Calvin the Mystic

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John Calvin

There is a certain popular image associated with the person of John Calvin. To his admirers, he was the closest thing to a saint they will admit; to his detractors, he was the bloodthirsty butcher of Geneva, a man who established a semi-theocracy in Switzerland to worship a God that rejoices at the damnation of sinners. To friend and foe alike, however, he was an austere scholar—cold, even harsh—the literary stoic set as an antitype to the firebrand Luther. The Reformed tradition that he influenced, likewise, has a reputation for a detached intellectualism; one need only peek into a Presbyterian congregation during Sunday worship to see that being one of God's elect comes with a certain penchant for stillness. If there is one thing that the Reformed tradition, and Calvin by extension, is not lauded for, it is their mystical tradition. In the history of the Reformed churches, there has been no St. Francis of Assisi, preaching to birds as he receives the stigmata. Nor does the Reformed tradition boast of islands of quiet monks, praying to God in the hope of catching some glimpse of the divine light. The perception of the Reformed as being fundamentally anti-mystical is exacerbated by their station in contemporary American Christianity. In the somewhat frenzied landscape of modern American Protestantism, the Reformed are the staunch opponents of the rising tide of charismatics. To many Reformed Christians, the claims of Pentecostals and other charismatics to apostolic gifts (such as speaking in tongues) and extra-Biblical revelation smacks of sensationalism and opens the door to an evangelical movement untethered from the truth of Scripture. The Reformed tradition as it stands today, then, at least in the popular imagination, comes as close to a type of rationalism as any religious faith can be said to approach.

In stark condemnation of this notion, however, stands the fact that John Calvin—a man with as much claim to be the father of Reformed Christianity as anyone since Augustine—was something of a mystic in his own right. This side of John Calvin is most apparent in his writings on the Eucharist, and it is with the bread and the wine that Reformed mysticism is carried on throughout the history of the tradition, even if at times it exists in an antagonistic relationship with the rationalistic mainstream.

The text most widely associated with John Calvin—and the text with which any serious students of his thought should strive to familiarize themselves—is of course his monumental *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Originally penned in Latin, and then soon after in Calvin's native tongue of French, the volume is the closest thing that Protestantism has to a *Summa Theologica*. A brief skim over the table of contents will immediately reveal some of Calvin's mystical bent: the longest chapters in the book are not dedicated to the controversial doctrine of double predestination most commonly associated with his name, but rather to prayer and the

Eucharist, at 52 and 50 subsections, respectively.

Historians and theologians have long labored to identify the unifying element of Calvin's theology, much as it has been argued that *Sola Fide* was the glue that held Luther's thought together. Interpretations of Calvin's thought abound—the idea that predestination was the basis of his entire system lives on in the popular imagination, both within churches and without—but one of the more compelling, especially in light of the structure of the *Institutes*, is that of Union with Christ.

Calvin's doctrine of Union with Christ is an oft-overlooked aspect of his theology, even by many modern Calvinists. In its most basic form, it is a way of understanding sanctification, the process by which the justified Christian is made holy throughout his/her mortal existence and is united closer to the person of Christ. To dig deeper into the vaults of this doctrine, however, is to discover a doctrine that forces the Christian religion to the apex of Christocentrism and bears essential fruit for the doctrines of atonement and justification. To ignore this concept is to miss the central aspect of Calvin's theology altogether - not predestination or the divine decrees, important as they may be—but the eternal God-man Himself, Christ Jesus.

Critics of the Reformation's doctrine of imputed righteousness—the rock upon which the Reformed understanding of justification stands or falls—have ascribed to it the character of a "legal fiction," to quote the late R.C. Sproul.[1] The critique seems valid; how can a just God inflict his wrath on an innocent victim, this punishment standing in place of that which is deserved by the guilty? The idea is scandalous. This is not how justice works. The atonement necessitates that Christ be a true representative of the guilty—that, somehow, the guilty be united to Christ. Truly, for the crucifixion to have been of any avail, *we must have been crucified with Christ*. It is into this crucial gap that the Calvinistic doctrine of Union with Christ emerges in all its glory.

When Adam fell from paradise, the entirety of the human race fell with him, because *in Adam was contained, truly and organically, all of mankind—not merely by proxy*. In like manner, when the second Adam was hanged on the cross, all of mankind (or at least all of the elect), hung with Him. As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. Like our union with Adam, our union with Christ is not merely a figurative union by proxy—such would perhaps be open to charges of legal fiction—but is a *true union*, by which the believer is united truly and organically to the person of Christ, much as the head is united organically to the body.

Such, at least, mirrors the argument presented by the somewhat-obscure Reformed theologian John Williamson Nevin in his work on the Eucharist, *The Mystical Presence* (1846).[2] Although it was controversial at the time of its publication, and is practically unknown in most Calvinistic circles today, Nevin's book, in my view, means that he, more than any other thinker I have read, correctly taps into Calvin the mystic.

In his 2008 book *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, Dr. R. Scott Clark wrote that the Reformed churches descended from Calvin locate their "modest mysticism in Word and sacrament."[3] The mysticism of John Calvin and the churches he inspired may be called modest in breadth—certainly you will witness no speaking in angelic tongues, levitating, or other powers ascribed to mystics both ancient and modern in your average Presbyterian congregation—but it would be a mistake to consider it modest in depth. What Calvin and the Reformed divines of the sixteenth century denied was transubstantiation and the local or carnal presence; what they did not deny, but rather upheld, was that what happened in the sacrament of the Eucharist was a miracle.

Though Calvin denied that the body and blood of Christ were carnally received in the sacrament, what he and his successors did not deny was that the body and blood of Christ were truly and substantially received by the power of the Holy Ghost—a doctrine most commonly known as the *spiritual presence*, but perhaps ought better to be called the *mystical presence*, as Nevin named it. Calvin held that what was received by the believer was the same flesh of Christ that was crucified, buried, and rose again, the same blood that once watered Golgotha. What is received in the Supper is both the real, substantial bread and wine, and the real, substantial body and blood of the God-man; in this way the sacrament typifies the Incarnation. A mere ghostly, Gnosticized doctrine of the sacrament, this is not. Calvin almost seemed to evoke the sacerdotalism he opposed when, in discussing the Eucharist in his *Institutes*, he wrote that "the communion of the flesh and blood of

Christ is necessary to all who aspire to the heavenly life."[4]

The Reformer of Geneva was able to make such a claim because the sacrament of Communion was inseparable from the Union with Christ. Calvin held that the sacraments were true means of grace, aids to sanctification, albeit not *ex opere opero*. In this scheme, the Supper occupied a principal place as one of the chief means by which the Union with Christ was effected and strengthened. The body of Christ is offered "that we may become one body with him," by participating in the sacrament "Christ truly form[s] one with us."[5]

The mysticism of John Calvin is a subtle mysticism; to an outside observer, there is nothing immediately striking about the taking of the bread and the wine in a pious silence. However, as referenced earlier, the depths of Reformed mysticism are bottomless, plunging ever deeper into the life of the eternal Christ. It is the life of Christ that is offered in the Supper; through the body and blood, the believer is bound ever more tightly to Him, to His Passion, His crucifixion, and His resurrection. The Union with the King of Kings is such that the Christian can truly say with the Apostle Paul: I was crucified with Christ, I was buried with Christ, I will rise with Christ. This is no legal fiction.

Reading Calvin is, at times, daunting. He is measured, not quite as analytical as some suppose, but a far cry from the bombastic Luther. One can almost see his frail form hunched over his desk, pen in hand, on a cold night in Geneva. His words float off the page like a whisper, the structure of his work so strikingly similar to the Augustine whom he loved. Calvin was undoubtedly a complex historical figure. Peppered references to Michael Servetus throughout the *Institutes* cannot help but bring to mind the orange glow of flames flickering against the sky, the odor of burning flesh, and then the crackling of flames in the fireplace as the theologian dips his pen once more to the inkwell. John Calvin has been remembered in history by many names: a scholar, a tyrant, a stern philosopher, the greatest mind of his generation, and the cruelest. If I may add a title to his legacy, let it be this: Calvin the Mystic; a man whose life was possessed by a burning desire to be united, for eternity, to the divine *Logos*.

Notes

1. R.C. Sproul, *Justified by Faith Alone* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

2. John Williamson Nevin, *The Mystical Presence, and Other Writings on the Eucharist* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1966).

3. R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety and Practice* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2008), 113.

4. Jean Calvin and Henry Beveridge, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2017), 900.

5 *Ibid.*, 900-901.