we can rest assured that we are one with him.⁵⁷

52. Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 97.

53. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.

54. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.3.

55. Ross, *Pneumatology and Union*, 41.

56. Quigley, *The Sovereign Spirit*, 98.

57. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.9.

Calvin further discusses the hope that union with Christ ought to produce in the believer's life in his commentary on Galatians; in his discussion of Gal 2:20, Calvin teaches:

Ingrafted into the death of Christ, we derive from it a secret energy, as the twig does from the root . . . (Paul) does not live by his own life, but is animated by the secret power of Christ, so that Christ may be said to live and grow in him. For as the soul enlivens the body, so Christ imparts life . . . Christ lives in us in two ways. The one consists of governing us by his Spirit, and directing all our actions; the other, in making us partakers of his righteousness.⁵⁸

The benefits of union with Christ, then, are twofold; there are the invisible benefits, such as justification, and the tangible effects, such as the guidance and direction of the Spirit in one's daily walk. Perhaps Canlis summarizes best when she asserts that "It is only through union with Christ that Jesus's Father becomes our Father and that we in turn become children, entering the family dynamic. It is the Spirit's unique work to make God's Fatherhood concrete."⁵⁹

The Expectation of Life: Spirit, Sanctification, and Assurance of Salvation

While Calvin may have not placed the distinctive emphasis on the doctrine of sanctification as did some other theologians—for example, John Wesley—it nevertheless occupied a crucial place in his pneumatology. Calvin, again, is careful to note how the persons of the Trinity work together in the process. Quoting 1 Pet 1:2, which links election with "sanctification of the Spirit," he asserts that the Spirit washes the souls of believers through a "secret efficacy."⁶⁰ He states:

Christ came provided with the Holy Spirit after a peculiar manner, namely, that he might separate us from the world, and unite us in the hope of an eternal inheritance. Hence the Spirit is called the Spirit of

58. Calvin, *Galatians*, 52–53.

59. Canlis, "John Calvin," 6.

60. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.

sanctification, because he quickens and cherishes us, not merely by the general energy which is seen in the human race, as well as other animals, but because he is the seed and root of heavenly life in us.⁶¹

While adamant in his rejection of works-righteousness, Calvin nevertheless repudiated the notion that one could be a believer and yet continue to live in unrepentant rebellion.⁶² He declares that “Christ justifies no man without also sanctifying him,” as they are linked “by a perpetual and inseparable tie.”⁶³ Sanctification is thus the fruit of justification; it is not that growth in holiness contributes to one’s righteousness before God, but that union with Christ inevitably results in a passion for holiness. This was crucial for Calvin to uphold to those who abused the doctrine of justification by faith alone in the name of Christian liberty and Catholic opponents who charged that such a doctrine led to a neglect of sanctification. In his discussion with Roman Catholic cardinal Jacopo Sadoleto he explains:

We deny that good works have any share in justification, but we claim full authority for them in the lives of the righteous. For if he who has obtained justification possesses Christ, and at the same time, Christ is never where his Holy Spirit is not, it is obvious that gratuitous righteousness is necessarily connected with regeneration...where zeal for integrity and holiness is not in vigor, there neither is the Spirit of Christ.⁶⁴

While undisputedly rejecting the notion that sanctification has a role to play in justification, the two are still inseparable, since the same Spirit who regenerates also sanctifies. For Calvin, this process involves a separation from the world that enables one to serve Christ faithfully.⁶⁵ Though it involves the mortification of sin, it is not a matter of working with all one’s might, but rather allowing the Spirit to work so that the heart is transformed.⁶⁶

61. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.2.

62. Lee, *The Holy Spirit*, 170.

63. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.16.1.

64. Calvin and Sadoleto, *A Reformation Debate*, 62.

65. Quigley, *The Sovereign Spirit*, 104–5.

66. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.29.

Thus, having established that holy living does not cause justification but is an inevitable result of it, Calvin is still keen to clarify that even in sanctification it is the work of God by his Spirit, and not the striving of the believer, that produces the fruit of holiness. This did not diminish his insistence that humans had a responsibility to fight against their sinful desires.⁶⁷ One of the distinguishing features separating his thought from that of fellow reformer Martin Luther was his emphasis on the third use of the law—the belief that the moral imperatives contained in Scripture must guide the Christian’s life, particularly in reference to mortifying the flesh and overcoming sin.⁶⁸ Christians, then, can and should expect to see progression in holiness as the Spirit continually fights against the old nature.

This understanding directly impacted his doctrine of assurance. Calvin, deriding the scholastic notion that one could have assurance of salvation through dependence on merits,⁶⁹ declared that only by looking to Christ could one have confidence of salvation.⁷⁰ In fact, he held that not only could the redeemed be sure of their salvation, but they must be, for assurance is grounded in the cross, and not anything in believers themselves. Yet, Calvin also asserted that by the Spirit believers could be fully assured, through personal experience, that they were children of God.⁷¹ What Calvin cautioned against is not the Spirit’s subjective testimony but relying on that experience without grounding it in Christ’s work. He stressed the link between the Spirit and the Word in assurance, saying “We shall now have a full definition of faith if we say that it is a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favor toward us, founded on the truth of a free promise in Christ, and revealed to our minds, and sealed on our hearts, by

67. Quigley, *The Sovereign Spirit*, 112.

68. Thorsen, *Calvin Vs. Wesley*, 89.

69. Calvin and Sadoletto, *A Reformation Debate*, 97. Though Calvin drew on Augustine in support of his position he did not adopt it wholesale.

70. Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction*, 82.

71. See Thorsen, *Calvin vs. Wesley*, 91. Though writing as a Wesleyan, and thus more a proponent of John Wesley’s doctrine of assurance than Calvin’s, Thorsen is nevertheless charitable toward the latter.

the Holy Spirit.”⁷² Assurance, thus, is grounded in the objective and confirmed by the subjective. Though Calvin believed that Christians could expect to struggle with sin as long as they remained alive, he did not see this as cause for despair, but rather implies that the very presence of that struggle means that the Spirit is indeed at work.⁷³ Otherwise, individuals would not think to war against the flesh. Even while struggling, Calvin teaches, Christians may look to Christ for assurance and expect the testimony of his Spirit to confirm their faith. He considers this two-fold experience to be essential, declaring “Christ cannot be known without the sanctification of his Spirit; therefore faith cannot possibly be disjointed from pious affection.”⁷⁴ Even more explicitly demonstrating the need for a subjective testimony, he comments on Rom 8:11 by noting Christ promises the resurrection only to “those who feel his Spirit dwelling in them.”⁷⁵ Given this “intimate union,” Ross sees assurance as another area for potential dialogue between Calvin and the Pentecostals.⁷⁶

A related aspect of his pneumatology that demonstrates the value he placed on experience is the way Calvin highlights the Spirit as the “Spirit of Adoption,” as the Apostle Paul labels him.⁷⁷ Though Calvin did not devote any particular section to this doctrine in his *Institutes*, it is present through his discussion of other questions.⁷⁸ The Spirit, in confirming the Christian’s election, reminds them of the promise of adoption as children of God, acting as a “seal” of the promise. Though he grants, in a sense, that the elect have already been adopted into God’s family through new birth, this ministry of the Spirit remains necessary until they inherit that which has been promised. The effects of this work of the Spirit include greater liberty in prayer and a sense of guidance from the Lord as children would sense from

72. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.7.

73. Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction*, 82–83.

74. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.8.

75. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.39.

76. Ross, *Pneumatology and Union*, 107.

77. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.11.

78. Trumper, “An Historical Study,” 43–44.

their father.⁷⁹ Thus, the goal of adoption, for Calvin, is linked to assurance; through the testimony of the Spirit, Christians may approach God with confidence. “The Lord in his mercy,” Calvin concludes, “once adopted and ever defends them.”⁸⁰

A Spiritual Feast: Calvin on The Lord’s Supper

“Nowhere is the work of the Spirit in Calvin’s theology more prominent,” I. J. Hesselink charges, “than in his view of the Lord’s Supper.”⁸¹ This may strike the average evangelical as somewhat odd, given that the Spirit and the sacraments are not often associated with one another in their modern context. Leonard Vander Zee observes that even within denominations like the Christian Reformed Church, which owe much of their doctrinal orientation to Calvin, it is actually Zwingli’s understanding that is most influential today on the Supper.⁸² Yet, while even most Reformed churches today are, in Hesselink’s estimation, “More Zwinglian than Calvinian in regard to the sacraments,”⁸³ Calvin himself devoted a sizeable portion of his *Institutes* to refuting this position on the Supper. He also criticized those who placed too much emphasis on the sacrament’s power, such as the Catholic Church in the Mass.⁸⁴ Calvin, while vehemently rejecting transubstantiation, held that Christ was indeed present in the meal—albeit spiritually rather than physically. Central to his doctrine, which shares aspects with both Luther and Zwingli,⁸⁵ is the Spirit’s work, making the sacrament effective in the heart of the believer.⁸⁶ Canlis suggests “the role Calvin gave to the Spirit in the Lord’s Supper cannot be overstated,” and that not since the patristic era had anyone afforded the

79. Evans, “John Calvin,” 96–97.

80. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.17.6.

81. Hesselink, “The Role,” 78.

82. Vander Zee, “The Loss and Renewal,” 67–68.

83. Hesselink, “The Role,” 69.

84. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.9.

85. For a contemporary overview of their competing positions, see Mathison, *Given for You*, 239–68, which addresses alternatives to Calvin’s position.

86. Moore, “Baptist View,” 60–61.

“pneumatological dimensions” of the sacrament such attention.⁸⁷ Without this vital link, his position becomes incoherent; how can Christ be present if not physically in the elements as the Lutheran and Catholic positions hold? For Calvin, the power of the Supper does not lie in the elements, but the power of the Spirit working within the Christian’s heart.⁸⁸ He explains that:

The sacraments duly perform their office only when accompanied by the Spirit, the internal Master, whose energy alone penetrates the heart, stirs up the affections, and procures access for the sacraments into our souls. If he is wanting, the sacraments can avail us no more than the sun shining on the eyeballs of the blind, of sounds uttered in the ears of the deaf . . . this ministry, without the agency of the Spirit, is empty and frivolous, but when he acts within, and exerts his power, it is replete with energy.⁸⁹

Gordon Smith, in his work encouraging greater dialogue between Sacramental, Pentecostal, and Evangelical wings of the church, highlights Calvin’s pneumatologically driven position, claiming that “we must stress that both baptism and the Lord’s Supper are supremely Pentecostal acts, acts of the Spirit.”⁹⁰ It is fascinating how Calvin’s position compares to his view of the illumination of Scripture; just as the written Word is useless unless accompanied by the Spirit, so the Supper is without effect unless he “penetrates the heart” of the one receiving it. For Calvin, the elements do not contain the physical body and blood of Christ, but communicate his presence by the Spirit,⁹¹ who “stirs up the affections” of the Christian. It has been noted by some

87. See Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 239.

88. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.10.

89. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.9.

90. Smith, *Evangelical, Sacramental, & Pentecostal*, 42.

91. So central is his work that Vander Zee points out, “Rather than using the term real presence to describe how Christ communicates himself in the Eucharist, Calvin preferred to describe it as a spiritual presence. But he was concerned to make clear that by spiritual he did not mean ephemeral or unreal. In Calvin’s usage, the term simply means that Christ gives himself in the sacrament by the work of the Holy Spirit . . . Calvin therefore affirms the true presence of Christ in the sacrament through the Holy Spirit.” Vander Zee, “The Loss and Renewal,” 70–71.

within the Pentecostal tradition—among whom the memorial view has long been the consensus⁹²—that Calvin’s view of the Spirit’s presence would be a natural fit within Pentecostal pneumatology, which places a very high premium on the Spirit’s activity.⁹³ Daniel Tomberlin writes,

early Pentecostal leaders intuitively knew that there is a ‘presence’ inherent in the holy meal. Baptism in the Holy Spirit brought into their lives a real presence . . . (that) became associated with the Lord’s Supper. It is evident that Pentecostals understood that at the Table, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ is present.⁹⁴

It is not that Calvin would disagree with the position that the Supper is a memorial.⁹⁵ Yet, it is more than this; it is truly an encounter with the living God. Though Christ remains in Heaven, in a very real sense believers still feast on his body and blood; instead of the Lord lowering himself to earth, by the power of the Spirit the Christian’s heart is raised to heaven so that communion with Christ is possible.⁹⁶ All this is accomplished through a mysterious operation of the Spirit.

Finally, Calvin understood the Supper to be a means of fellowship with Christ and other believers; through the bond of the Spirit, which unites all believers to their Lord, the body communes with its head by rising spiritually into heaven—that is, into fellowship with the risen Jesus.⁹⁷ Canlis also touches on this aspect of Calvin’s eucharistic theology, noting that:

This is the eschatological dimension of the Lord’s Supper, which continues to bring us from the Old Creation into the new. The Spirit brings us into God’s reality, not him into ours. As Douglas Farrow

92. This is a reference to most Pentecostal denominations in the twenty-first century. See Green, *Toward a Pentecostal Theology*, especially Green’s analysis of primary sources in chapter 3 for an analysis of early Pentecostal sacramentology that demonstrates that not all early Pentecostals held a strictly memorial understanding of the Supper.

93. Siekawitch, “Calvin, Spirit, Communion,” 14–15.

94. See Tomberlin, *Pentecostal Sacraments*, 195.

95. See Blocher, “Calvin on the Lord’s,” 58–59.

96. Siekawitch, “Calvin, Spirit, Communion,” 21.

97. Hesselink, “Reformed View,” 81–82.

says, “It is *we* who require eucharistic relocation.” Forgoing the usual complaints about the spatial nature of this scheme, Calvin’s point is that God controls our eucharistic participation, and that the nature of this participation is *koinonia*. The Lord’s Supper thus becomes a transforming event for creaturely reality—ours, not Jesus’—for to be brought into *koinonia* with the triune God is an ontologically shattering event.⁹⁸

One may conclude, then, that Calvin’s theology of the Supper has a strong eschatological accent. This too marks him out as a valuable dialogue partner for Pentecostals. Steven Land, in his book *Pentecostal Spirituality*, notes that historically, “the theological task” for Pentecostalism “is best understood as a discerning reflection by the eschatological missionary community upon the living reality of God with us.”⁹⁹ If this is true for the movement’s theology on the whole, its doctrine of the Supper ought not be excluded. For Calvin, Christ will no longer descend from his place of glory, but his people will be raised to fellowship with him. The Supper, therefore, is a foretaste of what is to come at the end of the age when believers are physically united with him. Recalling Beeke’s observation that Calvin considered one’s experience of the Spirit to be even more important than comprehending him, the reformer concludes his analysis of the Supper in true Pentecostal form, declaring “It is a mystery of Christ’s secret union with the devout which is by nature incomprehensible . . . to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it.”¹⁰⁰

In All Their Fullness: Calvin and the Gifts of the Spirit in the Church

With the emergence of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements across the globe has come a renewed interest in certain gifts of the Spirit—tongues, prophecy, and miracles—whose place have become subjects of debate in virtually every branch of the

98. Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 163.

99. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, 183.

100. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.32.

church, including Calvin's own Reformed tradition.¹⁰¹ Hesselink sees potential for compatibility, arguing that "the charismatic movement . . . stresses and magnifies the personality and power of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, the Reformed tradition—at least certain strains of it—has placed great emphasis on the person and work of the Holy Spirit."¹⁰² Calvin himself, however, believed the miracles performed by Christ and his apostles were intended to authenticate their preaching, claiming tongues and prophecy were designed to "beautify the first beginnings of the gospel," and that in causing them to cease God demonstrated that the perfect, in Christ, had come.¹⁰³ Likewise, in his commentary on Acts, Calvin distinguishes between ordinary gifts which were to be permanent, and extraordinary gifts which were designed to authenticate apostolic preaching.¹⁰⁴ Though some reject the cessationist label placed on Calvin given that the cessationist/continuationist divide is a modern one,¹⁰⁵ it is hard to understand Calvin's exegesis of such passages as anything but that of a cessationist.

Although in this sense Calvin confines the Spirit's miraculous work to the apostolic age, is it possible the Pentecostal movement's love of these particular gifts has, at times, overshadowed the church's need for the remaining ones, to which Calvin devotes great attention? His writings note how the gifts are essential for the church to function. For example, those whom God calls to pastoral ministry may have substantial education and natural ability; however, such credentials are meaningless unless the Spirit empowers them to fulfil the task.¹⁰⁶ Regarding Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts in Rom 12, Calvin highlights how mercy, service, teaching, giving, and other gifts are vital to unity and mutual edification within the church.¹⁰⁷ They also evoke a sense of humility, reminding believers that no one can accomplish "all

101. Hesselink, "Charismatic Movement," 147–48.

102. Hesselink, "Charismatic Movement," 148.

103. Evans, "John Calvin," 95.

104. Van Alten, "John Calvin on the Gifts," 5.

105. Van Alten, "John Calvin on the Gifts," 1–2.

106. Wetmore, *The Theology*, 93–94.

107. Wetmore, *The Theology*, 92.

things at one time,” thus acknowledging the mutual reliance they have on one another.¹⁰⁸ Likewise, in his commentary on 1 Cor—an epistle which discusses the gifts which Calvin would label “miraculous”—he reiterates the claim that they were given for mutual edification.¹⁰⁹ It is fascinating to note in this section that, while he still refers to them as signs, he also grants they were designed for the church’s edification, just as the “ordinary” gifts in Romans. At one point in his commentary on Acts 5 he even implies that a restoration of certain gifts could be possible if God’s people would repent of vices like sloth and ingratitude.¹¹⁰ Beeke, also noting Calvin’s cessationism in his Acts commentary, notes “Calvin says that sinful ambition eventually deprived the church of these gifts.”¹¹¹ Why would Calvin make this claim if he believed the gifts that ceased were relevant solely to the apostolic era? His precise understanding of their purpose and function, then, appears somewhat unclear at times.

The question, then, is why Calvin seems so averse to certain gifts of the Spirit remaining in operation. Furthermore, given that Calvin recognized the role of all the gifts in edifying the early church, why would he not conclude that they all may be beneficial in edifying the church in his era? Once again, when considering Calvin’s pneumatology, it is imperative to consider his historical context and what external factors may have influenced him to hold this position. John Hesselink, commenting on Calvin and the gift of healing, notes that his rejection of this gift for his age came in response to Catholic claims of miraculous healing.¹¹² Indeed, many of their practices which Calvin deemed contrary to Scripture were defended by Rome on the grounds that they had been revealed to the church by the Spirit—outside of the written word.¹¹³ So, in considering how Calvin might

108. Calvin, *Romans*, 267.

109. Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 395.

110. Van Alten, “John Calvin on the Gifts,” 9.

111. Beeke, “The Holy Spirit,” 393.

112. Hesselink, “Charismatic Movement,” 148.

113. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.19.18. It is worth noting that in the very same chapter that Beeke engages Calvin’s theology of spiritual gifts, he also points

react to some of the more outlandish types in the Charismatic movement who claim new revelation by the Spirit, it may be helpful to consider how he responded to both the Catholic Church and other Protestant groups such as the Anabaptists of his day.¹¹⁴ To them, Calvin would likely say, as in his *Institutes*, that “the office of the Spirit promised to us, is not to form new and unheard of Revelations, or to coin a new form of doctrine, by which we may be led away from the received doctrine of the gospel, but to seal on our minds the very doctrine which the gospel recommends.”¹¹⁵ In other words, the Scriptures are not only the written revelation of God, but they are the full and final revelation. Christians, therefore, should not expect the Holy Spirit to speak outside or beyond the Scriptures, a position he regarded as protecting the church from false prophecies that opposed the inspired word.¹¹⁶ The Anabaptists, he charged, were guilty of replacing the Spirit’s true work with “frenzied excess,” and in doing so obscured his true work of regeneration; the Spirit, Calvin charged, is “full of wisdom and understanding,” not a “Spirit of giddiness.”¹¹⁷ Thus, when Calvin is read in context, his caution against ecstatic experience is in no way intended to downplay the Christian’s experience of the Spirit, but rather to protect his true work from what Calvin believed to be a distortion. It is impossible to know exactly how Calvin may react if he observed a church in which the “miraculous” gifts were used in proper order. Though he makes an argument for their cessation based on his exegesis of Scripture, in light of his historical context one cannot help but wonder if his cessationism was driven in no small part by what he saw as the abuses of certain gifts in the Catholic and Anabaptist world.

In short, despite his cessationism, one must not depict Calvin as if he cared little for the gifts of the Spirit in general. In fact, he

out that, for the reformer, “the Spirit without the word is a delusion.” Beeke, “The Holy Spirit,” 378.

114. See Calvin, *Treatises against the Anabaptists*, for an overview of Calvin’s rebuttals to what he perceived as doctrinal errors within these groups.

115. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.9.

116. Thorsen, *Calvin vs. Wesley*, 43.

117. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.14.

suggests that one of the primary reasons believers must seek fellowship with other Christians is that God manifests himself in them through the gifts of the Spirit.¹¹⁸ Christian fellowship is vital because the Spirit gifts each member so that they edify the entire body. “Governing Calvin’s understanding of the gifts,” Beeke explains, “is that the Spirit intends them to be used for the common good of the church. When any gift deviates from this purpose, it loses its proper function.”¹¹⁹ So deeply convinced of this truth was Calvin that he established friendships with other Christians based on the gifts he saw in them.¹²⁰ Thus, despite his assertion that certain gifts of the Spirit ceased with the apostolic age, and therefore have no place in the church outside of its primitive era, those who would cast Calvin as uninterested in the gifts of the Spirit are perhaps not granting him enough grace on the matter. The fact that a convinced cessationist demonstrated such interest in spiritual gifts could serve as a much-needed reminder to contemporary Pentecostals that theological allies may be found in unlikely places.

All Things Considered? A Theologian of the Spirit

One can only speculate on how Calvin might interact with the Pentecostal movement, in which the Spirit’s work is especially emphasized, were he alive today. Nevertheless, his interest in the Spirit’s work confirms that he would be an excellent conversation partner. When recounting the enormous impact Calvin’s pneumatology had on his larger theology, the fact that it has often been overlooked is baffling. It is truly an untapped resource that Pentecostals would benefit from in constructing what Gabriel calls a “formal and comprehensive pneumatology.”¹²¹ While this paper has explored several areas where the Spirit features prominently in Calvin’s thought, there remain doctrines

118. Zachman, *Reconsidering John Calvin*, 47.

119. Beeke, “The Holy Spirit,” 392.

120. Zachman, *Reconsidering John Calvin*, 47.

121. Gabriel, “Pneumatology: Eschatological Intensification,” 206.

beyond the scope of this piece, such as common grace, creation, providence, that Pentecostals might benefit from engaging. His contribution to the church's understanding of the Spirit has made him a prominent voice in considering how the church should understand the third person of the Trinity. The rest of the body of Christ, including the robustly pneumatologically Pentecostal movement, would do well to heed that voice, which has time and time again lived up to the label "Theologian of the Holy Spirit."

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