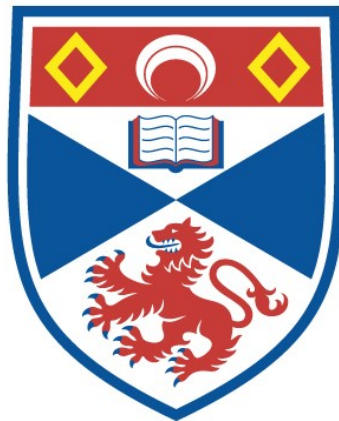


A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SOTERIOLOGICAL
THEMES IN CALVIN'S EARLY WRITINGS

Steven M. Marsh

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MPhil
at the
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*A Critical Analysis of Soteriological Themes
in Calvin's Early Writings*

Steven M. Marsh
M.Phil.
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Abstract

This dissertation will offer an analysis of conversion and its related themes in Calvin's early writings. It will include an introduction and five chapters. In the Introduction, I plan to accomplish five things. First, I will set forth a statement about and a definition of conversion. Second, I will explore the notion within the Reformed tradition that the *ecclesia reformata* is an *ecclesia reformanda* and its impact on the nature of conversion. Third, I will state what has led me to conduct a study of Calvin's view of conversion and its related themes in his early writings. Fourth, I will provide definitions of words that are used within the Reformed and the broad evangelical Protestant traditions in the United States to articulate an understanding of the notion of conversion. Fifth, I will pose two questions that need to be answered as a result of this study.

Chapter 1 will describe current views of conversion that are represented in the Reformed and the broad evangelical Protestant traditions in the United States, as well as the evangelical Reformed subset of the broad evangelical Protestant tradition. Chapter 2 will provide a brief overview of Calvin's understanding of conversion in his writings in their entirety. Chapter 3 will analyze Calvin's view of conversion and its related themes as it is expressed in *Psychopannychia* (1534) and *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536). Chapter 4 will conduct a brief analysis to see what Calvin meant and the Reformed and the broad evangelical Protestant traditions mean, as well as the evangelical Reformed subset of the broad evangelical Protestant tradition, when they each speak of conversion. Chapter 5 will set forth answers to the two questions raised.

I, Steven M. Marsh, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 40,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

date: *31 March 2002* signature of candidate *✓*

I was admitted as a research student in October, 1996 and as a candidate for the degree of Masters in Philosophy March, 2000; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 1996 and 2002.

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Introduction

Intro.1 Topic

This dissertation will offer an analysis of conversion and its related themes in Calvin's early writings.

Intro.2 An Approach to the Topic

The dissertation will include an introduction and five chapters. In the introduction, I plan to accomplish five things. First, I will set forth a descriptive statement about conversion and a working definition. Second, I will explore the notion within the Reformed tradition that the *ecclesia reformata* is an *ecclesia reformanda* and its impact on the nature of conversion. Third, I will state what has led me to conduct a study of Calvin's view of conversion and its related themes in his early writings. Fourth, I will provide operative definitions of words that are used within the Reformed and the broad evangelical Protestant traditions in the United States, as well as the evangelical Reformed subset within the broad evangelical Protestant tradition, to articulate an understanding of the notion of conversion. Fifth, I will pose two questions that need to be answered as a result of this study.

Five chapters will follow this introduction to the study. Chapter 1 will describe current views of conversion that are represented in the Reformed and the broad evangelical Protestant traditions in the United States, as well as the evangelical Reformed subset of the broad evangelical Protestant tradition. Chapter 2 will provide a brief overview of Calvin's understanding of conversion in his writings in their entirety. Chapter 3 will analyze Calvin's view of conversion and its related themes as it is expressed in *Psychopannychia* (1534) and *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536).

Chapter 4 will conduct a brief analysis to see what Calvin meant and the Reformed and the broad evangelical Protestant traditions mean, as well as the evangelical Reformed subset of the broad evangelical Protestant tradition, when they each speak of conversion. Chapter 5 will set forth answers to the two questions raised.

Intro.3 A Descriptive Statement and A Working Definition of Conversion

Stephen C. Neill articulates a descriptive statement and a working definition of conversion that will serve as an informative base for the writing of this dissertation. The descriptive statement is that

Conversion is the beginning of real Christian life. Christian nurture, education and worship may be valuable preparations. But no one is, or should be called, a Christian until he has personally encountered God in Jesus Christ, until he has personally repented, until he has personally accepted God's gift of salvation through faith in Christ, until by faith he has individually been born again. The reality of the church in every generation consists in those who have thus been born again. The continuance of the Church in the world depends on there being enough people who have passed through this experience, and through whom it can be passed on to others.¹

And the working definition is that

Conversion is primarily an act or determination of the will. All men are in a state of alienation from God; each man is the centre of his own world, and claims the right to determine his own existence. This is rebellion and the way of death. Even those who have been baptised do in practice go on living in this way; particular sins are the fruit of the central sin of rebellion. Real life begins only when a man consciously finds his true centre in God. God's offer of grace is continuous and unconditional. But it constrains no man and leaves the freedom of decision to men. To return to God is response to the love of God manifest in Christ. Nevertheless it is impossible without a decision on the part of the individual, the exercise of that freedom which has been impaired by sin, but which God Himself has kept in being in every man. Without this personal and individual response, there can be no reality of Christian life.²

The statement on conversion can be affirmed the Reformed and the broad evangelical Protestant traditions. The definition provided captures the sentiment of the broad

¹Stephen C. Neill, "Conversion," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 3 (1950): 353.

²Ibid., 354.

evangelical Protestant tradition. It captures the partial sentiment of the evangelical Reformed subset. But it does not capture the sentiment of the Reformed tradition. What does the Reformed tradition believe about the nature of conversion?

Intro.4 The *ecclesia reformata* is an *ecclesia semper reformanda*

The Reformed tradition³ acknowledges the need for the continual reformation of the church catholic. This notion has been identified with the descriptive phrase that the *ecclesia reformata* is an *ecclesia semper reformanda*. Simply stated, churches within the Reformed tradition are committed to a process of continual self-examination and reformation within the church. The Reformed tradition is committed to change. And Scripture is to guide that change. The Reformed Church is always reforming according to the Word of God.

My interest in this descriptive phrase, the *ecclesia reformata* is an *ecclesia semper reformanda*, however, is narrowly focused on change in the sense of conversion. How does the Reformed tradition understand the nature of conversion in light of this statement? In both corporate and personal terms from what and to what is the change or conversion?

The Reformed tradition traces its heritage to John Calvin. How Calvin understood the nature of conversion is critical for an assessment of whether or not the Reformed and the evangelical Reformed subset of the broad evangelical Protestant tradition are

³There are common theological themes that unite churches, which identify themselves within the Reformed tradition. The Constitution of the World Alliance of Reformed churches (revised 1982) states that membership is open to "any church which accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; holds the Word of God given in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the supreme authority in matters of faith and life; acknowledges the need for continuing reformation of the church catholic; whose position in faith and evangelism is in general agreement with that of the historic Reformed confessions, recognizing that the Reformed tradition is a biblical, evangelical, and doctrinal ethos, rather than any narrow and exclusive definition of faith and order." (*Historical Dictionary of Reformed Churches*, edited by Robert Benedetto, Darrell L. Guder, and Donald K. McKim (London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1999), xlix.)

operating from an accurate rendering of the notion that the *ecclesia reformata* is an *ecclesia semper reformanda*.

The Latin *conversio* means “a turning, changing or revolution.” There are various ways in which conversion has been construed. Two possible ways of considering conversion, for example, might be referred to as punctiliar and continuous. The former can be defined as a conversion experience consisting in a self-contained moment or event of limited temporal duration. The latter defines conversion, instead, as a process not contingent upon any one event, but inclusive of many. It will be my contention that for Calvin, conversion can helpfully be thought of under both the punctiliar and continuous models. He sometimes stresses one particular event and at other times a continuous process. This process orientation is crucial for Calvin’s understanding of conversion.

Another question, which arises about conversion, has to do not so much with its temporal extension as with the sphere of life in which it takes place. The phenomenon may take place in several spheres. It may be primarily confessional; a change from Catholicism to Protestantism for example. Or it may be theological; a change from one theological standpoint to another. Or it may be ‘religious’ in the widest sense, indicating a fundamental change of orientation in the whole of one’s existence, and embracing ‘confessional,’ ‘theological’ and other dimensions.

The only reference that Calvin, himself, makes to his conversion is in his *Commentary of the Psalms* (1557) when in the preface he references a sudden conversion (*subita conversione*).⁴ Calvin writes, “Having thus received some taste and knowledge of

⁴ The word conversion is problematic for the initial stages of this study. The language of conversion brought to the discussion is foreign to Calvin’s theology and is imposed on it. Conversion, in the Greek *metanoia* and the Latin *conversio* means “turning around.” Current theological usage of the word in the broad evangelical Protestant tradition, infers that a person not only has turned or responded to God’s

true godliness (*pietas*), I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein, I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardour.”⁵ Calvin’s understanding of conversion was expressed in terms of *pietas*. He understood *pietas* to be true godliness, consisting of a sincere love for God as Father and an equally compelling fear and reverence of God as Lord.⁶ True godliness (*pietas*)

does not consist in a fear, which willingly indeed flees God’s judgment, but since it cannot escape is terrified. True godliness (*pietas*) 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 (sec. 2).⁷

For Calvin, *pietas* “was the shorthand symbol for his whole understanding and practice of Christian faith and life.”⁸

Calvin’s understanding of conversion is a reorientation of the soul of an individual. He views conversion as a process initiated by God. It is an encounter by and with *pietas*. Conversion is a growing awareness of the implications of such an understanding and a practice of that understanding in Christian faith and life. Although Calvin himself underwent a reorientation of the soul, he does not write of his conversion as a single event with a limited and focused temporal duration. Rather, Calvin describes conversion as a process demonstrating movement from *impietas* toward *pietas*, a transition of sorts. Thus, for Calvin, in this movement or transition from *impietas* toward

call in Jesus Christ through repentance and faith, and in that order, but can also document when that turn happened. This turning around or change effects a radical transformation of a person’s heart, mind, and will. It would be more accurate to speak of Calvin’s encounter by and with godliness.

⁵John Calvin, *Commentary of the Psalms*, vol. 1, translated by James Anderson (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), xl-xli.

⁶John Calvin, *Catechism 1538*, translated and annotated by Ford Lewis Battles (Pittsburgh: The Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1972), 2.

⁷Ibid, 46.

⁸Ford Lewis Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, edited by Robert Benedetto (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996), 289.

pietas, a conversion process, there is growth into the Christian life to perfection beyond death.

With the writing of his *Commentary on the Psalms* (1557), it would seem, then, that Calvin was intuitively aware that true godliness (*pietas*) was not a stagnant notion relegated to a once and for all experience. To the contrary, Calvin's language betrays an understanding of true godliness (*pietas*) as an experience, which is progressive in nature and content.⁹ For Calvin, making progress in true godliness (*pietas*) seems to be limitless in scope and temporal locus during our earthly lives.

Some twenty-one years earlier in the preface to the 1536 edition of *Institutes*, Calvin writes, "My purpose was solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped toward true godliness."¹⁰ This concise statement indicates that for Calvin experiencing true godliness was important for both his reader and himself. He seems to understand the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas* as having a beginning, but not an ending in this earthly life.

Calvin's understanding of conversion is more properly understood as a transition from *impietas* toward *pietas* beginning with a punctiliar event of sure faith and then continuing through a series of punctiliar events throughout our earthly existence than a

⁹In his *Concerning Scandals*, Calvin refers to the gradual nature of Luther's understanding of conversion. "We remember with amazement how deep was the whirlpool of ignorance and how horrible the darkness of errors in the papacy. Then it was a great miracle of God that Luther and those who labored at the same time in restoring the doctrine of the faith were able to extricate themselves from it little by little. Some pretend that they are offended because they did not see everything all at once and because such a difficult task was not brought to absolute perfection on the first day, and they do so in order not to give their assent to the gospel or to complete the course after starting out on it...For it is exactly as if someone finds fault with us because at the first streak of dawn we do not yet see the midday sun. [John Calvin, *Concerning Scandals*, translated by John W. Fraser (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1978), 83.]

¹⁰John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 1.

once and for all punctiliar event. Such a punctiliar event of sure faith then initiates a process of *faithing*,¹¹ which is continuous throughout a believer's life.

The conversion experience then, as a transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*, is a series of punctiliar events with none necessarily contingent upon others. Take for example the biblical notion of mortification of the flesh. By definition, mortification of the flesh is the subduing of those things in our lives that are contrary to the gospel. By self-denial, we are to remove such things from our lives. "We are baptized into the mortification of the flesh, which begins with our baptism and which we pursue day by day and which will, moreover, be accomplished when from this life we pass to the Lord."¹² The daily mortification of the flesh contributes to our turning back toward God and moving toward true godliness. One day our mortification of the flesh may be with respect to the lust of our hearts; the next day jealousy. Neither is contingent on the other, but both must be subdued, that is mortified.

Furthermore, Calvin views conversion, this transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*, as a fundamental change of orientation in the whole of our existence, in that we are reborn in the *imago Dei*, a life of holiness. "...it will be nothing amiss for us to regard holiness of life to be the way, not indeed that leads, but by which those chosen by their God are led, into the glory of the Heavenly Kingdom."¹³ Conversion begins with a punctiliar event of sure faith and takes shape through a continuous series of events throughout our earthly existence and is completed at the final consummation when we are led into the kingdom of God. Moreover, I will show that Calvin's understanding of

¹¹I have coined the word *faithing* to denote the active and ongoing nature of the work of faith in which repentance is one aspect. Ronald Wallace in *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* states that "For Calvin, the Christian life is simply the constant practice of repentance" (99).

¹²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 98.

¹³*Ibid.*, 41.

conversion encompasses election, regeneration, union with Christ, faith, repentance, justification, and sanctification all words, phrases, and themes that he uses to describe the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*, or the conversion experience.

The fact that Calvin references his conversion only once is a possible indication that his understanding of conversion might be different than that of the Reformed and the broad evangelical Protestant traditions in the United States, as well as the evangelical Reformed subset within the broad evangelical Protestant tradition. According to Calvin, the will is in bondage to sin. It is unable to choose righteousness. Until the will is set free from its bondage to sin it cannot choose salvation in Christ. Calvin writes, "In man, therefore, if he be judged according to natural gifts, not one spark of good will be found in him from the top of his head to the sole of his feet."¹⁴ How the will is set free from its bondage to sin is the key to an accurate rendering of Calvin's understanding of conversion. That rendering is seen at the earliest in Calvin's *Psychopannychia* (1534) and the 1536 edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Without a consistent biblical and theological understanding of the nature of conversion, change can be dangerous whether it is punctiliar or continuous in nature, confessional, theological or religious in its temporal extension. Yes, the church Reformed is always a church reforming. However, a Reformed perspective on conversion must be rooted in and guided by Scripture. A Reformed perspective should describe conversion, that movement from *impietas* toward *pietas*, using biblical words and themes. In that way the church reformed is always reforming, biblically, from *impietas* toward *pietas*.

¹⁴Ibid., 31.

Intro.5 The Reason for Such a Study

The reason for such an analysis of conversion and related themes in Calvin's early writings is prompted by a theological crisis in the Presbyterian Church (USA), which has persisted since 1976. In January of 1976, the Presbytery of New York City was seeking definitive guidance concerning the ordination of an avowed practicing homosexual to the gospel ministry. After two years of prayerful study, the 1978 General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church (USA) established policies against such ordinations.¹⁵ The Presbyterian Church (US) established the same policies in 1979.

In brief, both Assemblies affirmed the biblical position that homosexual practice is sin.¹⁶ Self-affirming, practicing homosexuals have excluded themselves from ordination.¹⁷ Both Assemblies further stated that the church, in its ministry and mission, must offer to homosexual persons and to those who fear and hate them, God's gracious provision of redemption and forgiveness. Also, the church must call such persons to repentant faith in Christ, urging them toward loving obedience to God's will. "The church must become the nurturing community so that all whose lives come short of the glory of God are converted, reoriented and built up onto Christian maturity. It may be only in the context of loving community...that homosexual persons can come to a clear understanding of God's pattern for their sexual expression."¹⁸ The perplexities revolving around the ordination of gays and lesbians still persist. In the Reformed tradition, can there be competing theologies about God's divine revelation concerning the ordination of self-avowed, practicing homosexuals? From this writer's perspective there cannot be

¹⁵See *Minutes* from the 1978 Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly, 262-264.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 262, paragraphs 4, 9, and 13.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 264, paragraph 1.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 263, paragraph 13.

competing theologies; that the PC (USA) has allowed both theologies to coexist borders on apostasy. A crisis in Reformed theology exists and the nature of conversion is at its very heart. The nature of conversion must be carefully considered.

The analysis of conversion and related themes in Calvin's early writings has the expressed purpose of exposing the overall relativizing of conversion that has taken place in the Reformed and the broad evangelical Protestant traditions, as well as the evangelical Reformed subset of the latter tradition. By the overall relativizing of conversion, I mean the purely subjective and individualistic nature conversion has taken with definitions of key words like regeneration, justification, and sanctification taking on any meaning that fits a person's personal and privatistic worldview. The meaning of conversion has been reformed-it has been changed.

Intro.6 Definitions

Intro.6.1 The Reformed Tradition

The Reformed tradition is the theological tradition that emerged from the work of John Calvin (1509-1564) and other reformers such as Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575). This theological tradition is in contrast to Lutheran and Anabaptist traditions. Several key theological doctrines make up the Reformed tradition's understanding of conversion. First, **election** is "God's choosing of human beings to receive the gift of salvation and carry out divine purposes in the world."¹⁹ It pertains to salvation as the work of God. God initiates a salvation by grace through faith to those who are the elect. Election is the outworking of God's eternal and unchangeable plan. It is not associated with God's foreknowledge, because it took place before the creation of

¹⁹Robert Benedetto, Darrell L. Guder, and Donald K. McKim, editors, *Historical Dictionary of Reformed Churches* (London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1999), 102.

the world. Faith is the work of election, but election does not depend on faith. Election is focused in Jesus Christ.²⁰ Second, **predestination**, often used as a synonym for election, asserts that God initiates salvation. However, predestination is a broader term than election in that it includes the election of the reprobate (nonbelievers) in addition to the elect (believers). "Because human beings are captive to sin, they cannot will themselves to faith; only God can predestine or elect them to salvation."²¹ Third, **sin** has broken the relationship between God and humanity. "It has corrupted the image of God in humanity and enslaved the human will so that human beings are unable to choose to act in accord with God's will."²² It is the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit that breaks the bonds of sin. "...in regeneration sin is forgiven and reconciliation is accomplished through the atonement of Jesus Christ on the cross."²³ Fourth, **regeneration** is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit conveys the gift of faith. Those regenerated experience a new birth and salvation through Jesus Christ.²⁴ Fifth, **faith** conveyed by the Holy Spirit comes "...as unmerited benevolence from God's Spirit and not as a result of human efforts."²⁵ Faith is placing one's belief, trust, and obedience in God as revealed in Jesus Christ. "Faith affects all dimensions of one's existence: intellect, emotions, and will."²⁶ God produces both the will to believe and the act of believing in man. Sixth, **repentance** is "the act of expressing contrition, penitence, and contrition for sin."²⁷ Repentance means a change of mind and life direction. It is one way that a person expresses faith. Seventh,

²⁰Ibid., 102.

²¹Ibid., 248.

²²Ibid., 277.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 235.

²⁵Ibid., 101.

²⁶Ibid., 100.

²⁷Ibid., 237.

justification “is a declaration through Christ that humanity’s deserved condemnation is suspended by God’s forgiveness.”²⁸ Faith effects justification. The result is salvation. Salvation is a new status for the believer as a forgiven sinner who is adopted into the family of God. Eighth, **sanctification** is “the condition and process of being made holy. Sanctification is both a present condition as well as a process toward which faith is directed.”²⁹ There is a strong connection between justification and sanctification. Both are dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit. “Ultimately, the process of sanctification is a paradox: it is completely dependent upon the Holy Spirit yet requires human effort and obedience to the will of God.”³⁰ Ninth, **union with Christ** is the doctrine that asserts the believers’ unity with Jesus Christ on the basis of faith.³¹ Tenth, **conversion** then encompasses all the other words, which describe a person’s turning or response to God’s call in Jesus Christ. Conversion “radically transforms one’s heart, mind, and will.”³²

Intro.6.2 The Broad Evangelical Protestant Tradition

In the United States, evangelical is a term used to refer to a person “who stresses the need for a personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ by faith.”³³ Along with this basic meaning comes a fundamental theology. Evangelical theology emphasizes a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and the proclamation of the gospel.³⁴

²⁸Robert Benedetto, *Historical Dictionary of Reformed Churches*, 151.

²⁹Ibid., 268.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 292.

³²Ibid., 62.

³³Ibid., 96.

³⁴Emphases in an Evangelical theology include: emphasizing the authority of Scripture over against reason, tradition and ecclesiastical authority; prioritizing the experience of becoming a Christian and knowing Jesus as one’s personal saviour, not over against right belief-the importance of which is taken very seriously-but over against the sacraments and ecclesial structures; stressing conversion, evangelism, and missionary work, and the particularism of Christ’s saving work; and focusing on sanctification through holy living along with a corresponding rejection of Christ’s presence in the sacraments. [Trevor A. Hart, editor, *The Dictionary of Historical Theology*, “Evangelical Theology” by Harriet A. Harris (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 198.]

Evangelicalism with its commitment to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, a commensurate lifestyle, and evangelism “reflects the *sola scriptura* principle of the Reformers, the rational orthodoxy of Protestant Scholasticism, and the experiential emphases of the revivals.”³⁵ Scripture, doctrine, and experience all rooted in a personal relationship with Jesus, a commensurate lifestyle, and a commitment to evangelism set the context for an understanding of conversion within the broad evangelical Protestant tradition

The broad evangelical Protestant tradition in the United States, for all extensive purposes, has its foundation in the Arminian tradition. Arminianism is rooted in the teaching of James Arminius (1560-1609). Arminius disagreed with Calvin over the doctrines of sin, election, predestination, and whether or not salvation could be lost. He stressed human response to the gospel, conditional election, unlimited atonement, and resistible grace.³⁶ Specifically, Arminius believed the following. First, **election** asserts that God elects to salvation all whom He foresees will repent and believe in Jesus Christ. Election occurs after God gives the person grace to believe. “This is a ‘conditional election’ in that it is dependent on God’s foreknowledge of the human response.”³⁷ Second, **predestination** is based on foreknowledge. God foreknows the way individuals will come to faith (the elect).³⁸ God also foreknows those who will not come to faith (the reprobate). Third, the cause of **sin** is man himself. Man sins “of his own free will and without any necessity either internal or external, transgressed the law which had been proposed to him, which had been sanctioned by a threatening and a promise, and which it

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 18.

³⁷Robert Benedetto, *Historical Dictionary of Reformed Churches*, 12.

³⁸Ibid., 13.

was possible for him to have observed.”³⁹ Moreover, the whole of sin is not peculiar to our first parents, “but is common to the entire race and to all their posterity.”⁴⁰ Fourth, **regeneration** is necessary for man to be renewed or awakened in his understanding, affections, and will so that he can respond to God’s initiating grace. However, this regenerating grace is not irresistible.⁴¹ Man can reject God’s regenerating grace.

Arminius writes, “Those who are obedient to the vocation or call of God, freely yield their assent to grace; yet they are previously excited, impelled, drawn and assisted by grace. And in the very moment in which they actually assent, they possess the capability of not assenting.”⁴² For Arminius the work of salvation, in its efficacy and application, rests on human choice. Fifth, **faith** is the human requirement to experience justification. “People are not translated into the kingdom of Christ either against their own will or indiscriminately or automatically. Faith is a necessary condition.”⁴³ The volitional choice to believe is just that; a choice that can accept or reject God’s regenerating grace. “Those who are obedient to the vocation or call of God, freely yield their assent to grace; yet they are previously excited, impelled, drawn and assisted by grace. And in the very moment in which they actually assent, they possess the capability of not assenting.”⁴⁴ Sixth,

³⁹James Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius*, vol. 2, translated by James Nichols and William Nicols (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996), 153.

⁴⁰Ibid., 156.

⁴¹See Article 2 and 3 in *The Five Articles of the Remonstrants, 1610*. (Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1983), 3.545).

⁴²James Arminius, *Certain Articles to Diligently Examined and Weighed: Because Some Controversy Has Arisen Concerning Them Among Even Those Who Profess the Reformed Religion*, in Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius: The London Edition*, 2:721 (17.4). Article 17 is titled “On the Vocation of Sinners to Communion with Christ, and to a Participation of His Benefits.”

⁴³Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959), 187.

⁴⁴James Arminius, *Certain Articles to Diligently Examined and Weighed: Because Some Controversy Has Arisen Concerning Them Among Even Those Who Profess the Reformed Religion*, in Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius: The London Edition*, 2:722 (17.16).

repentance is “the act of expressing contrition, penitence, and contrition for sin.”⁴⁵

Repentance means a change of mind and life direction. Repentance is not a necessary outcome of the wooing grace of God. The unregenerate can reject the work of the Holy Spirit. The internal call is not effectual. “All unregenerate persons have freedom of will, and a capability of resisting the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁶ Man has the power to cooperate or not cooperate with God’s prevenient or the grace that comes before any human response.

Seventh, **justification** is an act of God’s grace. Faith and repentance are related to justification. Justification is “...God’s declaring a sinful person to be ‘just’ on the basis of the righteousness of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁷ But, without the human freedom of will choosing to assent to God’s wooing grace there can be no justification. Ryrie writes, “It is made possible on the basis of the sacrifice of Christ; the human requirement is faith, which brings imputed righteousness to the believer.”⁴⁸ Eighth, **sanctification** is the process of living one’s existence “in Christ.” Forgiveness, redemption, freedom from condemnation, freedom from the law, justification, and life are in Christ. Sanctification is the process of God’s continuing work in the believer through the power of the Holy Spirit. In Protestant theology, sanctification “...occurs after justification and is growth in grace and holiness of life marked by good works.”⁴⁹ Ninth, **union with Christ** is the believer’s fundamental unity with Jesus Christ. Whether this fundamental union with Christ insures that the believer will persevere in the Christian faith, Arminius and his followers offer no

⁴⁵Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 237.

⁴⁶James Arminius, *Certain Articles to Diligently Examined and Weighed: Because Some Controversy Has Arisen Concerning Them Among Even Those Who Profess the Reformed Religion*, in Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius: The London Edition*, 2:721 (17.5).

⁴⁷Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 152.

⁴⁸Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, 186-187.

⁴⁹Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 247.

certainty.⁵⁰ And tenth, **conversion** is a person's turning or response to God's call in Jesus Christ. This response is one of faith and repentance.⁵¹ Conversion is a punctiliar event with the believer receiving justification and beginning a subsequent process of sanctification. The change that conversion brings about is a unique participation between God and man.

Intro.6.3 The Evangelical Reformed Subset Within the Broad Evangelical Protestant Tradition

With the descriptive character that the word evangelical brings to the Reformed tradition, the meanings of election, predestination, sin, regeneration, faith, repentance, justification, sanctification, union with Christ, and conversion remain the same as discussed in the Reformed tradition with the added emphasis that these doctrines are manifested within the context of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that is exhibited in a commensurate personal lifestyle and a commitment to personal evangelism.

Intro.7 Two Questions That Need to be Answered

The Reformed tradition affirms the principle that the *ecclesia reformata* is an *ecclesia semper reformanda*. Given this operating principle, a principle that advocates change, I raise two questions: First, what can the Reformed tradition and the evangelical Reformed subset of the broad evangelical Protestant tradition learn from Calvin regarding conversion and its processes? Second, how does Calvin's view of conversion compare to that of the broad evangelical Protestant tradition in the United States?

⁵⁰Roger Nicole, "Arminianism," in Everett F. Harrison, ed., *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1960), 64.

⁵¹Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 62.

Chapter 1: The Reformed and the Broad Evangelical Protestant Traditions

1.1 Introduction

In many ways, conversion has been rendered relative. Whether a person uses accepted societal values, ethics, and behaviors of the 21st century to guide her interpretation of Scripture, believes she can decide amongst the many options of the day for Savior, and affirms she can accept or reject God's love in Jesus Christ as an autonomous act of the will, subjective, personal, and private beliefs about the nature of conversion exist. These views of the nature of conversion often run parallel tracks of acceptance. A pluralism of definitions exists.

Presbyterian Christians find themselves within two dominant traditions. First, some adhere to the Reformed tradition. Second, others express allegiance to the broad evangelical Protestant tradition. Within this second tradition there is a group, which I refer to as the evangelical Reformed subset. Presbyterians within either of the traditions could give their understanding of the nature of conversion and it could be different than another Christian asked the same question on the same day. This diversity in understanding within the Presbyterian Church (USA), in particular, is embodied by clergy and laity alike.

Why is this the case? Differing views on the authority of Scripture and the centrality of Jesus Christ for salvation coexist within the Reformed and the broad evangelical Protestant traditions in the United States. Although the authority of Scripture and the centrality of Jesus Christ for salvation are not the only doctrinal issues relevant to the discussion of how conversion has been rendered relative, they are, however, the most relevant. Is the Bible infallible in all matters of faith and practice, uniquely revelatory in

its nature or is it fallible, no more revelatory in and of itself than man's words? Is Jesus Christ the only way to be reconciled with the Father or a unique way? Regardless of where a person stands within the aforementioned traditions, the answers to these questions inform individuals' as well as churches' understanding of conversion.

The Reformed tradition often cites the principle that the *ecclesia reformata* is an *ecclesia semper reformanda*. However, this principle has historically been linked with the phrase, "according to the Word of God." Given this historic corrective, then, to affirm that the *ecclesia reformata* is an *ecclesia semper reformanda* without the phrase "according to the Word of God" is illustrative of the current dilemma within the Presbyterian Church (USA). Does the *ecclesia reformata* is an *ecclesia semper reformanda* mean, then, for example, that if the ordination of self avowed, practicing gays and lesbians is affirmed that an historic understanding of the authority of Scripture and the centrality of Jesus Christ for salvation has been reformed, thus creating a new operating understanding of the nature of conversion? If the response is in the affirmative, then the fundamental and historic nature of conversion has been compromised. What doctrinal standards then will guide the reformation of the Reformed tradition in the church? Will subjective, relative biblical interpretation or objective, absolute biblical interpretation guide the process? With the theological crisis surrounding whether or not the Presbyterian Church (USA) should ordain self avowed practicing homosexuals as the backdrop, how will the Reformed and the broad evangelical Protestant traditions be challenged to examine their understandings of conversion? A clear reading of Calvin's understanding of conversion is in order if the historic definition of conversion and its practice, from a Reformed perspective, is to be recovered.

This chapter will briefly highlight three contexts in order to ascertain the differing understandings of conversion within the two dominant traditions. The three contexts are: the current debate within the Presbyterian Church (USA) for the Reformed tradition, the pens of Bill Bright, Tony Campolo, Josh McDowell, and Max Lucado for the broad evangelical Protestant tradition, and the pens of John Piper, R.C. Sproul, Lloyd John Ogilvie, and Wayne Grudem for the evangelical Reformed subset within the broad evangelical Protestant tradition.

1.2 The Reformed Tradition

1.2.1 The Presbyterian Church (USA): a context

As an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA), I am keenly aware of the varied opinions, which currently exist regarding the authority of Scripture and the role of Jesus Christ in and for salvation. Jack Rogers the current (213th) Moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA) states this about the authority of Scripture,

Presbyterians usually try to balance “essential tenets” that define boundaries with freedom of conscience on non-essential matters. The authority of Scripture as God’s revelation and guidance for our lives, for example, is an essential. Particular interpretations of individual passages are not. Conflict occurs when we lose our balance.¹

Rogers’ belief that “the authority of Scripture is essential but particular interpretations of individual passages are not” seems to be a very slippery slope. If Rogers’ premise is true, then diversity of interpretation on certain teachings of the Bible would be permitted and the subjective nature of such diverse interpretations could deem particular texts no longer relevant. A group within the Presbyterian Church (USA) known as the Covenant Network asserts this about the authority of Scripture. “Our first loyalty belongs to Christ,

¹Jack Rogers in *Covenant Network of Presbyterians* (San Francisco, CA: Calvary Presbyterian Church, June 1999), 7.

as witnessed to in Scripture. The Bible can be interpreted in many ways by equally faithful Christians.”² For example, a Youth Advisory delegate at the 213th General Assembly, 9-16 June 2001 in Louisville, Kentucky states this about the role of Jesus Christ for and in salvation, “I have deep concerns about declaring Jesus as the only savior. This might portray intolerance on the part of the Presbyterian Church (USA) toward people of other faith traditions.”³ Is the Bible authoritative in all matters of faith and practice? Is what the Bible says about Jesus Christ being the way, the truth, and the life descriptive for this essential tenet of the Christian faith?

Within the Presbyterian Church (USA) there are at least three operative definitions of authority when it comes to Scripture. A first definition of authority views the Bible as a witness to revelation. This view is attributed to Karl Barth (1886-1968).⁴ Many theologians, clergy, and laity within the Presbyterian Church (USA) look to Karl Barth’s definition of the authority of Scripture as their own. In this view, the Bible becomes authoritative as it proclaims or bears witness to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. The Bible itself is not revelation. Jesus Christ is the true revelation of God. This view necessitates an understanding that the Holy Spirit makes the words of Scripture come alive so that they then become revelatory in nature. Scripture is “inspired” in that it witnesses to the revelation of Jesus Christ. A second view holds that the Bible is a book of inerrant facts. Scholars such as Francis Turretin (1623-1687), Charles Hodge (1823-1886), and B.B. Warfield (1841-1913) defended this view. They argued that the Bible must be completely accurate in all that it teaches, scientifically and theologically.

²Excerpted from Covenant Network website, www.covenantnetwork.org; Accessed 20 January 2002.

³*Presbyterian Layman*, Volume 24, Number 6, October 2001, 7B.

⁴Jack Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 406-26.

Scripture must be perfect and without error in its original manuscripts. The words of Scripture set forth the truth of God without error.⁵ Some theologians, clergy, and laity within the Presbyterian Church (USA) look to these scholars to find their definition of the authority of Scripture. A third view argues that the Bible is a divine message in human thought forms. John Calvin believed that the emphasis in Scripture must be that the Word of God presents God's divine redemptive plan of salvation through the words of human writers. These writers were "inspired" by God, but fully shared in the human constrictions of their cultures and time periods. God accommodated himself to his fallen creation. God accommodates his revelation to our condition.⁶ The overall purpose of the Bible is to tell the story of salvation, not to present "inerrant" facts. Each of these views has a level of authoritative value.

The Reformed tradition has essential theological tenets.⁷ Understandings of Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, and soteriology to name a few, are influenced by

⁵Donald K. McKim, *The Bible in Theology and Preaching* (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock Publishers, 1994), chapter 6.

⁶Ford Lewis Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 133.

⁷"In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) expresses the faith of the Reformed tradition. Central to this tradition is the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love. Related to this central affirmation of God's sovereignty are other great themes of the Reformed tradition: the election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation; Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God; A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God's creation; The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God... Thus, the creeds and confessions of this church reflect a particular stance within the history of God's people... All power in heaven and earth is given to Jesus Christ by Almighty God, who raised Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, all power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the Church, which is his body. Christ calls the Church into being, giving it all that is necessary for its mission to the world... It belongs to Christ alone to rule, to teach, to call, and to use the Church as he wills... Insofar as Christ's will for the Church is set forth in Scripture, it is to be obeyed... In affirming with the earliest Christians that Jesus is Lord, the Church confesses that he is the hope and that the Church, as Christ's body, is bound to his authority. The church confesses the Scriptures to be the Word of God written, witnessing to God's self-

an adopted and operative definition of biblical authority. For example, is the doctrine of salvation an essential tenet? Rogers' distinction between the authority of Scripture for the essential tenets over against those, which are the non-essential, fostered a division on the exclusivity of Jesus Christ for salvation at the 213th General Assembly (2001). "With the Church from its birth until today, we gladly affirm the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Christ's life, ministry, death, and resurrection is the ground of all our hope. The Lordship of Christ is not in question. But the Biblical witness on the reach of God's saving grace is less clear."⁸ In light of Rogers' statement that "the Biblical witness on the reach of God's saving grace is less clear", the authority of Scripture and its interpretation are called into question. Does the meaning of the principle that the *ecclesia reformata* is an *ecclesia semper reformanda* allow any view on the authority of Scripture and how to interpret Scripture to become valid? For example, if I follow Barth, I could easily read universalism into texts that seem to indicate that desires all people to be saved. Or, if I follow Turretin, I must reject a universal rendering of such passages because of a hermeneutic that insists the more clear texts must interpret the obscure. When addressing the issue of self-avowed, practicing gay and lesbian persons being ordained to the gospel ministry, a distinction must be made between the real issue and the symptomatic issue.

Richard Burnett writes,

The real issue has to do with revelation, i.e., the basis and means by which many in our denomination today are trying to legitimate homosexual practice. This is not to suggest, however, that the sort of questions being put to us today regarding human sexuality are not important or have nothing to do with 'salvation,' as some

revelation. Where that Word is read and proclaimed, Jesus Christ the Living Word is present by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit." (*The Book of Order 2000-2001*, G-2.0500, G-1.0100, and W-2.2001)

⁸*Covenant Network of Presbyterians* (San Francisco: CA: Calvary Presbyterian Church, June 2001), 4.

are saying. Only those having a very narrow understanding of salvation would claim this.⁹

For Reformed Christians, theology matters. But does a consistent and objective theological understanding of the essential tenets rooted in the historic apostolic tradition, in which Calvin stands, matter? Some within the Presbyterian Church (USA) believe that the Reformed tradition has always allowed for a diversity of expression on the essential tenets. According to Cynthia Campbell, President of McCormick Theological Seminary¹⁰, there are four principles, which should guide the Reformed way of thinking about the Christian faith. First, theological reflection must be grounded on “the witness of scripture.”¹¹ The Bible as story is a story of God and God’s people. Second, the Bible is God’s Word to us “...as the Holy Spirit enables us to read and hear and comprehend what is contained in it.”¹² Third, theology that matters grows up out of the context in which believers find themselves.¹³ And fourth, theological reflection is a human enterprise.¹⁴ Campbell’s process is inherently flawed. Her methodology creates an opportunity for the essential tenets of the Reformed tradition to be revised. In short, Campbell asserts that the Bible is authoritative only as it bears witness to the revelation of Jesus Christ, only as the Holy Spirit brings the words of Scripture alive, only as readers are aware of the contexts in which they find themselves, only as readers admit that theological reflection is purely a human endeavor. In other words, an individual reader’s subjective understanding of Scripture can become normative even if only for that particular individual. Douglas

⁹*The Presbyterian Layman*, October 2001, 1B.

¹⁰One of the ten Presbyterian Church (USA) seminaries.

¹¹Cynthia M. Campbell, *Covenant Network of Presbyterians* (San Francisco, CA: Calvary Presbyterian Church, June 2000), 7.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*

Oldenburg, past President of Columbia Theological Seminary and Moderator, 210th

General Assembly states,

If we believe in the absolute sovereignty of God, which of course we do, that only God is absolute, then we must never allow any thing to become absolute in our life and insist that everything is open to reformation. If we are obedient to the First Commandment, 'You shall have no other gods before me,' then we must never allow anything, any creed, any theological affirmation, any Church, any position of the General Assembly to become absolute. It is the insistence that no partial loyalty may be transformed into an object of ultimate loyalty, because only God is sovereign. I want to suggest that this Protestant principle is the fundamental perspective and perch and spirit, the underlying principle that influences the way we should look at everything. It provides the basis for our being a Church that is "Reformed but always being reformed."¹⁵

Oldenburg insists that the Presbyterian Church (USA) must be a Church that is

"Reformed but always reforming." This position suggests that a particular generation's doctrine and understanding of soteriology might not remain normative if reasons could be given to reform its operative definition. Lifting up the exclusive right of the individual to assert his understanding of Scripture as normative, other forms of revelation exist.

Human experience could be a form of revelation. Rogers writes, "Emphasize scripture as a revelation from God."¹⁶ Rogers states that scripture is one revelation from God among many, which is a clear contradiction to the *Book of Order*.¹⁷ Moreover, Rogers writes, "We need Presbyterians who know what it means to be Reformed Protestants. And Presbyterians need to be expandingly inclusive of people of every ethnic and experiential background."¹⁸ It appears that Presbyterians can be more inclusive if they adopt a view of Scripture that it is a revelation from God rather than the revelation from God.

¹⁵Douglas Oldenburg, *Covenant Network of Presbyterians* (San Francisco, CA: Calvary Presbyterian Church, June 2000), 7.

¹⁶Jack Rogers, *Claiming the Center* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 175.

¹⁷"The Church confesses the Scriptures to be the Word of God written, witnessing to God's self-revelation." (*Directory of Worship*, W-2.2001)

¹⁸Jack Rogers, *Claiming the Center*, 174.

Using the principle *ecclesia reformata is an ecclesia semper reformanda*, Rogers has reformed Calvin's teaching on the nature of man with his view that Scripture is a revelation from God, not the revelation. Calvin writes,

Forgetfulness of their own true nature, contempt of God's justice and ignorance of their own sin have plunged them into this error. Surely those cut themselves off from self-knowledge who judge themselves to be other than Scripture describes all the children of Adam to be. Their excellence Scripture sets off with these titles: that they are of wicked and inflexible heart [Jer. 17:9]; that the whole imagination of men's hearts is evil from the first years [Gen. 8:21]...¹⁹

Calvin is fully aware of how proud we are in our sense of self-worth. He writes, "So great indeed is the worth on which we are proud to rely against God! For we must hold this as a universal principle: whoever glories in himself, glories against God."²⁰ For Calvin, the simple text in Scripture is to be trusted more than human wisdom. Both Oldenburg and Rogers have a view of man's ability to know the truth and to interpret the Scriptures in a way that seems to elevate man. For Oldenburg and Rogers, man has the ability to differentiate which revelation from God is to be believed.

Another illustration minimizing the authority of Scripture as the revelation of God in regard to the doctrine of salvation is demonstrated by another General Assembly action at its June 2001 meeting. At that meeting, the person and work of Jesus Christ was discussed because of a public statement made by a plenary speaker during a conference sponsored by the Peacemaking Program area-a General Assembly Council entity at its conference during the summer of 2000. Overtures from three presbyteries asked the General Assembly to affirm the basic belief that Jesus Christ is the sole Savior and Lord. The General Assembly finally adopted the following statement.

¹⁹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 31.

²⁰Ibid.

We confess the unique authority of Jesus Christ as Lord. Every other authority is finally subject to Christ. Jesus Christ is uniquely Savior. It is 'His life, death, resurrection, ascension and final return that restores creation, providing salvation for all those whom God has chosen to redeem.' Although we do not know the limits of God's grace and pray for the salvation of those who may never come to know Christ, for us the assurance of salvation is found only in confessing Christ and trusting him alone. We are humbled in our witness to Christ by our realization that our understanding of him and his way is limited and distorted by our sin. Still the transforming power of Christ in our lives compels us to make Christ known to others.²¹

The statement above asserts that Jesus Christ is, "...*for us* the assurance of salvation."²² In other words, for Christians the only assurance we can have that a person has turned from an existence opposed to God to one in dynamic relationship with God is found only in confessing Jesus Christ and him alone. But what do the words "*for us*" mean? It would seem that the necessity of Jesus Christ as the means of salvation is only applicable to Christians. The statement seems to limit the confession of Jesus Christ as necessary for conversion to a Christian worldview alone, thus excluding Jesus' claim that he is the way, and the truth, and the life. It leaves the door open for other religions to be equally valid with their validity confirmed or rejected by Christ who is the authority over all other authorities.

Although the statement, "Although we do not know the limits of God's grace and pray for the salvation of those who may never come to know Christ, for us the assurance of salvation is found only in confessing Christ and trusting him alone" seems biblical and even orthodox, it is not clear or definitive. A more reflective stance on the statement would indicate that the writers of the statement are seeking to leave the door open for a more inclusive understanding of salvation. Donald K. McKim, Editor of Academic and Reference books with Westminster John Knox, writes, "Reformed Christians can agree

²¹*Presbyterian Pro-Life News* (Burke, Virginia: Research Education and Care, Inc., Fall 2001), 7.

²²*Italics mine.*

that we must confess and radically proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and savior. This is our evangelical mandate (Matt. 28:19), to proclaim the gospel to all people.”²³ McKim stands against any notion of a universal inclusivity.

1.3 The Broad Evangelical Protestant Tradition

1.3.1 Bill Bright, Tony Campolo, Josh McDowell, and Max Lucado: a context

Bill Bright, co-founder and President of Campus Crusade for Christ International has written more than fifty books and booklets. His classic booklet, *Four Spiritual Laws* has sold more than 2.5 billion copies worldwide. Bill Bright is perhaps the most influential Christian leader in the world when it comes to evangelism and the fulfillment of the Great Commission. His understanding of conversion could easily be the dominant view in the broad evangelical Protestant tradition in the United States.

“The term ‘evangelical’ has been used of Reformed and Lutheran churches since the Reformation, because they base their teaching pre-eminently on the ‘Gospel.’”²⁴ Evangelical theology reflects the following essential tenets: the authority of Scripture, the priority of knowing Jesus Christ personally, the importance of evangelism and conversion, the particularism of Christ’s saving work, the focus on sanctification and holy living, and a rejection of Christ’s presence in the sacraments.²⁵ Bright sums up the essential tenets of an Evangelical theology when he writes,

Receiving Christ involves turning to God from self (repentance) and trusting Christ to come into our lives to forgive our sins and to make us what He wants us to be. Just to agree intellectually that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that He

²³Donald K. McKim, *Introducing the Reformed Faith* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 182.

²⁴Trevor A. Hart, General Editor, *The Dictionary of Historical Theology*, “Evangelical Theology” by Harriet A. Harris (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 197.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 198.

died on the cross for our sins is not enough. Nor is it enough to have an emotional experience. We receive Jesus Christ by faith, as an act of the will.²⁶

Bright emphasizes the importance of human initiative for conversion. At no point does he indicate that God makes the human will receptive to the good news of Jesus Christ. In Bright's conversion scheme, he mentions no necessary prior work of God as necessary for human belief. Bright writes, "The moment you received Christ by faith, as an act of the will, many things happened, including the following: Christ came into your life (Revelation 3:20; Colossians 1:27). Your sins were forgiven (Colossians 1:14). You became a child of God (John 1:12). You received eternal life (John 5:24). You began the great adventure for which God created you (John 10:10)."²⁷ Human initiative is the starting place of the conversion process. Note his four spiritual laws to know God in Jesus Christ.

Just as there are physical laws that govern the physical universe, so are there spiritual laws that govern your relationship with God. Law 1: God **loves** you and offers a wonderful **plan** for your life. Law 2: Man is **sinful** and **separated** from God. Therefore, he cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life. Law 3: Jesus Christ is God's **only** provision for man's sin. Through Him you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life." Law 4: We must individually **receive** Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives.²⁸

From the four laws stated above, it seems abundantly clear that our relationship with God is simply a series of intellectual steps that bring about an experiential reality. Whereas the Reformed tradition states that God must move first in the conversion process, Bright indicates that we have the ability to think through our views of God. "Some people think of Him as a big bully, a cosmic policeman, or a divine Santa Claus.

²⁶Bill Bright, *God: Discover His Character* (Orlando, Florida: New Life Publications, 1999), 317.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 318.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 315-316. Scripture verses that support the four spiritual laws include: Law 1: John 3:16; John 10:10; Law 2: Romans 3:23; Romans 6:23; Law 3: Romans 5:8; John 14:6; Law 4: John 1:12; Ephesians 2:8,9; John 3:1-8.

Others believe He is like their insensitive, selfish parents who do whatever they want because they have the size or power."²⁹ Depending on our conclusion, we could then initiate a process to actualize the spiritual laws that govern the universe in the same way we would actualize the physical laws. Bright's system seems to assert that becoming a Christian is simply a process of acknowledging the difference between a self-directed life and that of a Christ-directed life. Bright makes these distinctions between the two directions. "Self-Directed Life: Self is on the throne. Christ is outside the life. Interests are directed by self, often resulting in discord and frustration. Christ-Directed Life: Christ is in the life and on the throne. Self is yielding to Christ. Christ directs interests. This results in producing harmony with God's plan."³⁰ Note this conversion prayer that signifies conversion from a self-directed life to a Christ-directed life.

Dear God, I want to know You as You really are, the Creator of the universe, our Heavenly Father, who holds everything in your hand. You know my past, present, and future. Help me to love, trust, and obey You with all my heart, soul, mind, and will. Thank You for giving me an opportunity to know You intimately as my heavenly Father and to tell others about You and Your marvelous love... Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank you for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of the throne of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be. Amen.³¹

For Bright, receiving Christ by faith is an act of the will.³² As a further act of the will, spiritual growth results from trusting Jesus. To grow spiritually, a new convert is to go to God in prayer daily, read God's Word daily, obey God moment by moment, witness for

²⁹Ibid., 22.

³⁰Ibid., 317.

³¹Ibid., 30 and 317.

³²Ibid., 318.

Christ by your life and words, trust God for every detail of your life, and allow the Holy Spirit to control and empower your daily life and witness.³³

Tony Campolo, Professor Emeritus at Eastern College in St David, Pennsylvania and founder of EAPE ministries operates from the same salvation paradigm as Bright.

Campolo writes,

But here's the good news of the gospel: when you and I allow Jesus to come in and possess us, He enables us to will what neither of us could ever will before-He enables us to do what neither of us could ever do before. The Scripture says, "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure."³⁴

Campolo believes that all we need to do to have a new life is to become committed to Jesus. We must allow Jesus to have his way with us. "Jesus, I'm Yours, I'm going to do whatever You want me to. I want you to come into my life and possess me and enable me to do what I could never do on my own; to will what I could never will before; to live as I could never live in my own strength."³⁵ Moreover, being a Christian is not simply correct doctrinal beliefs. One must be committed to Jesus Christ. Commitment to Jesus Christ presupposes some appropriate grasp of the essential tenets of the Christian faith, however. "A person is a Christian when he or she becomes totally committed to changing the things that God wants changed."³⁶ Josh McDowell, an internationally known speaker, author, and traveling representative for Campus Crusade for Christ, is a dominant voice in the broad evangelical Protestant tradition. McDowell's *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* clearly depicts this emphasis on man as morally free to choose or reject God's love for them in Jesus Christ. McDowell writes,

³³Ibid.

³⁴Tony Campolo, *You Can Make a Difference* (Waco, Texas: Word, Incorporated, 1984), 21.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid., 15.

During my fifty-five years of sharing the good news of the Savior with the academic world, I have met very few individuals who have honestly considered the evidence and yet deny that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of men. To me, the evidence confirming the deity of Jesus Christ is overwhelmingly conclusive to any honest, objective seeker after truth. However, not all-not even the majority-of those to whom I have spoken have accepted Him as their Savior and Lord. This is not because they were unable to believe-they were simply unwilling to believe!³⁷

In the broad evangelical Protestant tradition, the Bible is viewed as "...the unerring communication of a perfect God to fallen humanity."³⁸ At the foundation of such a belief is the evangelical commitment to the authority of Scripture. The words of the Bible are "inspired" by God. "Inspiration can be defined as the mysterious process by which God worked through human workers, employed their individual personalities and styles to produce divinely authoritative and inerrant writings."³⁹ The Bible in this sense claims to be God's very Word. It comes from His very mouth. The Bible forms the bottom line to how a person is to be reconciled to God, grow in their faith, and persevere in everyday life situations. "The bible that we have today is the inspired Word of God. Recent archaeological discoveries have confirmed that the Bibles we have today are accurate transmissions of what existed two thousand years ago. We simply have a translation in our current language of the God-breathed Scriptures that were originally written in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek."⁴⁰

Max Lucado, a popular Christian author writes this about salvation. "The message is simple: God gave up his Son in order to rescue all his sons and daughters. To bring his

³⁷Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), xii.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 333.

³⁹Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 39.

⁴⁰Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, 349.

children home. He's listening for your answer."⁴¹ In this vein, God is waiting for people to decide whether or not they will respond to his voice. Is God's invitation universal or only for the chosen? Lucado does not clearly identify his position, but in careful reading, the reader is presented with a strong bias toward an Arminian free will position. Lucado writes, "God is an inviting God... To know God is to receive his invitation... We cannot choose whether or not we are born... But we can choose where we spend eternity. This is the only choice which really matters... It is a choice of a lifetime."⁴² Lucado is committed to a free will choice that is ultimately and finally left up to the individual. He offers these steps for conversion. First, "Turn to God. Your abba is waiting for you, with arms open wide."⁴³ Second, recognize our problem. "We're on the wrong bus."⁴⁴ Third, the solution is to go to the right bus.⁴⁵ And fourth, trust God by getting on the right bus.⁴⁶

Lucado describes this four-step process as new birth in Christ. "In many ways, your new birth in Christ is like your first. In your new birth, God provides what you need and someone else does the work. And just as parents are newborn, so God is patient with you. But there is one difference. The first time you had no choice about being born; this time you do."⁴⁷ The choice is ours and God will not take that away from us. "God will whisper. He will shout. He will touch and tug. He will take away our burdens; he'll even take away our blessings. If there are a thousand steps between us and him, he will take all but one. But he will leave the final one for us."⁴⁸

⁴¹Max Lucado, *The Gift* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 1999), 108.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 103-105.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 128.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 130.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 132.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 110-111.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 119.

Much like Bright, Campolo, and McDowell, Lucado sees the salvation experience and its construct of conversion as a series of choices, choices that we, and we alone must make. We can accept God's love for us or reject it.

Abel and Cain, both sons of Adam. Abel chooses God. Cain chooses murder. And God lets him. Abraham and Lot, both pilgrims in Canaan. Abraham chooses God. Lot chooses Sodom. And God lets him. David and Saul, both kings of Israel. David chooses God. Saul chooses power. And God lets him. Peter and Judas, both deny their Lord. Peter seeks mercy. Judas seeks death. And God lets him. In every age of history, on every page of Scripture, the truth is revealed: God allows us to make our own choices.⁴⁹

Moreover, "Have we been given any greater privilege than that of choice? Not only does this privilege offset any injustice, the gift of free will can offset any mistakes... One good choice for eternity offsets a thousand bad ones on earth. The choice is yours."⁵⁰

1.3.2 John Piper, R.C. Sproul, Lloyd Ogilvie, and Wayne Grudem: an evangelical Reformed context

Scripture, doctrine, and experience all rooted in a personal relationship with Jesus, a commensurate lifestyle, and a commitment to evangelism set the context for an understanding of conversion within the evangelical Reformed subset of the broad evangelical Protestant tradition.

John Piper, the pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota writes this about conversion.

These are just some of the conditions that the New Testament says we must meet in order to inherit final salvation. We must believe on Jesus and receive him and turn from our sin and obey him and humble ourselves like little children and love him more than we love our family, our possessions or our own life. This is what it means to be converted to Christ. This alone is the way of the life everlasting.⁵¹

⁴⁹Max Lucado, *He Chose the Nails* (Nashville, Tennessee: Word Publishing, 2000), 52-53.

⁵⁰Ibid., 55-56.

⁵¹John Piper, *The Creation of a Christian Hedonist* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1986),

Conversion, then, is the discovery of salvation and its corresponding process. Salvation is lived out through the experience of everlasting life by believing in God's promises.

Salvation, the outcome of belief, is the experience in which a person lives to the glory of God. Piper writes,

God created us for his glory... Therefore it is the duty of every person to live for the glory of God... Yet all of us have failed to glorify God as we ought... Therefore all of us are subject to eternal condemnation by God... Nevertheless, in his great mercy God sent forth his Son, Jesus Christ, to save sinners by dying in their place on the cross... The benefits purchased by the death of Christ belong to those who repent and trust in him.⁵²

Believing on Jesus is the act of faith, which receives what was done for us in Christ, that is, salvation. Faith in Christ precedes repentance. "If 'salvation' refers to new birth, conversion is not a condition of it."⁵³ Saving precedes believing. Faithing precedes repenting. Repenting is an ongoing process. This is conversion.

Believing on Jesus is a work of God, first, and our work, second. "Repentance and faith are our work. But we will not repent and believe unless God does his work to overcome our hard and rebellious hearts. This divine work is called *regeneration*. Our work is called *conversion*."⁵⁴

A similar view is articulated by Lloyd John Ogilvie, a former pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Hollywood California and currently the Chaplain to the United States Senate argues that Jesus Christ, alone, is the way for all people to be reconciled to God. "Jesus Christ came and comes to say, 'Now's the time to start living!'... It is time to take time to discover that the will of God... Life's ultimate pleasure and sublime joy is to

⁵²Ibid., 43-48.

⁵³Ibid., 51.

⁵⁴Ibid., 49.

be liberated by God to desire to live in intimate fellowship with Him. That's His will for our lives."⁵⁵

To know the will of God requires conversion. Conversion, by simple definition, is "One's turning or response to God's call in Jesus Christ in faith and repentance. It is profound in its effects in that it radically transforms one's heart, mind, and will."⁵⁶

Conversion is an act of the will, but the will cannot act without the work of regeneration reorienting the will. Ogilvie addresses the innate structures that we are given to respond to God's regenerating will. He writes,

We were wonderfully created to respond to the will of God. We are spiritually endowed with an inner mind, spirit, and soul, which were given to us to receive God's mind, respond to His Spirit, and have our souls prepared for eternity. Our physical brain and nervous system are a magnificent mechanism given to us to accomplish our purpose.⁵⁷

R.C. Sproul, a theologian, pastor, and teacher is chairman of the Board of Ligonier Ministries. Addressing the theological theme of regeneration Sproul writes,

"Regeneration is the theological term used to describe rebirth. It refers to a new generating, a new genesis, a new beginning. It marks the beginning of a new life in a radically renewed person...Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit upon those who are spiritually dead."⁵⁸ Wayne Grudem, Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Trinity Seminary in Deerfield, Illinois, writes this about regeneration. "Regeneration is a

⁵⁵Lloyd John Ogilvie, *God's Will in Your Life* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1982), 29 and 175.

⁵⁶Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 62.

⁵⁷Lloyd John Ogilvie, *God's Will in Your Life*, 14.

⁵⁸R.C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), 171.

secret act of God in which he imparts a new spiritual life to us.”⁵⁹ We are passive in regeneration. Believing in Jesus Christ is God’s work first and our response, second.

We cannot choose to be made physically alive and we cannot choose to be made spiritually alive. Salvation happens to us. New birth (regeneration) is God’s work. Conversion (faith and repentance) is our work.⁶⁰ Saving faith in Christ involves a profound change in heart. Only God can bring about that change. “Faith is the evidence of new birth, not the cause of it”⁶¹ Moreover, The will is not free until God sets it free. The will has been set free through regeneration, the beginning of conversion. “By supernatural power, we were given the gift of faith to receive Christ as Savior and Lord. He has made us willing to be made willing to receive all that He did for us in the cross, resurrection, and Pentecost.”⁶²

Conversion does involve an act of the will, but we cannot perform that act without the prior work of regeneration. The normal Christian life is a repeated process of restoration, renewal, and recovery of the image of God. Piper defines conversion this way.

Conversion, then, is repentance (turning from sin and unbelief) and faith (trusting in Christ alone for salvation). They are really two sides of the same coin. One side is tails-turn tail on fruits on unbelief. The other side is heads-head straight for Jesus and trust his promises. You can’t have the one without the other any more than you can face two ways at once, or serve two masters.⁶³

But sin inhibits our ability to utilize these innate structures. We do not naturally desire God. Sin, at the fall of Adam and Eve, distorted our natural endowments and freedom.

⁵⁹Wayne Grudem, *Biblical Doctrine*, edited by Jeff Purswell (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 300.

⁶⁰See James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:3; John 3:3-8; Ephesians 2:5; Colossians 2:13; James 1:17-18; Ezekiel 36:26-27.

⁶¹John Piper, *The Creation of a Christian Hedonist*, 50.

⁶²Lloyd John Ogilvie, *God’s Will in Your Life*, 150.

⁶³John Piper, *The Creation of a Christian Hedonist*, 48.

“The ability to think and make choices was used to rebel against God and seek to be gods.”⁶⁴

Sin is the sickening story of man’s fall from his intended purpose. All aspects of our nature were corrupted by that rebellion. “When you and I were born, we inherited that fallen nature. We were not inherently inclined to love God or seek to do his will.”⁶⁵ We do not naturally desire God or the knowledge of his will. But, when there is an impingement on our consciousness, God is giving us a desire to know him. This is the beginning of conversion or most specifically, regeneration. “No one is in search of the will of God who has not had this rebirth experience. It is impossible to know or do God’s will without it. The will simply does not desire God until God himself has energized it with the gift of desire, the freedom to respond, and the capacity to make a commitment.”⁶⁶

Grudem defines conversion as “Our willing response to the gospel call, in which we sincerely repent of sins and place our trust in Christ for salvation.”⁶⁷ Conversion is a spiritual turning from sin to Christ. “The turning from sin is called repentance, and the turning to Christ is called faith.”⁶⁸ For Grudem, faith is trust in Jesus Christ as a living person for forgiveness of sins and eternal life with God. Repentance is a heartfelt sorrow for sin. He views faith and repentance, as two components of conversion, like Piper. Grudem believes that they are simultaneous and it doesn’t matter which comes first. On the subject of faith, R.C. Sproul writes,

⁶⁴Lloyd John Ogilvie, *God’s Will in Your Life*, 19.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid., 21.

⁶⁷Wayne Grudem, *Basic Doctrine*, 481.

⁶⁸Ibid., 307.

Saving faith involves content. We are not justified by believing just anything. Some have said, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere." That sentiment is radically opposed to the teachings of the Bible. The Bible teaches that it matters profoundly what we believe. Justification is not by sincerity alone...Right doctrine, at least in the essential truths of the gospel, is a necessary ingredient of saving faith. We believe in the gospel, in the person and work of Christ. That is integral to saving faith. If our doctrine is heretical in the essentials, we will not be saved.⁶⁹

Finally, Piper, Sproul, Ogilvie, and Grudem lift up the Scripture as God's written Word. It is authoritative for defining the Christian life. Piper writes,

...we need to know why we accept the Bible as the reliable Word of God...we need to see the benefits and power of Scripture and how it rekindles our joy...we need to hear a practical challenge to renew our daily meditation in the Word of God, and to bind that sword so closely around our waist that we are never without it...The Word of God is not a trifle; it is a matter of life and death...Our physical life is created and upheld by the Word of God, and our spiritual life is quickened and sustained by the Word of God...Faith is born and sustained by the Word of God.⁷⁰

The Bible is the kindling for the conversion process. Piper cites three aims for understanding the importance of Scripture for salvation and the conversion process. First, we need to know why we accept the Bible as the reliable and authoritative Word of God. Second, we need to see the benefits and power of Scripture for everyday living. And third, we need to hear a practical challenge to renew our daily meditation on the Word of God.⁷¹ Moreover, The Word of God is not a trifle. It is a matter of life and death. Piper writes, "Our physical life is created and upheld by the Word of God, and our spiritual life is quickened and sustained by the Word of God."⁷² Ogilvie believes that the Scripture and its authority are significant for undergoing a conversion process that validates a person's reconciliation with God. Ogilvie writes, "Consistent, daily readings of the Bible prepares

⁶⁹R.C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, 187-188.

⁷⁰John Piper, *The Creation of Christian Hedonist*, 118-121.

⁷¹Ibid., 118.

⁷²Ibid., 119.

us for each step of His evolving plan for us. He inspired the writing of it so that we could have an objective standard for knowing what He wants us to do...If we are serious about knowing God's plan, we will listen to what He has to say in the Bible."⁷³ Grudem sums up a Reformed understanding of Scripture by stating "The authority of Scripture means that all the words in Scripture are God's words in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God."⁷⁴ Sproul continues, "The Bible is called the Word of God because of its claim, believed by the church, that the human writers did not merely write their own opinions, but that their words were inspired by God."⁷⁵

1.3.3 Conclusion

Unlike Piper, Sproul, Ogilvie, and Grudem, Bright, Campolo, and McDowell affirm the notion that the self is not something to be found or discovered, but something to be created. "The self is something waiting to be created. And there is only one way to create an identity; there is only one way to create meaning in life; and that, friends, is through commitment. Only through commitment do people achieve an identity and a meaning and a purpose for life. And there are very few committed people in this world."⁷⁶ Although Bright does not use the same words as Campolo to describe conversion, he asserts that we are not God's puppets or slaves. We have the determining choice in whether or not we want to have a relationship with God. Bright writes, "He made us as free moral agents with minds, wills, and emotions. He will not force His love and plans upon us against our wills. Within the context of His master plan, God gives us

⁷³Lloyd John Ogilvie, *God's Will in Your Life*, 151.

⁷⁴Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, 33.

⁷⁵R.C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, 15.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 13.

the freedom to choose.”⁷⁷ Only with a proper view of God can we create a proper view of self. “...a false view of God leads to sin and corruption...On the other hand, a proper view of God leads to a life of blessing for oneself and many generations to follow.”⁷⁸ McDowell continues in this vein when he writes, “Is there any evidence of a compelling nature that can deliver an individual from the futility of skepticism, agnosticism, and atheism? From the contradictions of postmodernism? Or from the deceptive emotions of mysticism? I believe that there certainly is”⁷⁹

Although Bright uses words to describe conversion similar to those of Piper, Sproul, Ogilvie, and Grudem, the how of repentance and faith has a different starting place. Whereas Piper, Sproul, Ogilvie, and Grudem acknowledge an initial work of God that is required for conversion to begin, that is regeneration, Bright seems to believe that a simple act of the will rooted in human volition is the initial and punctiliar starting place. “Receiving Christ involves turning to God from self (repentance) and trusting Christ to come into our lives to forgive our sins and to make us what He wants us to be... We receive Jesus Christ by faith, as an act of the will.”⁸⁰ Moreover, “The amount of trust you have in God depends on how you view Him.”⁸¹

1.4 Summary

The theological crisis currently facing the Presbyterian Church (USA) has called into question several essential tenets of the Christian faith. They are: the authority of Scripture, the centrality of Jesus Christ as Savior alone, and the nature of conversion.

⁷⁷Bill Bright, *God*, 114.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 17.

⁷⁹Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, liii.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 22.

Have they been changed, altered, and reformed from their initial Reformed understandings?

This chapter has highlighted two traditions using three contexts in order to gain an understanding of conversion perspectives. The Reformed tradition and its particular Presbyterian Church (USA) context understand the Scriptures to have authority. But, interpretations of various passages can have more authority than other passages. This hermeneutic held as viable by clergy and laity alike allows room for the interpretation that Jesus Christ is not the only savior, but one among many. Although I have used the controversy surrounding whether or not self-avowed, practicing homosexuals should be ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, the question of the fundamental nature of conversion is raised. If a person responds to God's love for them in Jesus Christ, what is the extent of that conversion or change? Does conversion fundamentally change the whole person or is it limited to those areas which have been determined as needing change through a subjective interpretation process?

The broad evangelical Protestant tradition with its evangelical Reformed subset is less ambiguous in these areas. The Scriptures are authoritative in all matters of faith and practice, Jesus Christ is the only way to be reconciled to the Father, and conversion is not simply a subjective experience, but one of objective confirmation in lifestyle as well. Conversion can be qualitatively verified. God regenerates the person to respond to the good news of the gospel and that good news is irresistible. Faith leads to repentance and the resulting conversion process does not just change a person's objective standing before God, but begins the slow process of changing sinful behaviors as well.

The context represented by Bright, Campolo, McDowell, and Lucado and the context represented by Piper, Sproul, Ogilvie, and Grudem disagree, however, on the doctrine of regeneration. Whereas the evangelical Reformed context affirms the notion that God must change the person's heart to want to accept God's love for them in Christ and that love is irresistible, the broad evangelical Protestant context represented by Bright, Campolo, McDowell, and Lucado holds to the premise that the individual can freely choose or reject God's regenerating work in their lives and His love for them.

The thesis of this dissertation is to examine Calvin's understanding of conversion in his early writings, *Psychopannychia* (1534) and *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536) in order to recover the unique voice Calvin could have among Christians within the Reformed and the broad evangelical Protestant traditions in the United States, particularly Christians in the evangelical Reformed subset within the broad evangelical Protestant tradition.

Chapter 2: Calvin's Understanding of Conversion in his Writings in General

2.1 Introduction

According to the Reformed tradition, conversion "...radically transforms one's heart, mind, and will."¹ Conversion is fundamentally "...the work of the Holy Spirit according to which the intellect and the will of the sinner are turned toward God in contrition and faith."² The soul is the spiritual or non-physical part of the human being. "The soul may be distinguished into two *facultates animae* (q.v.), the *intellectus* (q.v.) and the *voluntas* (q.v.); the will, or *voluntas*, is further subserved by the *affectiones*, or affections; the soul, therefore, thinks, wills, and feels. It gathers, remembers, and interprets the data perceived by the senses and uses its knowledge when making choices."³ For Calvin, the soul is the essence of the person. In Calvin's words,

The soul is the cause of life, and the life depends on the soul—a figure, which boys learn from their rudiments. In this sense it was said, "the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David" — the soul of Sychem "clave unto Dinah the daughter of Jacob;" and Luke says, "the multitude of the believers was of one heart and soul." An indescribable something more is expressed.⁴

From this citation in *Psychopannychia* (1534) to the final edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the reader can see the continuity in Calvin's thought on the centrality of the soul to personhood. Calvin writes, "Now I understand by the term 'soul' an immortal yet created essence, which is man's nobler part."⁵ The soul's preeminence is central to the doctrine of redemption. "For although God's glory shines forth in the outer

¹Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 62.

²Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House Company, 1985), 82.

³*Ibid.*, 35.

⁴John Calvin, *Psychopannychia in Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 421.

⁵John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 184.

man, yet there is no doubt that the proper seat of his image is in the soul.”⁶ The image of God, which is properly seated in the soul, is restored through redemption into the divine likeness of Christ, which was obscured through the Fall. According to Calvin,

...the beginning of our recovery of salvation is in the restoration which we obtain through Christ, who also is called the Second Adam for the reason that he restores us to true and complete integrity...Christ is the most perfect image of God; if we are conformed to it, we are so restored that with true piety, righteousness, purity and intelligence we bear God’s image.⁷

Salvation is an inner change that the Holy Spirit brings about in man. Calvin writes,

Now, unless the soul were something essential, separate from the body, Scripture would not teach that we dwell in houses of clay [Job 4:19] and at death leave the tabernacle of the flesh, putting off what is corruptible so that at the Last Day we may finally receive our reward, according as each of us has done in the body. For surely these passages and similar ones that occur repeatedly not only clearly distinguish the soul from the body, but by transferring to it the name “man” indicate it to be the principal part.⁸

According to A.N.S Lane, Calvin views conversion as a lifelong process. “Calvin stresses the need for saving faith, but he does not imply that it must come at an instant.”⁹

This orientation of Calvin to conversion as a lifelong process stands in contradiction to the broad evangelical Protestant tradition represented by Bright, Campolo, McDowell, and Lucado that instantaneous conversion is the norm. Calvin writes,

I interpret repentance as regeneration, whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God that had been disfigured and all but obliterated through Adam’s transgression...In this way it pleases the Lord fully to restore whomsoever he adopts into the inheritance of life. And indeed, this restoration does not take place in one moment or one day or one year; but through continual and sometimes even slow advances God wipes out in his elect the corruptions of the flesh, cleanses them of guilt, consecrates them to himself as temples renewing all their minds to

⁶Ibid., 186.

⁷Ibid., 189-90.

⁸Ibid., 185.

⁹A.N.S. Lane, “Conversion: A Comparison of Calvin and Spener”, *Themelios* 13:1 (1987), 20.

true purity that they may practice repentance throughout their lives and know that this warfare will end only at death.¹⁰

2.2 An Overview of Conversion in the Entirety of Calvin's Writings

Calvin's *Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia* was published in April 1532.

The verb *convertere* is used six times in *Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia*.

Convertere is used in a secular way, that is, change. In *Ioannis Calvin's Opera quae supersunt omnia* the references are: "the citizens' enthusiasm which had been 'turned' to him"; "having 'turned' to his friends"; "We 'turn' to someone"; "from that which had been 'turned'"; "'turning' ...his weapons...against the commonwealth"; and "To this we are directed; to this we are 'turned'."¹¹

It seems to be clear that Calvin's use of *convertere* is never used in this text to address any notion of spiritual conversion. In fact, Calvin makes few references to religious considerations in *Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia*.

Calvin's second work is *Psychopannychia*. This work was completed in 1534 and finally published in 1542. Calvin uses the verb *convertere* four times. Like *Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia*, the four references use the secular meaning of "to turn" or "to return." The four references are: "Let the conversation be 'turned' to those"; "he who speaks from the 'reverse'"; "Let the sinners be 'turned' to hell"; and "Let us 'turn' to the examples of other saints."¹² In this work, Calvin argues for the existence of the soul after

¹⁰John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. I, edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles, 601.

¹¹Ganoczy's English translations of the Latin are translated from Calvin's *Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia* as found in *Ioannis Calvin's Opera quae supersunt omnia*. Edited in *Corpus Reformatorum* by G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Ruess. 55 vols. Braunschweig and Berlin, 1863-1890. Specific references are taken from 5:9, 10, 49, 55, 70, and 149.

¹²Ganoczy's English translations of the Latin are translated from Calvin's *Psychopannychia* as found in *Ioannis Calvin's Opera quae supersunt omnia*. Edited in *Corpus Reformatorum* by G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Ruess. 55 vols. Braunschweig and Berlin, 1863-1890. Specific references are taken from 5:200, 213, 224 and 225.

death and an immediate union with Christ. "For if the death to which we were liable was to be overcome by death, he undoubtedly suffered the same death as we do, and likewise in death suffered what we suffer... believers in the midst of death acknowledge him [Jesus Christ] as their leader, and while they behold their death sanctified by his death, have no dread of its curse."¹³ Christ's death provides the hope needed for believers to endure. Jesus Christ's death paves the way for human identity to have meaning and significance. This discovery of meaning and significance is at the core of existentially understanding the importance of conversion.

In *Psychopannychia*, Calvin's understanding of redemption is not as concerned with the afterlife as it is with everyday life. Calvin writes,

"As the Father hath life in himself, so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself." (John 5:26) Let them not tell me that these things belong to his Divinity. For if there has been given to him who has not, it has been given to man and not to God to have life in himself. For seeing that Jesus Christ is Son of God and man, that which he is by nature as God is he also by grace as man, that thus we may all receive of his fullness, and grace for grace.¹⁴

With the writing of the 1536 edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin uses the verb *convertere* and even the noun *conversio* in a clearly religious sense. It is in this edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that one sees Calvin discuss conversion as an ongoing process of repentance. Throughout the *Institutes*, Calvin discusses repentance in the reality of law and gospel. For Calvin, like Luther, the law did not heal the woundedness of sin. It was only through God's mercy that sin and the consequences of sin could be addressed. Calvin states,

Others, because they saw the various meanings of this word in Scripture, posited two forms of repentance. To distinguish them by some mark, they called one

¹³John Calvin, *Psychopannychia* in *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, vol. 3, 436.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 436-437.

“repentance of the law.” Through it the sinner wounded by the branding of sin and stricken by dread of God’s wrath, remains caught in the disturbed state and cannot extricate himself from it. The other they call “repentance of the gospel.” Through it the sinner is indeed sorely afflicted, but rises above it and lays hold of Christ as medicine for his wound, comfort for his dread, the haven of his misery.¹⁵

In Calvin’s two treatises of 1537, *The Unlawful Rites of the Ungodly* and *And Preserving the Purity of the Christian Religion*, Calvin does use “turn” or “conversion” when speaking of confessing one’s faith in a way that is purified of superstitions. Calvin speaks about the need for careful and critical examination of certain Roman Catholic practices. For example, Calvin is critical about the practice of indulgences. Although he is suspect of the rite, Calvin does not advocate a renunciation of or turning away from the Catholic Church. However, Calvin does state that Jesus Christ is insulted by the practice of indulgences. In Calvin’s words, “If you thoroughly examine what is concealed under them, you will nowhere find Christ and his cross more systematically insulted.”¹⁶

Calvin also critiques the Mass. Although he was critical of the Mass, Calvin did not advocate leaving the Church. But, Calvin does call the Mass “...the foulest and most pestiferous of Idols!”¹⁷ Calvin writes, “Come now and consider with me, in regard to a pretended observance of the Mass, with what kind of conscience you can present at the performance of its mysteries.”¹⁸ In these tracts, Calvin argues for the faithful to have courage like the invincible Martyrs of God. He calls believers to focus on Jesus Christ and not to turn from him.

On 01 September 1539, Calvin wrote *Reply to Cardinal Sadolet*, which was a response to Cardinal Sadolet’s *Letter to the Senate and People of Geneva* written 18

¹⁵John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1536 edition, 131.

¹⁶John Calvin, *On Sharing the Unlawful Rites in Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, vol. 3, 381.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 386.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 385.

March 1539. It is in Calvin's response to Sadolet that he begins to use the word *convertere* in the context of turning from one tradition to another. The context of the letter is the accusations that Cardinal Sadolet made inferring that Farel, Viret and Calvin incited religious disturbance in Geneva. Cardinal Sadolet attacked their character and questioned their motivation, particularly to the unrest that was forming in the Church in Geneva. He inferred that ambition and greed only motivated Farel, Viret and Calvin when they led the citizens of Geneva in dissent against the church.¹⁹ Cardinal Sadolet insinuated that Farel, Viret and Calvin broke away from the Church, because they were unjustly deprived of the recognition that the Church should have given them for their knowledge. Calvin responds to that charge by stating,

As to those of us to whom you pointed as with the finger, it seemed proper for us to reply in our own name. But since you seem to throw out indirect insinuations against all who in the present day are united with us in sustaining the same cause, I would have you understand, that not one can be mentioned for whom I cannot give you a better answer than for Farel and myself... Think you it was hunger which drove them away from you, and made them in despair flee to that *change* (italics mine) as a means of bettering their fortunes?... But come and consider with me for a little what the honours and powers are which we have gained. All our hearers will bear us witness that we did not covet or aspire to any other riches or dignities than those which fell to our lot... If there was any hope of rising, why did we not craftily dissemble, so that those powers might have passed to us along with the office of governing the Church?²⁰

Calvin's *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, which was published in 1551, was the first commentary in which he engaged in the interpretation of the Old Testament.²¹ With this commentary, a new development in Calvin's reflection upon conversion is noticed. Life experiences become opportunities for conversion. Calvin writes,

¹⁹Ibid., vol. 1, 26.

²⁰Ibid., vol. 1, 30-31.

²¹Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin*, translated by Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1993), 101.

We are utterly ruined so long as we are turned away from God; but when we are converted, we return to his favour, and are delivered from death; not that we deserve the favour of God by our repentance, but because in this manner God raises us up, as it were, from death to life. To repentance is added a promise, from which we conclude, that when we sincerely repent, we do not in vain implore forgiveness. Now when the Prophet says that the Lord will be gracious and reconciled to the Egyptians, he at the same time shews, that as soon as they have been converted, they will obtain forgiveness. It will therefore be a true conversion when it is followed by a calling on God. But without faith (Rom. X, 14) it is impossible to call on God; for even the ungodly may acknowledge sin, but no man will have recourse to the mercy of God, or obtain reconciliation, til he be moved by a true feeling of repentance, which is likewise accompanied by faith.²²

With the writing of *Commentary on Acts* (vol. 1: 1552 and vol. 2: 1554), the story of Paul's conversion seems to captivate Calvin. Paul's dramatic conversion seems to have moved Calvin to focus on the cause of conversion more than its effect. Calvin emphasizes that it is God's grace that causes conversion and that grace is irresistible.²³

Commenting on Paul's conversion, particularly Acts 9:5,

In this story we have, so to speak, a universal type of that grace which the Lord puts out every day in calling all of us. Indeed all do not rise up against the Gospel with such great violence, but both pride and rebellion against God are nevertheless innate in all; we are all by nature perverse and cruel. Accordingly when we are converted to God it happens against our nature and by the marvellous and secret power of God... Therefore the beginning of our conversion is such, that God, without having been called or sought, by His own initiative seeks us who are wandering and going astray; that He changes the inflexible desires of our heart, so that He may keep us open to His teaching.²⁴

Calvin is captivated by the suddenness of Paul's conversion and identifies the work of God as "...God's wonderful hand... assuming the character of a shepherd."²⁵

Paul's conversion becomes a paradigm for Calvin of the notion that conversion can begin with an element of suddenness and unexpectedness. In Calvin's words,

²²John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 1, translated by the Rev. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1981), 79-80.

²³John Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, vol. 6, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), 257.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 259.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 256.

...this narrative is of value for confirming Paul's teaching. If Paul had always been one of Christ's disciples, ungodly and impudent men could weaken the authority of the testimony which he gives to His master. If he had shown himself to be good-natured and compliant at the beginning, we should be seeing nothing but what is human; but when a deadly enemy of Christ, a rebel against the Gospel, a man swollen with confidence in his own wisdom, burning with hatred of the true faith, blind with hypocrisy, absolutely determined to destroy the truth, is suddenly and in an unusual way changed into a new man, when the wolf is not only changed into a sheep, but adopts the character of a shepherd, it is just as if Christ were publicly leading out by His hand some angel from heaven.²⁶

A fourfold process has emerged in Calvin's understanding of conversion following the publication of Calvin's *Commentary on Acts*. First, there is a dialectical opposition between the human will, which is rebellious and powerless, and the divine will, which is sovereign and compelling.²⁷ Second, conversion can demonstrate the sudden nature of God's triumphant and transforming intervention.²⁸ Third, conversion affirms that the convert begins an entirely new existence.²⁹ And fourth, the notion of conversion develops into a pastoral calling.³⁰

In 1557, Calvin's *Commentary on the Psalms* was published. In the Preface, Calvin uses *subita conversione* for the first time. This usage highlights Calvin's punctiliar understanding of the nature of conversion. In his translation of the Psalms, Calvin marks all the verses where the terms "to turn" and "conversion" are used. It was Calvin's intent to establish the punctiliar and process aspects of the notion of repentance.

Calvin worked diligently to translate *convertere* appropriately, insisting that the word has both secular and sacred meanings. For example, Psalm 7:12 states, "If one does not repent, God will whet his sword."(NRSV) Calvin writes, "Returning (*repent*) does

²⁶Ibid., 260.

²⁷Ibid., 248.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

not signify repentance and amendment in David's enemy, but only a change of will and purpose."³¹

There are two other passages, which are particularly significant for this discussion. First, Psalms 22:27 says, "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD." (NRSV) This verse is a typical example of conversion as repentance. "I allow that the conversion or return of which mention is here made, implies that they had previously been alienated from God by wicked defection; but this remembrance simply means that the Gentiles, awakened by the signal miracles wrought by God, would again come to embrace the true religion, from which they had fallen away."³²

Second, Psalm 51:13 reads, "Then I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will return to you." (NRSV) "Here he [David] speaks of the gratitude which he would feel should God answer his prayer, and engages to show it by exerting himself in effecting the conversion of others by example."³³

Conversion as an ongoing process of repentance becomes Calvin's primary understanding of the nature of conversion in the 1559 edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. By 1559, Calvin views conversion as an ongoing process of repentance than that of sudden change.³⁴ Despite Calvin realizing that his own conversion though delayed, had been sudden, in the Preface to *Commentary on the Psalms*, Calvin uses the word conversion to describe repentance, which is thought of as lifelong.

Can true repentance stand, apart from faith? Not at all. But even though they cannot be separated, they ought to be distinguished. As faith is not without hope, yet faith and hope are different things, so repentance and faith, although they are held together by a permanent bond, require to be joined rather than confused.

³¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 1, 88.

³² *Ibid.*, 385.

³³ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 301-02.

³⁴ Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, 251.

Indeed, I am aware of the fact that the whole of conversion to God is understood under the term 'repentance,' and faith is not the least part of conversion; but in what sense this is so will very rapidly appear when its force and nature are explained. The Hebrew word for 'repentance' is derived from conversion or return; the Greek word, from change of mind or of intention. And the thing itself corresponds closely to the etymology of both words. The meaning is that, departing from ourselves, we turn to God, and having taken off our former mind, we put on a new. On this account, in my judgment, repentance can thus be well defined: it is the true turning of our life to God, a turning that arises from a pure and earnest fear of him; and it consists in the mortification of our flesh and of the old man, and in the vivification of the Spirit.³⁵

In the 1559 edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin links the conversion of the sinner to God's eternal election. He rejects the role of free will in salvation. The Holy Spirit must regenerate the will in order for salvation to occur. Since the Lord in coming to our aid bestows upon us what we lack, when the nature of his work in us appears, our destitution will, on the other hand, at once be manifest. When the apostle tells the Philippians he is confident 'that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ' (Phil. 1:6), there is no doubt that through 'the beginning of a good work' he denotes the very origin of conversion itself, which is in the will. God begins his good work in us, therefore, by arousing love and desire and zeal for righteousness in our hearts; or, to speak more correctly, by bending, forming, and directing, our hearts to righteousness. He completes his work, moreover, by confirming us to perseverance.³⁶ Furthermore, Calvin, relying heavily on Augustine, asserts that the human will must be "turned" or "changed" by God's grace in order for conversion to begin and to continue.

...the human will does not obtain grace by freedom, but obtains freedom by grace; when the feeling of delight has been imparted through the same grace, the human will is formed to endure; it is strengthened with unconquerable fortitude;

³⁵John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, ed. by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles, 597.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 297.

controlled by grace, it will never perish, but, if grace forsake it, it will straightway fall; by the Lord's free mercy it is converted to good, and once converted it perseveres in good; the direction of the human will toward good, and after direction its continuation in good, depend solely upon God's will, not upon any merit of man. Thus there is left to man such free will, if we please so to call it, as he elsewhere describes: that except through grace the will can neither be converted to God nor abide in God; and whatever it can do it is able to do only through grace.³⁷

Finally, by 1559, Calvin's understanding of conversion is rooted in the notion of ongoing repentance, the process and experience of the human being turning one's life to God. Calvin views repentance in three categories as they are outlined in Book 3, Chapter 3 of the 1559 edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. First, repentance transforms the soul. Calvin defines repentance as a transformation that is visible by outward works, which reflects a change in the soul itself.³⁸ Second, repentance proceeds from a sincere fear of God. In this regard, Calvin views repentance as coming forth from an awareness of divine judgment. The mind is quickened to reckon with that outcome.³⁹ And third, repentance has two components, mortification of the flesh (ceasing to do evil) and vivification of the Spirit (doing good). We are given the desire to repent from evil, because the Spirit of God infuses our souls with God's holiness. This in turn produces new thoughts, and new feelings.⁴⁰ The sole purpose of repentance, or turning over one's life to God is to be restored in the image of God.

In *A Treatise on the Predestination of God* (1552) and *Sermons on Jeremiah* (1563), Calvin's commitment to election and grace is central to his understanding of the process of conversion. First, in *A Treatise on the Predestination of God*, Calvin states this concerning the relationship between election and repentance,

³⁷Ibid., 308-09.

³⁸Ibid., 598.

³⁹Ibid., 599.

⁴⁰Ibid., 600.

...all those who do not follow the stream of the common ruin are saved by His grace. Whether or not repentance is His own work ought not to be brought into the controversy. So evidently true is that which Augustine says: "Those whom the Lord wills to be converted, He converts Himself; who not only makes willing ones out of them who were unwilling, but makes also sheep out of wolves and martyrs out of persecutors, transforming them by His all-powerful grace."⁴¹

Second, in *Sermons on Jeremiah*, we have this statement of Calvin concerning the relationship between election and repentance, "It is impossible we return to God, save that the Holy Spirit converts us; and, insofar as we are unworthy, we cannot trust that it will do so."⁴² Perhaps, but not necessarily, the present tense, ongoing action of "converts" denotes, for Calvin, that the sinner is converted gradually, precisely because of the depravity and perversity that is so persistent in the human condition.

2.3 Summary

While Calvin was aware of an aspect of the conversion experience, which can be sudden and unexpected, it is equally apparent that Calvin had a progressive understanding of conversion that continued long after any sudden beginning. With this perspective, Calvin offered an understanding of conversion that paralleled a person's Christian discipleship. In fact, this progressive nature of conversion necessitated ongoing repentance in order to experience the deepening reality of conversion.

⁴¹John Calvin, *A Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God*. In *Calvin's Calvinism*, translated by Henry Cole (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 79-80.

⁴²John Calvin, *Sermon on Jeremiah 18:16*. In *Sermons on Jeremiah*, translated by Blair Reynolds (Lampeter, Dyfed, Wales: United Kingdom, 1990), 275.

Chapter 3: Calvin's Understanding of Conversion in *Psychopannychia* (1534) and *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536)

3.1 *Psychopannychia* (1534) and *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536)

3.1.1 *Psychopannychia* (1534)

There has been little study done on *Psychopannychia*. Walther Zimmerli's 1932 study of *Psychopannychia* is the first thorough investigation of the text.¹ A second study, Jung-Uck Hwang's doctoral dissertation, was presented in 1991.² And finally, George H. Tavard's *The Starting point of Calvin's Theology* was published in 2000.³

In *Psychopannychia* it is Calvin's fascination with the immortality of the soul that generates his initial understanding of regeneration. Calvin notes that it is the soul or spirit, which is born anew by the Holy Spirit. "He [Paul] no doubt calls the body the mass of sin, which resides in man from the native property of the flesh; and the spirit the part of man spiritually regenerated."⁴ In this tract, Calvin demonstrates from the Scriptures that a proper understanding of the immortality of the soul is essential and necessary for the doctrine of salvation to be biblical. It is Calvin's belief that without a biblical understanding of the doctrine of salvation there will be no peace or unity in the Church.

Psychopannychia was completed in 1534 and later published in 1542. In the preface, Calvin wrote to a friend explaining why he would undertake such an endeavor, to counter the notion that the soul goes into a state of sleep at death and does not come to

¹Walther Zimmerli, *Psychopannychia von Joh. Calvin (Quellenschriften zur Geschichte des Protestantismus 13)* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1932).

²Jung-Uck Hwang, *Der junge Calvin und seiner Psychopannychia*, Europäische Hochschulschriften. Reihe XXIII. Theologie. Series XXIII, vol. 407 (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1991).

³George H. Tavard, *The Starting Point of Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000).

⁴John Calvin, *Psychopannychia in Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 439-40.

life again until the final judgment. In one sentence, Calvin states "...I could not well defend myself from the charge of being a traitor to the Truth were I, in such urgent circumstances, to keep back and remain silent."⁵ It seems possible that Calvin is divulging something more than theological accuracy with such a statement. Could Calvin be engaged in a struggle between his commitment to the essential nature of the immortality of the soul and his own understanding of personal piety, particularly the doctrine of salvation? At this point, suffice it to say, that for Calvin, inherent in the *imago Dei* is the true definition of humanity, which we see lived out in Jesus Christ.

The preface to *Psychopannychia* is helpful in this regard. Calvin remarks to his reader, "To Him [God] alone ought we to open our ears when the doctrine of Salvation is in question, while to others we should keep shut. His word, I say, is not new, but that which was from the beginning, is, and always shall be."⁶ For Calvin, human self-knowledge includes an awareness of immortality and the perpetuity of the human will. If the soul were to sleep at death or actually die until the resurrection at the final judgment, then the self-knowledge of immortality that is innate at birth is compromised by the physical death of the body.

3.1.2 *Institutes of the Christian Religion (1536)*

Leaving France following the Cop address, Calvin became an exile from his native country. By January 1535, Calvin was living in Basel. Ganoczy asserts that *Institutes* was completed in the first few months of Calvin's arrival in Basel.⁷ Battles confirms Ganoczy's position with more specificity, stating that the 1536 edition of

⁵Ibid., 415.

⁶Ibid., 417.

⁷Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, translated by David Foxgrover and Wade Provo (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 94.

Institutes was completed on 23 August 1535 and published in March 1536.⁸ The 1536 edition of *Institutes* was Calvin's first attempt to write a primer on the basics of the Christian faith.

In my exposition of the 1536 edition of *Institutes*, I am using, predominantly, the Battles translation. This edition is composed of a prefatory letter written to King Francis I and six chapters. This six-chapter format basically follows the format of Luther's *Der kleine Catechismus* (1529). Chapters on the law, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Sacraments follow Luther's catechism format exactly. However, Calvin added a chapter on the False Sacraments and a chapter on Christian Freedom, the Christian doctrine of Church and State and spiritual and temporal government.

The very structure of the 1536 edition of *Institutes* reveals Calvin's underlying conviction that the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas* is a lifelong process. His clear exposition of the interactive and dialectic nature of the law, faith, the triune God, prayer, and the sacraments betrays Calvin's emerging understanding of the pursuit of true godliness (*pietas*). Furthermore, it is this transition from *impietas* toward *pietas* that is definitive for Calvin's later use of *convertere* and *conversio* to describe the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. This is, fundamentally, Calvin's framework for understanding the nature of conversion.

There are two works that deal specifically with the 1536 edition. Both are written by Battles. The first is his 1975 translation and annotation of the 1536 edition of *Institutes*. The second is the 1996 compilation of Battles' interpretive theory on Calvin's thought edited by Robert Benedetto titled *Interpreting John Calvin*.

⁸John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), xxxiv.

In his preface to *Institutes*, Calvin states a twofold purpose in writing this basic instruction in the Christian religion. First, he desired to write an instruction of Christian doctrine for the common people. Second, Calvin desired to write a confessional defense.

The first stated purpose is critical for my thesis. Calvin is not writing to proselytize. He is writing to enable people to be shaped toward true godliness if they “are touched with any zeal for religion.” Although the distinction seems negligible, it is not. Calvin is not stating that his catechetical instruction will instigate the zeal for religion within us. He is assuming that if we already have the zeal for religion, it has come from somewhere else. Calvin’s language for the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas* assumes a beginning from a non-human source. Calvin’s language is intentional. He is drawing a line in the sand between the Roman understanding of godliness and the emerging Reformed perspective.

Whereas Roman Catholic teaching highlighted human acts that were particular and punctiliar like penance, Reformed teaching shifted the emphasis from human initiative to divine initiative and from isolated individualism to corporate fellowship. Calvin focused attention on the notion of an ongoing relationship in fellowship with God as adopted children of the Father, a relationship that is initiated by God the Father. Calvin writes, “We have taught that the sinner does not dwell upon his own compunction or tears, but fixes both eyes upon the Lord’s mercy alone.”⁹

The second stated purpose is to write a confessional defense. Why was Calvin concerned with such a confessional defense? Simply stated, Calvin believed that Anabaptist teaching placed an unhealthy emphasis, like that of Roman teaching, on human initiative in redemption. In his preface to Francis I, he writes:

⁹Ibid., 134.

Thus, before God nothing remains for us to boast of, save his mercy alone, whereby we have been saved through no merit of our own...Indeed, our adversaries cry out that we falsely make the Word of God our pretext, and wickedly corrupt it. By reading our confession you can judge according to your prudence not only how malicious a calumny but also what utter effrontery this is.¹⁰

The content of Calvin's epistle dedicatory to Francis I, King of the French is essential to a correct interpretation of the 1536 edition of *Institutes*. It is essential because in it we see that Calvin views his theological writing as a way to enhance true knowledge of God.¹¹ Although Calvin claims in this preface that his *Institutes* is both a catechetical instruction in basic Christianity and a defense for the persecuted in the Reformed movement, he sets forth an underlying assumption that is true for Reformed and non-Reformed alike. True religion can only be known through a careful examination and study of the knowledge of God and ourselves as the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures reveals these. All human beings are in the same predicament. What Calvin sets forth in the preface sets the tone for the content of the six subsequent chapters.

Now look at our adversaries (I speak of the order of priests, at whose nod and will the others treat us hostilely), and consider with me for a moment what zeal moves them. They readily allow themselves and others to ignore, neglect, and despise the true religion, which has been handed down in the Scriptures, and which ought to have a recognized place among all men. They think it of no concern what belief anyone holds or does not hold regarding God and Christ, if only he submits his mind with implicit faith to the judgment of the church. The sight of God's glory defiled with manifest blasphemies does not much trouble them.¹²

Calvin's commitment to a catechetical exposition of Christian doctrine and an apologetic of the Reformed faith remained the twofold purpose for each subsequent edition of *Institutes*.

¹⁰Ibid., 3.

¹¹For Calvin, the knowledge of God (*cognitio Dei*) is the beginning of *pietas*.

¹²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 4.

3.2 Soteriological Themes in Calvin's Understanding of Conversion in *Psychopannychia* (1534) and *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536)

3.2.1 Election

God's mediating reconciliation in Jesus Christ with mankind is ontological in nature and source, because of God's character. Because of this, the onus of the *ordo salutis* is on God's being and initiative as opposed to man's. This a fundamental premise in the doctrine of election, which is seen early on in Calvin's writings. "We acknowledge God as growing in his elect, and increasing from day to day."¹³ First, God initiates a redemptive relationship with mankind through election. "...the Lord, when he calls his own, justifies and glorifies his own, is declaring nothing but his eternal election, by which he had destined them to this end before they were born."¹⁴ Second, election is a mystery. "We indeed cannot comprehend God's incomprehensible wisdom, nor is it in our power to investigate it so as to find out who have by his eternal plan been chosen, who condemned."¹⁵ Moreover, in Jesus Christ alone the will of God the Father is found. "God will recognize as his sons those who have received his only-begotten Son."¹⁶ This is secured in God's covenantal promise. Jesus became our redemption, righteousness, salvation, and life through the Incarnation. He became these things for us in his pre-existence. Calvin continues,

When therefore by faith we possess Christ and all that is his, it must certainly be established that as he himself is the beloved Son of the Father and heir of the Kingdom of Heaven, so we also through him have been adopted as children of God, and are his brothers and companions in such a way as to be partakers of the same inheritance; on this account we are also assured that we are among those

¹³John Calvin, *Psychopannychia* in *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, vol.3, 444.

¹⁴John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1536 edition, 58.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

whom the Lord has chosen from eternity, whom he will ever protect and never allow to perish.¹⁷

Third, election is based on grace alone. The elect are not chosen because God knows they are worthy. They are chosen in Christ. "For God, whenever it pleases him, changes the worst men into the best, engrafts the alien, and adopts the stranger."¹⁸ Like Augustine, Calvin affirmed the notion that "God's grace does not find but makes them fit to be chosen."¹⁹ Finally, God must show himself to us. God calls to himself, his own.²⁰ This is foundational to conversion, the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. God the Father must choose to reveal himself to us. This notion of God revealing himself to us is referred to, although casually, in the last and longest section of *Psychopannychia*, which argues against those, who hold to the ideas that the soul dies at a person's material death. Calvin adeptly takes on those who go further than those who hold to the notion of "soul sleep." Calvin relies heavily on the New Testament books of 1 Corinthians, Hebrews, and Acts. He appeals to the mystical tradition as well. "...when Christ shall have received us into his own glory, not only will the animal body be quickened by the soul, but made spiritual in a manner which our mind can neither comprehend nor our tongue express."²¹ For Calvin, the soul dies when it exists in God's absence. "...for if God is its life, it loses its life when it loses the presence of God."²² But this is not true for the elect. "...we conclude that the elect now are such as Adam was before his sin; and as he was created inexterminable, so now have those become who have been renewed by Christ to a better

¹⁷Ibid., 60.

¹⁸Ibid., 62.

¹⁹Augustine, *Letters*, clxxxvi.5.15

²⁰John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 58.

²¹John Calvin, *Psychopannychia in Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, vol. 3, 451-452.

²²Ibid., 454.

nature.”²³ Moreover, “‘The Kingdom of God is within you.’ (Luke xvii.21) God, therefore, now reigns in his elect, whom he guides by his Spirit.”²⁴

We have no ability in ourselves to reveal God the Father to ourselves. Calvin writes, “...we must now recognize that our salvation consists in God’s mercy alone, but not in any worth of ours, or in anything coming from us.”²⁵ The notion that we have no worth in ourselves to recognize the source of salvation strikes at the nerve of a free will, decision-based understanding of the transition. Furthermore, to admit that our salvation consists in God’s mercy alone places the discussion of the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*, in its entirety, in the provision of God’s agency and initiative alone.

Calvin does not deviate from his conviction that any zeal for religion must be given first by God. Furthermore, Calvin asserts that the righteousness “...we put on as our own”²⁶ is Christ’s righteousness which God accepts as ours. “Thus is fulfilled Paul’s statement: ‘Christ was made righteousness, sanctification, and redemption for us’ [1 Cor. 1:30].”²⁷ God’s mercy on us is known in Christ. In Christ is our righteousness. In Christ is our sanctification. In Christ is our redemption. Calvin writes, “...when all our confidence is utterly cast down yet we still rely on his goodness, we grasp and obtain God’s grace.”²⁸

Calvin asserts that until we become completely distrustful of ourselves, that is, our own attempts to provide meaning and significance in a salvific sense, we will not have confidence in God. Only in an accurate knowledge of God and ourselves, a knowledge trusting in God and distrusting of ourselves, will we grasp and obtain God’s

²³ Ibid., 457.

²⁴ Ibid., 464.

²⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 34.

²⁶ Ibid., 34.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

grace that is Christ. And this knowledge is only obtained at God's choosing. "...without any exception the Lord...sets forth and manifests his election in all men whom He has chosen."²⁹

Calvin describes God the Father as "...infinite wisdom, righteousness, goodness, mercy, truth, power and life."³⁰ Furthermore, whenever we see these attributes manifested, they have come from God. That is to say, any glimpse of infinite wisdom, righteousness, goodness, mercy, truth, power, or life are not made manifest by human volition, but through the disclosure of God, by God, in human experience.

3.2.2 Regeneration

If Calvin is correct that we have been chosen through God the Father's eternal election in Jesus Christ and adopted into the church, then it is the work of the Holy Spirit to awaken us to an awareness of that election. Calvin uses the word regeneration or some derivative six times in *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*.³¹ In each of those contexts, Calvin is addressing the sacrament of baptism. He writes that baptism "...should be a symbol and proof of our cleansing."³² Contradicting the teaching of Roman Catholicism, Calvin did not believe that in baptism a person is regenerated. Calvin writes, "For Paul did not mean to signify that our cleansing and salvation are accomplished by water intervening, or that water is itself the instrument to cleanse, regenerate, and renew; nor that here is the cause of salvation, but only that in this sacrament are received the knowledge and certainty of such gifts."³³

²⁹Ibid., 59.

³⁰Ibid., 15.

³¹See pages 94, 95, 96, 125, and 127.

³²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 94.

³³Ibid., 94-95.

Without using the word regeneration, Calvin defines what regeneration does when he writes, "He bestows upon us according to his own good will a new heart in order that we may will, and a new power, whereby we may be enabled to carry out his commandments [Ezek. 36:26]."³⁴ Furthermore, Calvin writes, "We are persuaded that there is no other guide or leader to the Father than the Holy Spirit."³⁵ It is the Holy Spirit, who gives us the desire to divest ourselves of all arrogance and to recognize our need of God the Father, for salvation exists in God only. Any zeal that we have for religion, then, is a work of the Holy Spirit. Calvin writes, "To man is left no reason why he should seek in himself his righteousness, power, life, and salvation; for all these are in God only."³⁶

Calvin believes that the Holy Spirit awakens a person to want the benefits of Christ. The Holy Spirit gives a person faith. Faith is the receiving of the grace offered to us in Jesus Christ. "Therefore, the Holy Spirit, while dwelling in us in this manner, illumines us with his light, in order that we may learn and plainly recognize what an enormous wealth of divine goodness we possess in Christ."³⁷ The grace offered us in Jesus Christ is forgiveness of sins. Our salvation consists in God's mercy alone, not our merit. Nothing comes from us. Calvin writes, "...on this mercy we must establish and as it were deeply fix all our hope, paying no regard to our works nor seeking any help from them."³⁸ This ability to turn from the arrogance of believing we can choose God based on our own merits to the mercy of God is faith, which results from regeneration.

³⁴Ibid., 17.

³⁵Ibid., 57.

³⁶Ibid., 16.

³⁷Ibid., 57.

³⁸Ibid., 34.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to bring us to such awareness. In the third article of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the Holy Spirit," Calvin demonstrates that the work of the Holy Spirit is indispensable in the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*.

We are persuaded that there is for us no other guide and leader to the Father than the Holy Spirit, just as there is no other way than Christ; and that there is no grace from God, save through the Holy Spirit. Grace is itself the power and action of the Spirit: through grace God the Father, in the Son, accomplishes whatever good there is; through grace He justifies, sanctifies, and cleanses us, calls and draws us to himself, that we may attain salvation.³⁹

It is the particular role of the Holy Spirit to move us into the knowledge of God as Redeemer. Without the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives there is no possible way for us to move from knowledge of God as Creator to that of God as Redeemer. Knowledge of God in and through creation can be attained, but that knowledge is only a knowledge that confronts us with our depravity. It is solely through the revelatory work of God through the Holy Spirit that we may possess Christ and be possessed by him. Without the Holy Spirit bringing us into the knowledge of God as Redeemer there is no union with Christ. We remain in "...darkness of mind and perversity of heart."⁴⁰

This aspect of the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*, then, is the Holy Spirit prompting in us an awareness that we need God. This is regeneration. It is God who initiates the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. The regenerative role of God is the sole work of the Holy Spirit. Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit our election remains unknown. Without God revealing himself to us through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, we cannot place our faith in Christ and his benefits, thus, becoming reconciled to God.

³⁹Ibid., 57.

⁴⁰Ibid.

There is no grace from God apart from the Holy Spirit and grace is the power and action of the Holy Spirit. God's grace through the Holy Spirit calls, cleanses, justifies, sanctifies and draws us to God. Of these five images, the most significant for our discussion are the calling and drawing actions of the Holy Spirit. "Therefore we believe in the Holy Spirit, acknowledging him, with the Father and the Son, to be our one God...because we have heard the sacred word of the gospel."⁴¹ The Holy Spirit calls us to God the Father through hearing the sacred Word of the gospel.

God's grace, through the Holy Spirit, calls us to the Father. But how does this call occur? In discussing the fourth article of the Creed, "I believe the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the flesh, eternal life," Calvin speaks unequivocally about the function of the church; particularly the role preaching and the sacraments play in the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the transition.

For Calvin, the church is the context in which the call of grace is heard. According to Wendel, Calvin took the view of St. Cyprian and St. Augustine "...that the church is our mother and that apart from her there is no salvation."⁴² Calvin writes, "First, we believe that the holy Catholic church – that is the whole number of the elect, whether angels or men; of men, whether dead or still living; of the living, in whatever lands they live, or wherever among the nations they have been scattered - to be one church and society, and one people of God."⁴³ The church for Calvin is first and foremost a people, not an institution. For Calvin, the lives of individual believers as well as the church as an institution are manifestations of the kingdom of God. The necessary implication then is

⁴¹Ibid., 57-58.

⁴²Francois Wendel, *Calvin*, translated by Philip Mairet (London: Collins, 1963), 294.

⁴³John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 58.

that grace calls people to God the Father as Redeemer through the lives of the elect, individually and corporately. The lives of the elect continue to be called to God the Father by grace as they hear the Word of God rightly preached and receive the properly administered.

Where the Word of God is rightly preached and heard and the sacraments are administered properly, there, the church of God exists.⁴⁴ Calvin goes on to clarify what the words “rightly” and “properly” mean by addressing the notion of the forgiveness of sins as the foundation of the church’s existence. Calvin writes,

Now the church itself stands and consists in this forgiveness of sins, and is supported by this as by a foundation. Since forgiveness of sins is the way that leads to God, and the means by which he is reconciled to us, for this reason forgiveness of sins alone opens for us the entrance into the church (which is the city of God; and the tabernacle which the Most High has sanctified as his dwelling place); and keeps and protects us therein. Believers receive this forgiveness, when oppressed, afflicted, and confounded by the awareness of their own sins, they are stricken by the sense of divine judgment, become displeased with themselves, and as it were groan and toil under a heavy burden. And by this hatred of sin and by their own confusion, they mortify their flesh and whatever derives from it.⁴⁵

It is through the church, the elect, that the Holy Spirit calls us to God. God the Father calls us to himself. When we hear God’s call through the Holy Spirit, that is regeneration, what in that gospel is so attractive to give us sure faith to begin the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*?

3.2.3 Faith

Before discussing Calvin’s understanding of faith and its relationship to the conversion process, a cursory knowledge of Calvin’s understanding of the law is in order. While we are caught in the predicament of our corrupted human nature, all the while

⁴⁴Ibid., 62-63.

⁴⁵Ibid., 63-64.

aware that God or a god exists and that there is a distinction between good and evil, we are subjected to the law, the law that is engraved on our hearts and the written law.

Consequently, all of us born of Adam are ignorant and bereft of God, perverse, corrupt, and lacking every good...Even though we have been so born that nothing is left for us to do which could be acceptable to God, nor has it been put in our power to please him – yet we do not cease to owe the very thing we cannot supply...For this reason Scripture calls us ‘children of God’s wrath and declares we are hurtling to death and destruction...The law teaches us God’s will, which we are constrained to fulfill and to which we are in debt; it shows us how we are able to carry out exactly nothing of what God has commanded us. Consequently, it is clearly a mirror for us wherein we may discern and contemplate our sin and curse.⁴⁶

Calvin understood the law, both *conscientia* and written, to function principally as a norm and guide. He envisioned three uses of the law. First, the law fosters an awareness within persons of their sinfulness and need of a savior. “...it admonishes each one of his unrighteousness and convicts him of his sin.”⁴⁷ Second, the law has uses within both the political and civil spheres of life. “...it serves at least by fear of punishment to restrain men, who, unless compelled, are untouched by any concern for what is just and right.”⁴⁸ Third, the law continues to instruct believers concerning God’s will and it serves as an instrument of exhortation that spurs us to obey God and forsake evil. “...it provides no unimportant use, warning them as it does, more and more earnestly what is right and pleasing in the Lord’s sight.”⁴⁹

Calvin then identifies three rules of interpretation in order to use the law properly. First, the law is spiritual. That is, the law, which is engraved on our hearts, first and foremost is a reality of the inner life. It, unlike the written law, is not an external code for behavior. Here, Calvin is writing of the *conscientia*. Second, Calvin believed that the Ten

⁴⁶Ibid., 16-17.

⁴⁷Ibid., 35.

⁴⁸Ibid., 36

⁴⁹Ibid.

Commandments, the written law, are mostly negative and for accurate interpretive purpose, the interpreter must discover God's intention, thus using the Ten Commandments to interpret in a positive manner. Third, the Ten Commandments are to be considered from the context of the two commandments that Jesus gave in the gospels; the commandments to honor, fear and love God and to love and serve one's neighbor.

Calvin admits that there is some good in human nature, but that goodness cannot merit God's grace. That is, there is nothing within human nature that can accomplish the work of God's redemption in Christ. The *conscientia*, God's law engraved on our hearts, teaches us the things that the natural law has not sufficiently taught us. The written law becomes a witness of natural law, which then arouses within us, the *conscientia*, to do the will of God. But we cannot do God's will apart from God's grace. From the law we are to learn that God is our Creator, our Lord, and Father. From the law, we are to learn that we need God. The written law is a "testimonium duntaxat legis naturalis."⁵⁰ Calvin refers to this idea of the law written on our hearts, the *conscientia*, as common grace. "But our task is to thank God for his every kindness, through which we recognize that what is not all owed is given to us: not to become elated in heart, and to seize more than was given."⁵¹ The law continues to function as a mirror to believers during the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. We are not bound by it any longer, because of our union with Christ by faith, but it reflects back to us our remaining imperfections.

It is because of Calvin's understanding of the law that he has a keen understanding of the human condition. He is clear in the 1536 *Institutes* that

⁵⁰Ibid., 17. See also, John Calvin, *Opera omnia quae supersunt*, edited by Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz, Edward Ruetz, 59 vols. *Corpus Reformatorum*, vols. 29-87 (Brunswick: C.A. Schwetschke, 1863-1900), I, 28.

⁵¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 41.

righteousness can be sought from the law, but only through our unceasing obedience will the law make us righteous. Calvin writes,

In short, in God's law we must have regard not for the work but for the commandment. Therefore, if righteousness is sought from the law, not one work or another, but unceasing obedience to the law will make one righteous. Moreover, sin is an utterly execrable thing in God's sight and of such gravity that men's whole righteousness, gathered together in one heap, could not make compensation for a single sin. For we see that man was so cast away and abandoned by God for one transgression that he lost at the same time all capacity to receive and regain his salvation. Therefore, the capacity to make satisfaction was taken away.⁵²

An incorrect understanding of the law is the roadblock to faith. If we accept the notion that through the works of the law we can satisfy God, then we forget our true nature. "Forgetfulness of their own true nature, contempt of God's justice and ignorance of their own sin have plunged them into this error."⁵³ Moreover, not only do we forget our true nature, but we also claim that we have kept the law in part and are, in respect to the part, righteous. Finally, we feel that we have some merit, because of our deceptive satisfaction that we have kept parts of the law.

In man, therefore, if he be judged according to natural gifts, not one spark of good will be found in him from the top of his head to the sole of his feet. Whatever there is in him that deserves praise is the grace of God. But our evil intent is always to excuse even our foulness, but to seize upon God's gifts for our own credit.⁵⁴

According to Calvin, then, the human condition is such that in and of ourselves, we have no ability to effect our standing before God, that is our salvation. Thus, if we are to receive our salvation, there must be a provision made by God to do so which is utterly dependent upon God. That provision is faith. Calvin defines faith as "...nothing else than a firm conviction of mind whereby we determine with ourselves that God's truth is so

⁵²Ibid., 32.

⁵³Ibid., 31.

⁵⁴Ibid.

certain, that it is incapable of not accomplishing what it is pledged to do by his holy Word [Rom. 10:11].”⁵⁵

In the Old Testament, people were asked to have a firm conviction of mind in the God of Abraham. In the New Testament, the incarnation makes the God of Abraham an historical reality in and through Jesus Christ. Jesus calls people to have a firm conviction of mind in him for he is the God of Abraham. Calvin writes, “Whoever has this kind of faith cannot but be accepted by God; on the contrary, without it, it cannot happen that anyone will ever please him [Heb. 11:6]...But this cannot have its seat in a devious, perverted and false heart, nor can it be begun or sustained except by God’s grace alone.”⁵⁶

The combined insight of the *conscientia* and the illumination of the Holy Spirit (regeneration) can create an appropriate zeal for religion, which has at its core, faith. This insight and illumination, both works of God, are not free from conflict, however.

In *Psychopannychia*, an example of faith that ignited the growth of the soul is that of Abraham. Abraham embraced God’s promise for him by faith. His faith did not waver concerning God’s promise for him.⁵⁷ Abraham believed something about himself as true, before he placed trust in the God of the promise. Calvin writes that Abraham,

...embraced the promises made to his own seed, never doubting that the word of God was efficacious and true: and as if God had actually performed what he had promised, he waited for that blessed seed with no less assurance than if he had had it in his hands, and perceived it with all his senses.⁵⁸

⁵⁵Ibid., 43.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷See Romans 4:20-22.

⁵⁸John Calvin, *Psychopannychia in Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, vol. 3,

Faith, then, is both the attitude and act of trust in pursuing God in order to experience God nourishing and nurturing his image in the believer. Faith is a firm and sure knowledge of God's favor toward us, based on the truth of the free promise in Christ, revealed to our minds and sealed on our hearts by the Holy Spirit. And faith causes the rest and peace that we receive in this life to increase and to be advanced by death. Again Calvin,

This peace is increased and advanced by death, which, freeing, and as it were discharging them from the warfare of this world, leads them into the place of peace, where, while wholly intent on beholding God, they have nothing better to which they can turn their eyes or direct their desire...their desire is always moving onward till the glory of God is complete, and this completion awaits the judgment day.⁵⁹

The soul, which is given to man at birth, returns to God at death. The elect rest in the bosom of Abraham. "It is just because they are admitted with Abraham, the father of the faithful, where they enjoy God fully without weariness."⁶⁰ How does a person enter this rest? By faith. In whom does a person enter this rest? In Jesus Christ.⁶¹

Psychopannychia sets the stage for the 1536 edition of *Institutes*. In *Institutes*, Calvin's unfolds the meaning of having knowledge of God through faith in Jesus Christ, a faith that is made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit. Calvin writes,

When through faith we lay hold on the mercy of God in Christ, we attain this liberation and, so to speak, manumission from subjection to the law, for it is by faith we are made sure and certain of forgiveness of sins, the law having pricked and stung our conscience to the awareness of them.⁶²

⁵⁹Ibid., 435-436.

⁶⁰Ibid., 434.

⁶¹It is Calvin's doctrine of union with Christ that is so crucial for his understanding of the eternal and non-sleeping nature of the soul. By faith, we immediately discover our union in Christ. Jesus' life is our life. His death is our death. If Jesus has no end to life, then there is no end to our life. If our souls are grafted into Jesus, then our souls cannot be ended by death.

⁶²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, . 33.

This encounter of and by faith in Jesus Christ is at the core of Calvin's understanding of conversion, the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. Because of Adam's sin, the ability to make satisfaction to God for our separation, through our efforts, was removed.

However, the promise of forgiveness of sins is one of the benefits of faith in Christ. By placing faith in Jesus Christ we begin the transition. Calvin continues,

Consequently, when all our confidence is utterly cast down yet we still rely on his goodness, we grasp and obtain God's grace, and forgetting our merits, we embrace Christ's gifts. This is what it means to have true faith as it is fitting. But no one can attain this assurance except through Christ, by whose blessing alone we are freed from the law's curse.⁶³

In essence, then, even the act of placing faith in Christ is the work of God. Regeneration leads to faith. Without regeneration, we have no ability to believe. When we believe that Jesus is our Savior, we are trusting that what Jesus did for us is true for us and only God can give us that faith.

In *Institutes*, I note four characteristics regarding the nature of faith, which should assist us in overcoming the roadblock to faith that the law erects. First, faith lays hold of the mercy of God in Christ.⁶⁴ Once the Holy Spirit has made us aware of our sinfulness through regeneration then it is through faith that we claim the promises of God, which restore us in the *imago Dei*. The *conscientia* is redirected to the God of the Scriptures and away from its subjection to the written law.

Faith in the mercy of God results in liberation, because the mercy of God restores us in the *imago Dei*. According to Calvin, faith liberates us from unbelief and begins to move us in the certainty of our liberation, that is, the forgiveness of our sins. At this early phase in Calvin's theological development and writing, he is aware of a change in

⁶³Ibid., 34.

⁶⁴Ibid., 33.

relationship with God that faith provides unlike that of the law. A turning from the law liberates us from subjection to the law. This turning is the beginning of the believer understanding God's movement in propitiating love toward him.

With Calvin's linking of faith to liberation and liberation to forgiveness of sins, the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas* is indicated. Faith in the mercy of God in Christ results in a person's liberation. Liberation leads to a surety and certainty of forgiveness of sins. Faith without liberation, liberation without a surety and certainty of forgiveness of sins, liberation without faith, or any combination, which leaves out one of the three components of faith, liberation, and a surety and certainty of forgiveness of sins, is not indicative of the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. One without the other two is not conclusive that the transition has begun. Liberation is the result of faith in the mercy of God in Christ. A surety and certainty of forgiveness of sins is the sign of liberation. Neither the result nor the sign is accessible without faith in the mercy of God in Christ, faith, which is given by God, and faith that Jesus does for us.

What is the nature of faith that Calvin urges us to receive and repose securely in? Faith "...is nothing else than a firm conviction of mind whereby we determine with ourselves that God's truth is so certain, that it is incapable of not accomplishing what it has pledged to do by his holy Word."⁶⁵ Furthermore, faith is the ability "...to recognize and profess him as the only God."⁶⁶ Faith then is the acknowledgment that God and Jesus Christ do exist, but more importantly the affirmation that God is our God and Jesus Christ is our Savior. Acknowledging God's existence and affirming God as our God are two different types of faith. As Wendel so accurately points out, even the devils affirm the

⁶⁵Ibid., 43.

⁶⁶Ibid., 18.

former.⁶⁷ It is only through the transition from acknowledging God and Jesus Christ's existence to affirming that we believe in God and Jesus Christ as our own, that we have begun our to move in our transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*.

The nature of faith cited above cannot begin by our own initiative. To lay hold of the mercy of God by faith can only come about by the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Faith possesses Christ. Faith possesses Christ because Christ in us mediates that reconciliation with himself. Faith makes us partakers of the same inheritance as Christ, because "...it is indeed for our great benefit that he is now in the Father's presence: in order to provide us access to Him, and to pave the way, to present us to Him, to implore grace for us from Him, to intercede with Him on our behalf as everlasting pleader and mediator, to make intercession on our behalf with Him for our sins, and unceasingly to reconcile Him with us."⁶⁸

But as we obtain through him forgiveness of sins and sanctification, so also salvation has been given, in order that we may at last be led into God's kingdom, which will be revealed on the last day. And this is indeed the head and almost the sum of all those things, which the Lord by his sacred Word offers and promises us. This is the goal set for us in his Scriptures; this the target he sets.⁶⁹

Being lead into God's Kingdom is the goal. The goal is attained in Jesus Christ, yet it is not fully realized in this earthly life. By faith in Jesus Christ, we accept our true ontology and begin to discover the impact of such an identity through our daily discipleship. As we move in the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*, we are becoming more like Jesus Christ. In the opening pages of his exposition on the law, Calvin states that through the Incarnation, Jesus "...paid our debts to God's justice, and appeased his wrath. He redeemed us from the curse and judgement that bound us, and in his body the

⁶⁷Francois Wendel, *Calvin*, 240.

⁶⁸John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 56.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 43.

punishment of sin, so as to absolve us from it.”⁷⁰ By placing our faith in Jesus Christ we undergo rebirth. “Through him we are reborn, wrested from the power and chains of the devil, freely adopted as children of God, sanctified for every good work. Through him we are renewed from day to day, that we may walk in newness of life and live for righteousness.”⁷¹ The incarnation reminds us that Jesus’ human obedience, death, resurrection, and ascension validates the calling of the Holy Spirit to faith. Jesus’ humanness identifies with ours. His obedience is our obedience. His death is our death. His resurrection is our resurrection. His ascension is our ascension. Jesus’ obedience, death, resurrection, and ascension are effectual for everyone whether they know it or not, because Jesus Christ through the Incarnation took on our human nature.

Second, faith makes us sure and certain of the forgiveness of sins.⁷² For Calvin, it is through the forgiveness of sins that we are able to find our way back to God. Calvin writes, “Forgiveness of sins is preached when men are taught that for them Christ became redemption, righteousness, satisfaction, and life, that by his name they are freely accounted righteous and innocent in God’s sight. In one word, then, we can interpret forgiveness of sins as repentance.”⁷³ Moreover, the work of faith is to claim the promise that Jesus Christ had to suffer, die, and be raised from the dead in order for repentance and forgiveness of sins to be preached in his name.⁷⁴ Forgiveness of sins, rightly and continually preached, reminds us of our unrighteousness and leads us to mortify the flesh in repentance in order to move further along the road in the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*.

⁷⁰Ibid. 18.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid., 132.

⁷⁴Ibid.

Furthermore, Calvin shows the significance of prayer as a discipline to exercise our faith. In prayer, we petition that forgiveness would come to us. Specifically, when we pray the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," we ask God to grant us forgiveness of sins. "By this petition we ask that we be granted forgiveness of sins, necessary for all men without exception."⁷⁵ All of us need forgiveness of sins. Calvin continues,

We call sins 'debts' because we owe penalty or payment for them to God, and we could in no way satisfy it unless we were released by this forgiveness. This free pardon comes from his mercy, when he himself generously wipes out these debts, and releases us from them, exacting no payment from us for them but making satisfaction to himself by his own mercy in Christ, who once for all gave himself as a ransom to the Father.⁷⁶

We cannot be released from the oppression of our sins without exercising faith that only in and through Jesus our sins have been forgiven.

Moreover the whole sum of the gospel is contained under these two headings, repentance and forgiveness of sins. John, a messenger sent before the face of Christ to prepare his ways proclaimed: 'Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.' By calling them to repentance, he was admonishing them to recognize they were sinners, and their all was condemned before God, that they might with all their hearts desire the mortification of their flesh, and a new rebirth in the Spirit... Therefore, when Christ meant to summarize the whole business of the gospel in brief, he said that he 'should suffer... and rise from the dead, that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name' (Luke 24:26, 46-47).⁷⁷

Third, the promises of our inheritance cannot come through the law. They can only be fulfilled through faith in Jesus Christ.⁷⁸ Calvin writes, "But as we obtain through him forgiveness of sins and sanctification, so also salvation has been given, in order that we may at last be led into God's kingdom, which will be revealed on the last day... This

⁷⁵Ibid., 81.

⁷⁶Ibid., 81-82.

⁷⁷Ibid., 132.

⁷⁸Ibid.

(*being led into the kingdom of God*) is the goal set for us in his Scriptures.”⁷⁹ Faith not only gives us forgiveness of sins, but it also gives us sanctification. Both are experienced in the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. Faith results in forgiveness of sins and deploys us in a lifestyle of sanctification. More pointedly, Calvin states that we receive our salvation.

Without a sure faith in God that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us, we would not continue exercising sure faith through the demonstration of repentance and the mortification of the flesh. Both repentance and mortification of the flesh validate and demonstrate our pursuit of true godliness, or sanctification. Fundamentally, the pursuit of godliness proves our zeal for religion. Sanctification means “set apart.” Thus, Calvin clearly places the doctrine of sanctification subsequent to justification in the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. The Incarnation did something for humanity. Through the Incarnation, God reconciled humanity to himself. The Incarnation culminated the choice of Israel as the covenant people. The Incarnation continued to mediate God’s revelation and reconciliation. Jesus’ choice of humanity set a people apart who were elected in him to share in his life and to be in union with him. We are sanctified before we discover that reality through the encounter of faith in the justifying work of Christ. Furthermore, Calvin’s understanding of sanctification is not completed until the last day when we are led into God’s kingdom, which indicates a lifelong earthly existence of the transition.

Fourth, faith strengthens the mind with constant assurance and perfect confidence.⁸⁰ In order not only to believe that God and Christ exist, but also to recognize God as our God and Christ as our Savior, we must exceed the total capacity of our own

⁷⁹Ibid., 43. (*italics are mine*)

⁸⁰Ibid., 34.

nature and realize the truth of God's promises in the Word of God. This faith, which produces assurance and confidence, is a work and gift of God. "...we have been persuaded that whatever we need, either for the use of the soul or of the body, He will give us; we await with assurance whatever the Scriptures promise concerning him; we do not doubt Jesus is our Christ, that is, Savior."⁸¹

This sort of faith is not intellectual assent by means of our rational capacity. It is assent from the heart. That is, this type of faith cannot be begun or sustained except by God's grace alone. Without faith, we cannot "...exceed the total capacity of our own nature."⁸² Our condition is such that without faith in the promises of God in Christ, we will not have the confidence to repent. Without faith in Christ there can be no zeal for religion. "...it is God who is asked to lead us, unfeignedly repentant, to the knowledge of ourselves; to lead us, by sure faith, to the knowledge of his gentleness and of his sweetness, which he shows forth in his Christ in order that Christ as our leader, who is the only way to reach the Father, may bring us into eternal blessedness."⁸³

3.2.4 Repentance

The Roman church required contrition of heart, confession of mouth and satisfaction of works for repentance, before it granted forgiveness of sins, the fruit of faith. "For while they require three things for repentance-compunction of heart, confession of mouth, and satisfaction of works-at the same time they teach that these things are necessary to attain forgiveness of sins...But if forgiveness of sins depends upon these conditions which they attach to it, nothing is more miserable or hopeless for

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid., 43.

⁸³Ibid., 18.

us.”⁸⁴ For Calvin, however, forgiveness of sins is received by faith and is a person’s rebirth. It precedes repentance. “...repentance is not the cause for the forgiveness of sins.”⁸⁵ Repentance is our response to the grace of forgiveness. We will desire to undergo the mortification of the flesh as an obedient response to the certainty of our forgiveness. By faith, we are united with Christ and participate with him in his life, death and resurrection. Our sins become his. Jesus Christ accomplished our redemption.

Thus, repentance is the mortification of the flesh. This process of mortification of the flesh begins after a person has received from Christ their justification, that is, their redemption, righteousness, satisfaction and life. According to Calvin, “...we must strive toward this repentance, devote ourselves to it and pursue it throughout life.”⁸⁶ As Christians, we are new creatures and received the fullness of our salvation. As we are still subject to sin, however, we are in need of constant repentance during our earthly existence. As Christians, we are ‘in Christ,’ thus justified.

As Christians who still live in this world, we experience sanctification through repentance until the final consummation. As believers our sins are lodged with Christ in order that they may be expiated in him not by works. There is a significant difference between saying that Jesus Christ is the propitiation of our sins and that our works must propitiate God. Moreover, Calvin writes, “Since therefore we see the whole sum of our salvation and also all its parts comprehended in Christ, we must take care not to think that the least particle of our salvation is lodged elsewhere.”⁸⁷

⁸⁴Ibid., 134.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ibid., 132-133.

⁸⁷Ibid., 57.

As asserted earlier in this study, Calvin uses the words “forgiveness of sins” and “repentance” to describe different aspects of the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. He particularly links the notion of forgiveness of sins with repentance. “...when Christ meant to summarize the whole business of the gospel in brief, he said that he ‘should suffer...and rise from the dead, that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name.’”⁸⁸ It is the work of the Holy Spirit that prompts perception on our part that we want the forgiveness of sins, which is offered by the Father through the Son, and that repentance is necessary.

Inherent in the Holy Spirit’s calling us to a sure faith that we need forgiveness of sins and thus should repent, is Calvin’s notion of mortification of the flesh. For Calvin, mortification of the flesh is a very tangible action, which makes repentance a result of faith. Under the conviction of sure faith, we desire forgiveness of sins and realize we are forgiven. We are then led to repent. Mortification of the flesh is our implementation of the justifying event of Jesus’ human obedience and its implications for our own existence. Calvin writes that it is with right faith that we “...truly feel the effective working of Christ’s death in the mortification of our flesh.”⁸⁹ Moreover, “...all God’s elect are so united and conjoined in Christ that, as they are dependent on one Head, they also grow together into one body...all these are made holy by the Lord.”⁹⁰ Another way of stating this is that we grow into one body, Christ’s body, because Jesus obeys for us, he believes for us and he repents for us.

Mortification of the flesh is the express action of obediently letting go of thoughts, attitudes, and actions, which are contrary to a life of *pietas*, but are

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Ibid., 95.

⁹⁰Ibid., 58.

characteristic of a life of *impietas*. "...repentance is mortification of our flesh and of the old man which true and pure fear of God brings about in us...return to the way and repent."⁹¹

God's call through the grace of the Holy Spirit leads us to the Father, confronts us with an accurate knowledge of God and ourselves, prompts in us a sure faith to believe we are forgiven, and humbles us in a posture of repentance.

3.2.5 Union with Christ

...we experience such participation in him that, although we are still foolish in ourselves, he is our wisdom before God; while we are sinners, he is our righteousness; while we are unclean, he is our purity...because all things are ours we have all things in him, in us there is nothing. Upon this foundation we must be built if we would grow into a holy temple to the Lord.⁹²

What does it mean to participate in Christ? Calvin speaks to an experience of participation in Christ. Calvin's doctrine of union with Christ is initially discussed in the 1536 edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in his exposition of the second article of the Apostles' Creed. That article states, "We believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord; who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; on the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father; thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead."

The certainty of this article for Christianity is that in it we can assert that Jesus provides the way for us to have faith and to be faithful. As early as *Psychopantychia*, Calvin speaks of union with Christ. "...our blessedness is always in progress up to that day which shall conclude and terminate all progress, and that thus the glory of the elect,

⁹¹Ibid., 131-132.

⁹²Ibid., 37.

and complete consummation of hope, look forward to that day for their fulfillment...that perfection of blessedness nowhere exists except in perfect union with God.”⁹³

Jesus Christ is the Son of God by nature. We are not sons and daughters of God by nature. We are created in the *imago Dei*. However, because of Adam’s sin, the *imago Dei* was and is effaced. Yet, God the Father elected some to be adopted as sons and daughters. The elect will enter into the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. Calvin writes,

Scripture often, in accommodating itself to our capacity, calls ‘the election of God’ only what has already been manifested by this calling and justification. The reason is this: that often among His people God numbers some in whom He has worked His own powers although they were not elect. On the other hand those who have been truly chosen, He may not reckon among the people of God, because they have not been declared to be such.⁹⁴

Election was accomplished in and through Jesus Christ. It is through faith in Jesus Christ, faith given by the Holy Spirit, that we can begin the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. It is in the historicity of Jesus Christ that we see our hope. For in Jesus Christ, God came to earth and in him we have life. By way of *unio cum Christo*, we know who we are, whose we are, and in whom we live. *Unio cum Christo* is in relation to the Holy Spirit, faith, and election. However, it is identical with none of them. Faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit. Through faith, we are engrafted into Christ, by Christ.

The law as *conscientia* and written is to convict us of our utter depravity. This conviction of our worthlessness, a work of the Holy Spirit, leads us to place our faith in God. Through God’s mercy, we are united with Christ and experience his righteousness. The effectual nature of our justification is known only if we are of the elect. Moreover, it

⁹³John Calvin, *Psychopannychia in Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, vol. 3, 463.

⁹⁴John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 59.

will be the illuminating grace of the Holy Spirit, which calls us to the Father and continues to draw us closer to the Father. However, it is through sure faith that we are confident of our union with Christ. And sure faith is a gift from God.

It is through our union with Christ, then, that we participate in him. In Christ, we experience all of his benefits, benefits intended not for him but for us. We are not to turn and place our faith in anyone else. It is only in and through Jesus Christ that we can be redeemed. Calvin writes,

...but few comprehend how we are made righteous by faith. Let us add that this is Christ's righteousness, not ours; it is lodged in him, not in us; but it becomes ours by imputation, since it is said to have been received by us. Thus the fact that we are not truly righteous, but imputatively so; or we are not righteous, but are reckoned righteous by imputation, inasmuch as we possess Christ's righteousness through faith, will be a matter plain and uncomplicated.⁹⁵

Faith is not something we have as an autonomous, independent act, which we do in and of ourselves. God evokes and nourishes the faith of individual members of the covenant people.

We are united with Christ by faith through the work of the Holy Spirit. "...thus engrafted into him we are already, in a manner, partakers of eternal life, having entered the Kingdom of God through hope."⁹⁶ It is through Jesus' role as Mediator that redemption is accomplished on our behalf. Our lives are redeemed in Christ. Calvin writes, "Now for us indeed it is free, but not so for Christ, who dearly bought it at the cost of his most sacred blood, beyond which there was no ransom of sufficient worth to satisfy God's justice."⁹⁷ Moreover, "...through grace God the Father, in the Son, accomplishes whatever good there is; through grace He justifies, sanctifies, and cleanses us calls and

⁹⁵Ibid., 46.

⁹⁶Ibid., 37.

⁹⁷Ibid., 39.

draws us to himself, that we may attain salvation.”⁹⁸ As mentioned earlier, reconciliation with God is the result of Christ’s justifying work on the cross. Regeneration is accomplished in Christ. It becomes effectual in our lives as a result of the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives. Calvin writes, “He saved us...in virtue of his own mercy, through the working of regeneration and of renewal in the Holy Spirit [Titus 3:5].”⁹⁹ Moreover,

For since faith embraces Christ as offered to us by the Father-that is, he is not only forgiveness, righteousness, peace and reconciliation with the Father, but also sanctification and the fountain of living water-doubtless in him one finds love, which is the gift and fruit of the Holy Spirit, and the work of his sanctification.¹⁰⁰

3.2.6 Justification

At no point does Calvin write of repentance as a conclusive, punctiliar event. What is conclusive and punctiliar for Calvin, however, is Jesus Christ’s work of justification on the cross. It is Calvin’s doctrine of justification, which bolsters his understanding of repentance as an ongoing process, the ongoing transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*.

Calvin does not give an explicit definition of justification, nor devote a special discussion to it. This lack of accentuation could be due to Calvin’s reaction to Luther’s heightened valuation of justification and corresponding devaluation of sanctification. For Calvin, justification and sanctification are equal in significance. “Consequently, the Lord, when he calls his own, justifies and glorifies his own.”¹⁰¹ Our sanctification in Christ, the ontological reality that is true for us before it is actualized in us, moves us to live obediently the justifying work of Jesus Christ.

⁹⁸Ibid., 57.

⁹⁹Ibid., 94.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 65.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 58.

We are becoming a new creation. "And those who from day to day are cleansed of the corruption of their flesh, he refreshes with the blessings of his Holy Spirit, and they are reborn into newness of life."¹⁰² Having heard God's call through the Holy Spirit, we place our faith in God and humbly repent. As we repent through actions of mortification of the flesh, we move in the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*.

Calvin teaches that it is the Holy Spirit who brings the justification of Jesus Christ to us. Justification is experienced as we bear "...the mortification of Jesus Christ about in our bodies that Jesus' life may be manifested in us."¹⁰³ Jesus Christ bought us at a cost of his own life. Christ was the only ransom of sufficient worth to satisfy God's justice.

We are not inviting man to sin when we affirm the free forgiveness of sins, but we are saying that it is of such great value that it cannot be paid for by any good of ours. Therefore, it can never be obtained except as a free gift. Now for us indeed it is free, but not so for Christ, who dearly bought it at the cost of his most sacred blood, beyond which there was no ransom of sufficient worth to satisfy God's justice. When men are taught this, they are made aware that his most sacred blood is shed as often as they sin.¹⁰⁴

Satisfying God's justice cannot be accomplished through any form of works righteousness. Although we often think we can placate God, we are forgetful of our corrupted nature and have contempt for God's justice. Calvin writes, "Therefore, our sins must be covered and forgiven before the Lord will recognize any work of ours."¹⁰⁵ There is no experience of our reconciliation with God without the justifying work of Jesus Christ.

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Ibid., 38.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 39.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 32.

Calvin uses the word justification seven times in this edition of *Institutes*.¹⁰⁶ He also uses the words justify, justified and justifies another thirteen times.¹⁰⁷ Specifically, without God the Father revealing himself to us through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, thus confronting us with Jesus' work of justification, the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas* is impossible. "...since no perfection can come to us so long as we are clothed in this flesh, and the law moreover announces death and judgment to all who do not achieve perfect righteousness in works, it will always have grounds for accusing and condemning us unless, on the contrary, the Lord's mercy counters it, and by continual forgiveness of sins repeatedly acquits us."¹⁰⁸

Christ's righteousness has become ours by imputation. We are really unrighteous, but considered righteous through imputation, as long as we possess the righteousness of Christ by faith. "God offers to us and gives us in Christ our Lord all these benefits, which include free forgiveness of sins, peace and reconciliation with God."¹⁰⁹ In relation to justification, our engrafting into Christ is total.

Forgiveness of sins is possible because of the justification that Jesus Christ accomplished on our behalf. "Thus the fact that we are not truly righteous, but imputatively so; or we are not righteous, but are reckoned righteous by imputation, inasmuch as we possess Christ's righteousness through faith, will be a matter plain and uncomplicated."¹¹⁰ Moreover, Calvin asserts that Jesus Christ willed to be our Redeemer.

No common thing it was that the Mediator was to accomplish: to make children of God out of children of men; out of heirs of Gehenna to make heirs of the heavenly

¹⁰⁶Ibid. See pages 36, 59, 66 (2x), and 176 (3x) for further examples of Calvin's usage of the word justification.

¹⁰⁷Ibid. See pages 30, 38, 41, 57, 58 (2x), 59 (3x), 66 (2x) 112, and 137 for further examples of Calvin's usage of the words justify, justified and justifies.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 33.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 18.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 46.

kingdom. Who will have done this had not the Son of God become the Son of Man, and had not so taken what was ours as to impart what was his to us, and to make what was his by nature ours by grace? Therefore our most merciful Lord, when he willed that we be redeemed, made himself our Redeemer.”¹¹¹

Calvin took issue with the Roman Catholic teaching of penance, because of Jesus’ work of justification. From his understanding of Scripture, Calvin understood faith and repentance to be inseparable, yet necessarily distinguishable. For Calvin, faith preceded repentance. The Roman Catholic Church taught that repentance preceded faith.

As we come to a true knowledge of ourselves, we realize our utter depravity before God. As the Holy Spirit convinces us of our need for and our justification in Christ, we will want forgiveness. By wanting forgiveness and realizing we are forgiven, we will repent and undergo the mortification of the flesh. The zeal for forgiveness is a gift of God’s grace. The sure faith that produced zeal for forgiveness will give us confidence to repent and to mortify our flesh.

3.2.7 Sanctification

The grace of the Holy Spirit draws us closer to God the Father. This “drawing” action of the Holy Spirit is the manner by which the believer experiences sanctification.

For our merciful Lord first indeed kindly received us into grace according to his own goodness and freely-given will, forgiving and condoning our sins, which deserved wrath and eternal death. Then through the gifts of the Holy Spirit he dwells and reigns in us and through him the lusts of our flesh are each day mortified more and more and more. We are indeed sanctified, that is consecrated to the Lord in complete purity of life, our hearts formed to obedience to the law.¹¹²

Being sanctified to the Lord in complete purity of life is God’s will.¹¹³

Furthermore, Jesus Christ is our sanctification as a result of his work of justification. In

¹¹¹Ibid., 51.

¹¹²Ibid., 34-35.

¹¹³Ibid., 40.

him we find love, justification, and sanctification, which is forgiveness, peace, and reconciliation with the Father.¹¹⁴ The whole of the Christian life is to be the work of sanctification, which Calvin calls “a sort of practice of godliness.”¹¹⁵ Calvin writes, “We are indeed sanctified, that is, consecrated to the Lord in complete purity of life, our hearts formed to obedience to the law... We hate all the filth of our flesh reposing in us.”¹¹⁶

Calvin describes the work of the Holy Spirit, through the mortification of the flesh, as enabling us to realize our sanctification. As we daily experience the work of the Holy Spirit through the mortification of the flesh, we understand our sanctification in Christ. Most importantly, we experience ongoing newness of life.

He justifies when he clothes them with the righteousness of Christ, with which as their perfection he also adorns them, and covers up their own imperfection. And those who from day to day are cleansed of the corruption of their flesh, he refreshes with the blessings of his Holy Spirit, and they are reborn into newness of life, until they clearly appear holy and stainless in his sight. He will glorify when the majesty of his Kingdom will have been manifested in all and through all things.¹¹⁷

Furthermore, the Holy Spirit’s drawing us closer to God the Father in sanctification is making us righteous by Christ’s righteousness. We are righteous because Christ dwells and reigns in us. By Christ dwelling in believers, the lusts of the flesh are each day mortified more and more. We are being sanctified.¹¹⁸ Calvin writes, “Take note that we do not justify man by works before God, but all who are of God we speak as being ‘reborn,’ and as becoming ‘a new creation,’ so that they pass from the realm of sin into the realm of righteousness.”¹¹⁹ This daily mortification of the lusts of the flesh, the

¹¹⁴Ibid., 65.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 177.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 35.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 58.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 35.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 38.

work of sanctification, is what Calvin denotes as walking in the Lord's ways by the leading of the Holy Spirit. Even as we walk in the Lord's ways, something imperfect remains in us to keep us humble in order for us to keep all of our trust in God.¹²⁰

Whereas receiving our justification is the result of the punctiliar event of sure faith, sanctification denotes the continuous nature of the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. Calvin's understanding of the Holy Spirit drawing us closer to God the Father speaks of process. This ongoing work of the Holy Spirit is inferred when he states that "...the work and power are his, because we have heard the sacred word of the gospel, because we have received him in faith, because we now stand firm in that faith. His work, I say, is freely given, that nothing may be credited to our merits."¹²¹ In the phrase "we now stand firm in faith," Calvin is not speaking of standing once, but an ongoing ability to stand throughout the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. The notion of standing firm in anything infers resistance from the other side. Thus, for us to stand firm in our relationship to God, we need the Holy Spirit's grace of continually drawing us closer to God the Father. It is in this way, that we receive strength from God to withstand the opposing pressures.

God reveals himself as the Holy Spirit prompts awareness that we need God. Faith moves us from a general knowledge of God as Creator to the particular knowledge of God as Redeemer. Salvation cannot be experienced except in the context of faith. It is Calvin's soteriological theme of faith, which sets the beginning and continuous nature of his understanding of the transition.

Therefore, if we but look upon ourselves and ponder what worth we possess, there is a remnant of good hope, but death and the surest confusion remains ours, cast

¹²⁰Ibid.

¹²¹Ibid., 58.

down as we are by God. It also was explained that there is one way to avoid this calamity, and restore us to a better condition, namely the Lord's mercy, which we most surely will experience, if we receive it in perfect faith, and repose securely in it.¹²²

3.2.8 The Means of Grace

It is Jesus who sanctifies, cleanses, governs and leads us. Jesus Christ lives his life through our lives. He is our zeal for religion. I have demonstrated that, for Calvin, it is through God the Father's choice of us in Christ that we are illuminated by the Holy Spirit to place faith in Jesus Christ.

What are the means of grace that Calvin delineates to assist us in our experience of regeneration? Calvin sets forth prayer, the Scriptures, and the sacraments as the means of grace available to us in order to more fully experience our union with Christ. By faith, we must "...cast ourselves upon his mercy, although we are ungrateful, rebellious and forward children."¹²³

3.2.8.1 Prayer

In discussing the importance of prayer, Calvin states "...we clearly see how destitute and devoid of all good things man is, and how he lacks all aids to salvation. Therefore, if he seeks resources to succor him in his need, he must go outside himself and get them elsewhere."¹²⁴ Going outside ourselves to Jesus Christ is the elsewhere we are to go. Only in Christ are the resources available to aid us in our transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*.

Calvin articulates two rules of prayer to assist us in going outside ourselves to Jesus Christ. First, believers are to acknowledge their own unrighteousness and sense of

¹²²Ibid., 42.

¹²³Ibid., 77.

¹²⁴Ibid., 68.

worthlessness. Calvin writes, "Now let this be the first rule of right prayer, that we abandon all thought of our own glory, that we cast off all notion of our own worth, that we put away all our self-assurance, in our abjection and our humility giving glory to the Lord."¹²⁵ As we admit our sinfulness, we become more honest with ourselves and know from where our strength comes.

The second rule of prayer is to have a sense of our own inadequacies and an equally strong sense that all we need can be attained in God. "Let this be the second rule: truly to sense our own insufficiency, and earnestly ponder that we need the things we seek from God for ourselves and for our benefit, and that we seek them so as to attain them from him."¹²⁶ Calvin highlights the grace of prayer as a chief way to attain the resources, already accomplished by and attainable in Christ, for sanctification, cleansing, governing, and leading that we so desperately need.

Going outside ourselves to Jesus for our needs betrays the attitude that is required in prayer. According to Calvin, we need an attitude that exemplifies dependence on God. This is the third rule of prayer. This attitude will provide the context from which authenticity of the Christian life can be lived and experienced. It is through prayer that we demonstrate our hunger and thirst after the righteousness of Christ, our sanctification. "For prayer was not ordained that we should be haughtily puffed up before God, or gently esteem anything of ours, but by it we should confess our calamities and weep for them before him, as children intimately unburden their troubles to their parents."¹²⁷ This type of prayer cannot take place apart from faith. And faith is confident that God will do what God has promised. This is the sure faith which Calvin claims so necessary to begin and

¹²⁵Ibid.

¹²⁶Ibid., 69.

¹²⁷Ibid.

continue our transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. Calvin writes, "Christ, the true son, has been given to us as our brother by Him in order that what belongs to him by nature may become ours by benefit of adoption, provided we embrace with sure faith this great blessing."¹²⁸

If we are united with Christ, then we should be confident that we are established in him and his benefits are for our sake not his. "If we had not been adopted to Christ as children of grace, with what assurance would anyone have addressed God as Father?"¹²⁹ The benefits of our adoption become ours, as we embrace them in Jesus Christ by faith. Prayer is a means of grace that moves us in sanctification. But all the while, we must remember that our attitude of dependence on God moves us to cast ourselves on God's mercy, remembering how ungrateful and rebellious we really are.¹³⁰

3.2.8.2 The Scriptures

A second means of grace is the Scriptures. Calvin writes, "He has set forth the preaching of his Word as a common doctrine for all."¹³¹ For Calvin, preaching the Scriptures is essential, because the Word of God is the object and target of our faith, which helps us see the ultimate target of being led into God's kingdom. "The Word of God, therefore, is the object and target of faith at which one ought to aim; and the base to prop and support it, without which it could not even stand."¹³² It is the right preaching of the Scriptures, then, which is the plumbline for the content of the Christian faith. The method of teaching the people of God is through the exposition of the Scriptures. The essential teaching of the Scriptures is that "...Christ was offered on account of our sins

¹²⁸Ibid., 76.

¹²⁹Ibid.

¹³⁰Ibid., 76-77.

¹³¹Ibid., 21.

¹³²Ibid., 43.

that he might bear our curse and cleanse our trespasses.”¹³³ Again Calvin lifts up Jesus Christ as the essential teaching of the Scriptures by writing, “Scripture offers Christ alone to us, sends us to him, and establishes us in him.”¹³⁴

Furthermore, Calvin states that the ministers of churches are faithfully to “...attend to the ministry of the Word, not adulterating the teaching of salvation, but delivering it pure and undefiled to God’s people.”¹³⁵ The Scriptures are to remind us of our need for God. The Scriptures leave us no reason to boast in God’s presence or to be exalted in God’s sight. Calvin writes, “...its whole end is to restrain our pride, to humble us, cast us down, and utterly crush us.”¹³⁶ The correct exposition of the Scriptures is essential to Calvin’s understanding of the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*, because Jesus Christ himself teaches and instructs us by his Word.¹³⁷ In the Scriptures we are exposed to and encountered by true godliness. Moreover, the ministry of forgiveness is not the power of the ministers. Again Calvin states, “We conclude that the power of the keys is simply the preaching of the gospel, and that with regard to men it is not so much power as ministry. For Christ has not given this power actually to men, but to his Word, of which he has made men ministers.”¹³⁸

The Scriptures contain the promises of our salvation and must be consulted and studied. “For God’s mysteries pertaining to salvation are of the sort that cannot in themselves and by their own nature be discerned; but we gaze upon them only in his Word. So persuaded ought we to be of its truth that we must count its every utterance an

¹³³Ibid., 21.

¹³⁴Ibid., 71.

¹³⁵Ibid., 28.

¹³⁶Ibid., 40.

¹³⁷Ibid., 89.

¹³⁸Ibid., 144.

accomplished fact.”¹³⁹ If we have been given zeal for religion then we must consult the Scriptures for clarity and direction.

3.2.8.3 The Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper

A third means of grace is the sacraments. In *Institutes*, it is Calvin’s purpose to rightly define a doctrine of the sacraments and to demonstrate the purpose for which they were instituted. By definition, a sacrament is an outward sign that God uses to represent and to attest the good will of Jesus Christ toward us and to sustain the weakness of our faith. A sacrament is a seal of a preceding promise, thus making the promise more evident to the believer. Calvin writes, “The sacraments, therefore, are exercises which make us more certain of the trustworthiness of God’s Word. And because we are of the flesh, they are shown us under things of the flesh, to instruct us according to our dull capacity, and to lead us by the hand as tutors lead children.”¹⁴⁰

Calvin goes further and confirms that the sacraments are more than a tutor reminding us of God’s promises in Jesus Christ. The “...sacraments have been set forth by God in order to serve our faith, namely to nourish, exercise, and increase it.”¹⁴¹ The sacraments are tangible markers to assist us in our transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. As previously stated, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are to nourish, exercise and increase faith. If faith is nourished, exercised and increased, then the benefits of Christ are more accessible. And if the benefits of Christ are more accessible, then we will participate more fully in the life of Jesus Christ. And as we participate more fully in the life of Jesus Christ, we understand the profound reality of our adoption as sons and daughters of God, thus more fully realizing the election of our salvation.

¹³⁹Ibid., 43.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., 88.

¹⁴¹Ibid.

The sequence described above helps us grasp the continuous nature of the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. It takes sure faith to believe the promises of God that are witnessed to in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Day is the expected and regular gathering of the church. The church exists to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God. The Lord's Day is one-day set apart for the church to be intentional about its faith. The Lord's Day creates a context for the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit through prayer, preaching, and the sacraments. In this way, we recognize and admit our real need of God. Then, we place faith in Jesus Christ, are engrafted into him, and begin the remainder of our earthly lives having Jesus sanctify, cleanse, govern, and lead us.

In Calvin's understanding of the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*, the sacraments are to serve our faith before God and they are to confess our faith before others. "...the Lord offers us mercy and the grace of his good will both in his Sacred Word and in his Sacraments."¹⁴² However, the benefits of the Word and the sacraments are nothing unless believers in faith receive them. Baptism attests to us that we have been cleansed and washed. The Lord's Supper attests that we have been redeemed. Our zeal for religion is nourished, exercised, and increased through the sacraments in both a punctiliar and continuous way. They sustain us along the road of transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*.

In baptism, Calvin sees union with Christ demonstrated. Through baptism, the believer shares with Christ in his death. "...baptism should be a symbol and proof of our cleansing."¹⁴³ Our cleansing and salvation are not accomplished by water. Baptism is the

¹⁴²Ibid.

¹⁴³Ibid., 94.

sacrament by which we receive the knowledge and certainty of our regeneration. When we are baptized, we are washed, purged, and cleansed for the whole of our earthly existence. "And, just as the twig draws substance and nourishment from the root to which it was grafted, so those who receive baptism with right faith truly feel the effective working of Christ's death in the mortification of their flesh, together with the working of his resurrection in the quickening of the Spirit."¹⁴⁴ For Calvin, baptism confirms the promises of regeneration, repentance, cleansing, and forgiveness of sins. Mortification of the flesh or sanctification confirms and demonstrates regeneration and repentance. Quickenning of the Spirit or justification confirms and demonstrates cleansing and the forgiveness of sins. In baptism, the witness portrayed is that we are no longer our own, but belong to Jesus Christ our Redeemer and Lord. Baptism is the sacrament of our union with Christ on the ground that Jesus has taken our place.

Baptism is a sign of the benefits of Jesus Christ, which are experienced by faith.¹⁴⁵ Faith is not something we have or an act, which we do. To perceive faith this way is to misconstrue the Gospel. It is true that the Gospel summons us to repent and believe. However, this act of repenting is not autonomous and independent, something we do in and of ourselves. Jesus believes for us. Jesus trusts God for us. Jesus is our mediator, united to us, taking our place as substitute at every point. Faith does not make

¹⁴⁴Ibid., 95.

¹⁴⁵According to Calvin, baptism is the sign confirming God's promise that God will nourish, exercise, and increase our faith. How, then, can infants be engaged with such a sign given their intellectual and emotional development and capacity? "It could be doubted why the children of Christians are baptized while as yet infants seem incapable of being taught anything by such numerous proofs, nor do they seem to have inwardly conceived a faith to which they can give outward testimony" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 101). In 1536, Calvin defended infant baptism in this way. First, election is God's prerogative and faith is the sole path of salvation. "All God's elect enter into eternal life through faith, at whatever point in age they are released from the prisonhouse of corruption" (Ibid., 102). Second, baptism is the sign of forgiveness. It is not forgiveness of sins itself. Third, baptism has taken the place of circumcision. God promised to the Jews and their offspring that they would be God's people. "...the very same thing the Lord promised the Jews in circumcision-he today promises to Christians in baptism" (Ibid., 102).

baptism more than a sign and baptism by itself does not do the work of faith. If baptism is a sign of regeneration and forgiveness, then our faith is belief that Jesus Christ has overcome our depraved and corrupt nature, giving us assurance that condemnation has been removed and remission of sin has been made. The human obedience of Jesus Christ is our obedience. The works of the flesh still occur, thus the continual nature of the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. But, as we undergo the mortification of the flesh, we are assured by the promises of God that the works of the flesh will not overcome us during our earthly existence, as we want to be led into God's kingdom.

...we are baptized into the mortification of our flesh, which begins with our baptism and which we pursue day by day and which will, moreover, be accomplished when from this life we pass to the Lord. We are not only engrafted into the death and life of Christ, but so united and joined to Christ himself that we become sharers in all his blessings.¹⁴⁶

It must be reiterated that no person begins the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas* except by faith.¹⁴⁷ Baptism is a sign that God promises regeneration and cleansing. The sign of baptism nourishes, exercises, and increases faith, faith that is given to us by the Holy Spirit. This faith believes that Jesus Christ in his human obedience, death, and resurrection reconciled humanity to God.

...we consider that God through baptism promises us forgiveness of sins, and he will doubtless fulfill his promise for all believers. This promise was offered to us in baptism; therefore, let us embrace it by faith. Indeed, on account of our unfaithfulness it lay long buried from us; now therefore, let us receive it through faith.¹⁴⁸

Baptism proclaims that we are saved by the unconditional grace of Christ. We do

¹⁴⁶John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 98.

¹⁴⁷The transition from *impietas* toward *pietas* begins in the lives of the elect at their election, which the Scriptures tell us is before the foundation of the world. However, our election is not realized and experienced except through faith which is the work of the Holy Spirit confirming God the Father's self revelation in Jesus Christ.

¹⁴⁸John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 100.

not save ourselves. Jesus Christ bought us with his blood. Jesus Christ cleansed us by his blood and thus placed his seal of ownership upon us. We are not our own. We belong to Christ. If baptism promises us forgiveness of sins then baptism must be a sign to Jesus' human obedience, which reconciled humanity to God. Given this premise, Calvin takes great offence at the Roman teaching of confirmation. He takes issue with the practice of confirmation, because the Roman Catholic Church taught, "...that the power of confirmation is to confer for the increase of grace, the Holy Spirit, who was conferred in baptism for innocence; to confirm for battle those who in baptism were regenerated to life."¹⁴⁹ Baptism is a sign and seal of the promise that by faith we have been buried in baptism with Christ and made partakers in his death in order that we may be sharers in his resurrection. Baptism was sanctified in Christ's body through his human obedience.

Participating in Christ's death and life, that is exercising the mortification of the flesh, is living out the promise that the old person has been crucified and we walk in newness of life. We do not receive the Holy Spirit at baptism because of any innocence on our part. Furthermore, nothing new happens at confirmation. Baptism is a sign of the promise that what we believe in faith is true and the Lord Jesus Christ with whom we are united accomplished all that we need in and through his human obedience, death, resurrection, and ascension.

...our faith receives from baptism the consolation of its sure testimony to us that we are not only engrafted into the death and life of Christ, but so united and joined to Christ himself that we become sharers in all his blessings. For he dedicated and sanctified baptism in his own body in order that he might have it in common with us as the firmest bond of the union and fellowship which he has deigned to enter with us. Hence, Paul proves that we are children of God from the fact that we put on Christ in baptism.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹Ibid., 125.

¹⁵⁰Ibid., 98.

The Lord's Supper is the sacrament that attests to us that we have been redeemed.¹⁵¹ In the Lord's Supper, we are spiritually fed by the Lord's goodness and we give thanks to the Lord for his kindness. According to Calvin, the Lord's body and blood have been handed over to us now and forever. He writes, "...from this sacrament we recognize Christ to have been so engrafted in us as we, in turn, have been engrafted in him, so that whatever is his we are permitted to call ours, whatever is ours to reckon as his."¹⁵² Both the bread and the wine are sanctified in Christ's body and blood. Through the Lord's Supper we are spiritually fed by the Lord's goodness.

Through our union with Christ our sins are now his. Christ paid the debt. Jesus Christ received our poverty unto himself and he has transferred to us his wealth. Jesus Christ has taken our weakness and strengthened us with his power. He has taken our mortality and given us his immortality. Jesus' body and blood are life and food for us.

It is not, therefore, the chief function of the Sacrament simply to exhibit to us the body of Christ. Rather, it is, I say, to seal and confirm that promise by which he testifies that his flesh is food indeed and his blood is drink, feeding us unto eternal life, by which he declares himself to be the bread of life, whereof he who eats will live forever. And to do this, the Sacrament sends us to the cross of Christ, where that promise was indeed performed and in all respects fulfilled. In calling himself 'the bread of life,' he did not borrow that name from the Sacrament, as some wrongly interpret. Rather, he had been given as such to us by the Father and showed as such when, being made a sharer in our human mortality, he made us partakers in his divine immortality; when, offering himself as a sacrifice, he bore our curse in himself to imbue us with his blessing; when, by his death, he swallowed up and annihilated death; and when, in his resurrection, he raised up this corruptible flesh of ours, which he put on, to glory and incorruption.¹⁵³

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is the seal and confirmation that Jesus Christ himself

¹⁵¹ According to Calvin, great comfort for our souls can be attained in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The sign of the Lord's Supper assures us that eternal life is ours. It assures us that the kingdom of God can no more be cut off from us than Jesus Christ himself. The sign of the Lord's Supper reminds us that we cannot be condemned for our sins, because they are now Christ's. These promises are so true and perfect "that we certainly consider him truly shown to us, just as if Christ himself present were set before our gaze and touched by our hands" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 103).

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 103-104.

sustains the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*, while we are led into eternal life.

3.3 Summary

As early as *Psychopannychia* (1534), Calvin appeals to the Christological focus of redemption. With the 1536 edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin was focused on the catechetical needs of those who had zeal for the true religion. In Calvin's words found in the dedicatory remarks to Francis, "My purpose was solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness...the whole of sound doctrine consists in the knowledge of God and of ourselves."¹⁵⁴ With the definitive edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), Calvin articulates a well-delineated understanding of conversion as a process, with particular attention given to the significance of repentance. Calvin writes,

Now, it ought to be a fact beyond controversy that repentance not only constantly follows faith, but is also born of faith...no one can embrace the grace of the gospel, without betaking himself from the errors of his past life into the right way, and applying his whole effort to the practice of repentance.¹⁵⁵

Calvin's defines conversion as a process of punctiliar events. Conversion is not a singular and conclusive punctiliar event. This understanding is rooted in his Christology. Calvin understood conversion as an ongoing experience of the benefits provided by Christ's imputed righteousness and the renewing work of the Holy Spirit.

...Christ was given to us by God's generosity, to be grasped and possessed by faith. By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; secondly, that sanctified by Christ's spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴Ibid., I, 15.

¹⁵⁵John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 593.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., 725.

Both *Psychopannychia* and the 1536 edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion* are significant for an understanding of how Calvin viewed conversion. First, *Psychopannychia* teaches us about the nature of the soul. What is the soul or spirit of man? First, the soul is the proper seat of the *imago Dei*. Second, regeneration ignites the discovery of a person's true identity. Third, it is this initial awareness that becomes progressive in nature, which indicates Calvin's understanding of conversion.

In the 1536 edition of *Institutes*, the salvation experience is unpacked by Calvin as a process or as I have referred to it as the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. This process begins with regeneration, continues with sure faith, and proceeds with ongoing repentance. Using the Apostles' Creed as the framework for the early sections of this work, Calvin explains his understanding of the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*.

In reciting the first article of the Apostles' Creed, we acknowledge God's self-disclosure by confessing that we believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. When we call God almighty and creator, we are exercising right faith. The right faith is faith that trusts that God does all things to us for our benefit. The right faith is faith that affirms that we are not the cause of God's presence with us, but it is solely God's goodness that compels God to have anything to do with us. God is our benevolent Father. God is our Creator. All things come from God. Not simply those things, which sustain and nourish our earthly lives, but also what activates and preserves our spiritual lives. "...we are never to doubt or lose faith that we have in him a propitious and benevolent Father, and no less are to await salvation from him."¹⁵⁷

Calvin is careful to remind us that this first article of the Apostles' Creed teaches us about the omnipotence, omniscience, election, and providence of God the Father.

¹⁵⁷John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 49.

However, Calvin is painfully aware that what the religionists teach about religion is centered on human effort. This, Calvin asserts, is not right faith. What we are taught by the religionists and what religion is are two different things. From where does this right faith come?

Whereas the *conscientia* and the written law are universal to all human beings, faith is not. It is a unique work of the Holy Spirit, which moves us from a general knowledge of God as Creator to the particular knowledge of God as Redeemer. Faith accesses our true ontology or identity.

The illumination of the Holy Spirit, that is regeneration, and the *conscientia* in conjunction with the mirror of the written law brings about an accurate assessment of the knowledge of God and ourselves. Through the gift of faith, the transition begins from the knowledge of God as Creator, functional ungodliness (*impietas*) to that of the knowledge of God as Redeemer, functional true godliness (*pietas*). It is the law which is to make us aware of our sinfulness and need of a savior; it is to be a mirror to us of our inability to make things right. The law leaves us without hope.

Now we are ready to understand what we are to learn from the law. God is the Creator, our Lord and Father. For this reason we owe him glory, honor, and love. Since, however, not one of us performs these duties, we all deserve the curse, judgement, in short, eternal death. Therefore we are to seek another way to salvation than the righteousness of our own works. This way is the forgiveness of sins. Then, since it is not our power or ability to discharge what we owe the law, we must despair of ourselves and must seek and await help from another quarter. After we descend to this humility and submission, the Lord will shine upon us, and show himself lenient, kindly, gentle, indulgent. Everything our sins deserved he forgives, and receives into grace.¹⁵⁸

Faith moves us into the particular knowledge of God as Redeemer and sets us on the road to seek true godliness through forgiveness of sins, repentance, the mortification

¹⁵⁸Ibid., 17.

of the flesh and rebirth. This is our salvation. Faith is our access to the forgiveness of sins, not once, but often. We receive, by faith, our forgiveness of sins in Christ. Christ, then, continues to receive us into grace through our acts of faithing. Faithing embraces our forgiveness.

For Calvin, faith precedes forgiveness of sins and repentance. Faith claims the promise of Jesus Christ's human obedience, death, resurrection, and ascension as our very own. We are engrafted into the life of Jesus Christ. Faith is a gift from the Holy Spirit and our faith needs to increase along the road of transition. "For we need to have faith increase constantly, while we are in this life. This is nothing but progress on the road, until we clearly reach God, in whom the whole of our perfection rests."¹⁵⁹

The means of grace are significant in Calvin's understanding of regeneration, both in its initial and ongoing forms. The church is the body of Christ made up of its individual members. We, as individuals, become one, a community, in Christ. The church is the presence of Christ in the world. As participants with Christ in the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*, we are not simply individuals added onto a salvific chain. We are adopted into the family and become one with Jesus Christ. Thus, salvation is to partake of Christ and be united with him. And as we partake and are united with Christ, we are to follow his example. As he gave himself for us, we are to give ourselves to one another.

In Christ, we are reborn, adopted, sanctified, and renewed day by day.¹⁶⁰ "In short, if we partake of Christ, in Him we possess all the heavenly treasures and gifts of the Holy Spirit, which leads us unto life and salvation. Except with a true and living faith,

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 67.

¹⁶⁰Ibid., 18.

we will never grasp this.”¹⁶¹ This statement articulates Calvin’s understanding of the relationship between faith and *unio cum Christo*. God the Father in Christ has chosen us. Through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, we were given faith to place in Jesus Christ to redeem us through his human obedience, death and resurrection. We are adopted as sons and daughters of God. Jesus’ work of sanctification and justification becomes ours.

Who is this Jesus Christ on whom, as our foundation, our lives rest? Jesus Christ has reconciled us to the Father. Jesus Christ is our wisdom, because we are foolish. Jesus Christ is our righteousness, because we are sinners. Jesus Christ is our purity, because we are unclean. Jesus Christ is our power, because we are weak. Jesus Christ is our life, while we bear about us the body of death. We are engrafted into Christ; thus we participate in him in eternal life and the kingdom of God. We obtain forgiveness of sins, salvation and life. Calvin writes,

Therefore he sanctifies us, cleanses the filth of our sins, governs and leads us, until we reach to himself, through death, which will bring an end indeed to our imperfection, but a beginning to our blessedness, which we shall receive in him, so that his Kingdom and glory may be our mainstay, power, and glorying against hell.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹Ibid.

¹⁶²Ibid., 56.

Chapter 4: Analysis

4.1 Introduction

At the outset of this dissertation, I presented a descriptive statement about and a working definition of conversion. The descriptive statement is that

Conversion is the beginning of real Christian life. Christian nurture, education and worship may be valuable preparations. But no one is, or should be called, a Christian until he has personally encountered God in Jesus Christ, until he has personally repented, until he has personally accepted God's gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, until by faith he has individually been born again. The reality of the church in every generation consists in those who have thus been born again. The continuance of the Church in the world depends on there being enough people who have passed through this experience, and through whom it can be passed on to others.¹

And the working definition is that

Conversion is primarily an act or determination of the will. All men are in a state of alienation from God; each man is the center of his own world, and claims the right to determine his own existence. This is rebellion and the way of death. Even those who have been baptized do in practice go on living in this way; particular sins are the fruit of the central sin of rebellion. Real life begins only when a man consciously finds his true center in God. God's offer of grace is continuous and unconditional. But it constrains no man and leaves the freedom of decision to men. To return to God is response to the love of God manifest in Christ. Nevertheless it is impossible without a decision on the part of the individual, the exercise of that freedom which has been impaired by sin, but which God Himself has kept in being in every man. Without this personal and individual response, there can be no reality of Christian life.²

I will now add Calvin's descriptive statement of conversion to the one cited above. Calvin describes conversion in this way.

Repentance is preached in the name of Christ when, through the teaching of the gospel, men hear that all their thoughts, all their inclinations, all their efforts, are corrupt and vicious. Accordingly, they must be reborn if they would enter the Kingdom of God; moreover, this is the manner of rebirth; if they have participation in Christ, in whose death our depraved desires die, in whose cross

¹Stephen C. Neill, "Conversion," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 3 (1950): 353.

²*Ibid.*, 354.

our old man is crucified, in whose tomb our body of sin is buried [Rom. 6:6]. Forgiveness of sins is preached when men are taught that for them Christ became redemption, righteousness, satisfaction, and life [I Cor. 1:30] that by his name they are freely accounted righteous and innocent in God's sight. In one word, then, I interpret repentance to be mortification...Lead a life befitting a repentance and conversion of this sort.³

Neill's statement is consistent with Calvin's. Neill writes that "...no one is, or should be called, a Christian until he has personally encountered God in Jesus Christ, until he has personally repented, until he has personally accepted God's gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, until by faith he has individually been born again."⁴ Calvin writes, "...this is the manner of rebirth; if they have participation in Christ, in whose death our depraved desires die, in whose cross our old man is crucified, in whose tomb our body of sin is buried [Rom. 6:6].⁵ For both Neill and Calvin no one is a Christian unless they have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ who is their redemption, righteousness, satisfaction, and life. Both the Reformed and broad evangelical Protestant traditions would have no problem with the statements on conversion by Neill and Calvin. However, Calvin's statement on conversion goes further.

With that said, then, of the various understandings of conversion presented in this dissertation, those within the Reformed and the broad evangelical Protestant traditions, as well as the evangelical Reformed subset within the broad evangelical Protestant tradition, what are the unique differences that Calvin's view of conversion bring to the discussion?

³John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 132.

⁴Stephen Neill, "Conversion," 353.

⁵John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 132.

4.2 Analysis

4.2.1 The Human Condition

The first difference between Calvin and the understandings of conversion presented in this dissertation is that of the human condition, that is the sin nature of humanity. Calvin is very clear on the state of human nature. Because of this common sin nature, Calvin speaks of a human condition that is condemned outside of Jesus Christ. "...all of us born of Adam are ignorant and bereft of God, perverse, corrupt, and lacking every good."⁶ Because of this common human condition, Calvin asserts that God chooses some to death and others to life.⁷ Because of the common sin nature in man, the basis for that determination is in God's free act of mercy. Conversion, then, necessitates a change from one condition to another. The change is from a condition of alienation from God to one of reconciled relationship with God. Concerning the alienated human condition Calvin writes,

...when Adam slipped into sin, this image and likeness of God was cancelled and effaced, that is, he lost all benefits of divine grace, by which he could have been led back into the way of life [Gen 3]...nothing was left to him save ignorance, iniquity, impotence, death, and judgment [Rom. 5:12-21]. These are indeed the "fruits of sin." [Gal. 5:19-21].⁸

Moreover, on the nature of sin Calvin writes,

Original sin is the depravity and corruption of our nature, which first renders us liable to God's wrath, then also gives rise in us to what Scripture calls "works of the flesh". And that is what is properly called "sin" in the Scriptures. The works that come forth there from-such as adulteries, fornications, thefts, hatreds, contentions, murders, carousings-ought according to this reckoning be called "fruits of sin", although they are also often called "sins" in Scripture.⁹

⁶Ibid., 16.

480: ⁷John Calvin, *Psychopannychia in Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, vol.3,

⁸John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 16.

⁹Ibid., 97.

Sin is that which is innate which generates such things as adultery, murder, lying, stealing, lust, gossip, fornication, and the like. Prior to God's regenerating work within us to lead us to faith in Jesus Christ and its corresponding repentance, we are inclined to do no other than the works of the flesh. Calvin writes,

Even though we have been so born that nothing is left for us to do which could be acceptable to God, nor has it been put in our power to please him-yet we do not cease to owe the very thing we cannot supply... Through him we are reborn, wrested from the power and chains of the devil, freely adopted as children of God, sanctified for every good work... Through him we are renewed from day to day [II Cor. 4:16], that we may walk in newness of life [Rom. 6:4] and live for righteousness.¹⁰

With this in mind, Neill's definition of conversion gives man "freedom of decision" to return to God. Both the Reformed tradition, historically, and the evangelical Reformed subset of the broad evangelical Protestant tradition would reject Neill at this point. However, the Presbyterian Church (USA) with its distortion of *ecclesia reformata* is an *ecclesia semper reformanda* has stepped outside the parameters of an historic understanding of the Reformed tradition in its articulation of the depth and breadth of the nature of human sin, particularly in the area of human sexuality.

In the context of the Presbyterian Church (USA) there seems to be no such understanding of the nature of sin as Calvin articulates above. Although its confessions argue for such an understanding of sin as Calvin sets forth that sin "...has corrupted the image of God in humanity and enslaved the human will so that human beings are unable to choose to act in accord with God's will,"¹¹ the issue surrounding the ordination of self-avowed, practicing gays and lesbians to the ministry of Word and sacrament, has been set outside of those behaviors characterized as sinful. That is, one's sexual preference even if

¹⁰Ibid., 16, 18.

¹¹Robert Benedetto, Darrell L. Guder, and Donald K. McKim, editors, *Historical Dictionary of Reformed Churches* (London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 1999), 276.

deemed non-biblical is not considered an outgrowth of one's sin nature. As mentioned in chapter 1, a person's view of the authority of Scripture and Christology can skew one's understanding of the doctrine of sin, particularly as Calvin states it.

Those evangelicals in the broad evangelical Protestant tradition as well as the evangelical Reformed subset have agreement on the doctrine of sin as Calvin outlines its pervasiveness in human nature. That is why evangelicals are keen on evangelism. Evangelism is geared to obtain converts. A.N.S. Lane offers this definition of conversion. "Conversion is not just entering into a private relationship with God. It means joining God's family, which is not some abstract mystical concept but is composed of actual human beings around us."¹² Yes, conversion is to restore a person's relationship with God, but it also brings individual believers into a community of other believers. An individual's standing changes before God and the community of faith is provided to aid in an individual's personal growth.

Lane's understanding of conversion is clearly evident in the 1536 edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Using baptism as his context for understanding the nature of conversion, Calvin writes, "...baptism should be a symbol and proof of our cleansing...baptism serves as our confession of faith before men. Indeed, it is the mark by which we publicly profess that we wish to be reckoned God's people; by which we testify that we agree in worshipping the same God in one religion with all Christians."¹³

Scholars debate the nature of Calvin's own conversion. Although his conversion is not the subject of this dissertation, suffice it to say that to fix a temporal locus to

¹²A.N.S. Lane, "Conversion: a comparison of Calvin and Spener", *Themelios* 13:1 (1987), 21.

¹³John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 94, 98.

Calvin's conversion¹⁴ without examining the ramifications of that event and its relationship to his intense desire to make progress in true godliness (*pietas*) is to miss the point of his understanding of conversion. Conversion is the road of transition from ungodliness toward true godliness or *impietas* toward *pietas*.¹⁵ This transition is a process. This view of repentance as an ongoing process forms the foundation of Calvin's understanding of conversion. Calvin writes, "...repentance is mortification of our flesh and of the old man, which true and pure fear of God brings about in us... Moreover the whole sum of the gospel is contained under these two headings, repentance and forgiveness of sins."¹⁶ Confirming Calvin's understanding of conversion as a process,

¹⁴Most scholars do agree that Calvin's fleeing Paris after the Nicolas Cop address on 01 November 1533 was a punctiliar event signifying Calvin's sympathy toward Lutheran ideas and a possible theological, as well as religious change. Parker, Ganoczy, and McGrath divide Calvin's conversion into the categories of confessional, theological and religious. Although these are various avenues a person's conversion may take, I argue that they are foreign to and inconsistent with Calvin's understanding of the transition from *impietas* to *pietas* and reinforce the current fixation with a punctiliar event to denote a person's once and for all conversion. Alister McGrath in *A Life of John Calvin* states that the existence of the Cop address in Calvin's own handwriting suggests that "...at least in Calvin's mind, the address was decisively associated with, perhaps even to the point of reflecting, his own religious formation." [Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990), 66.] Furthermore, McGrath states, "Conversion did not designate merely a private and intense religious experience; it embraced an outward, observable and radical shift in institutional allegiance." [Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin*, 70.] Contrary to McGrath, Ganoczy emphasizes the private and intense religious experience of repentance in Calvin's theology and downplays the necessity of institutional shift as part of Calvin's understanding of conversion. I find Ganoczy helpful here, because he at least leaves open the possibility that religious conversion could embrace both confessional and theological dimensions. Ganoczy writes, "...I in no way wish to deny that there was a conversion for Calvin. I only stress the indisputable fact that it was at a mature age that Calvin described his own spiritual transformation as 'conversion' and that he did so clearly only once and that was from a theological perspective." [Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, translated by David Foxgrover and Wade Provo (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 265.] Parker, like McGrath, sees Calvin's conversion first through the lenses of the institutional or confessional sphere. In 1534, Calvin resigned his chaplaincy and Parker remarks, "Would, it is asked, a scrupulously honest man like Calvin have continued to profit from a gross abuse when once he had seen it was an abuse? Therefore, he was converted shortly before the action." [T.H.L. Parker, *John Calvin*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 165.] And so the debate continues.

¹⁵For the sake of clarity throughout the remainder of this dissertation, I will refer to the road as the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*.

¹⁶John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 131-132.

A.N.S. Lane writes, "Conversion is, theologically speaking, a single event which may, in practice, happen gradually over a period of time and in stages."¹⁷

4.2.2 Election

The second noted difference is that of the doctrine of election. In the context of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Jack Rogers' statement that "...the Biblical witness on the reach of God's saving grace is less clear" indicates an understanding of election that is inconsistent with Calvin's.¹⁸ Whereas Rogers' comment is referenced to his understanding of the authority of Scripture and its teaching on salvation, particularly on the question of the inclusive or exclusive nature of Jesus Christ as the sole way of salvation, Calvin does not compromise the exclusive nature of Jesus Christ as being the way, the truth, and the life, but does acknowledge the mystery of our inability to know who the elect are in advance. Calvin writes, "We indeed cannot comprehend God's incomprehensible wisdom, nor is it in our power to investigate is so as to find out who have by his eternal plan been chosen, who condemned. But this is not needed by our faith, which is rendered abundantly secure by this promise: God will recognize as his sons those who have received his only-begotten Son."¹⁹ Moreover, "...no one will ever enter into the glory of the Heavenly Kingdom, who has not been called in this manner, and justified, seeing that without any exception the Lord in this manner sets forth and manifests his election in all men whom he has chosen."²⁰

The broad evangelical Protestant tradition and its evangelical reformed subset affirm some notion of God choosing first or electing some people unto salvation.

¹⁷A.N.S. Lane, "Conversion: a comparison of Calvin and Spener", 21.

¹⁸Jack Rogers in *Covenant Network of Presbyterians* (San Francisco, CA: Calvary Presbyterian Church, June 1999), 7.

¹⁹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 59.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 58-59.

Whereas Calvin acknowledges the mystery of not knowing who are the elect, Rogers mentions the mystery, but reforms Calvin's view by widening the possibilities, other than through Christ, for entrance into God's elect family. Piper, Sproul, Ogilvie, and Grudem stand firmly in Calvin's tradition. Bright, Campolo, McDowell, and Lucado, although focused on Jesus Christ as the sole way of salvation, place greater emphasis on human initiative in the conversion process, as opposed to the first work of election by God's sole choice. Bright writes, "We receive Jesus Christ by faith, as an act of the will."²¹ At no point does Bright acknowledge a choice made by God of the person first, before the person first believes. McDowell rejects the doctrine of election more directly by writing, "...not all-not even the majority-of those to whom I have spoken have accepted Him as their Savior and Lord. This is not because they were unable to believe-they were simply unwilling to believe."²²

4.2.3 Regeneration

The third noted difference revolves around regeneration. The Reformed tradition affirms the principle that the *ecclesia reformata* is an *ecclesia semper reformanda*. In the context of conversion, then, the Reformed tradition has historically defined regeneration as the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives the person a desire for faith and the actual gift of faith. Since sin has corrupted human nature radically, clouded the image of God, and enslaved the human will so it cannot choose to act in accordance with God's will, God must liberate the oppressed and captive will. This process of liberation is started with regeneration and continues through a lifestyle of Christian discipleship or conversion.

²¹Bill Bright, *God: Discover His Character* (Orlando, Florida: New Life Publications, 1999), 317.

²²Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), xii.

Given the current crisis facing the Presbyterian Church (USA) surrounding the issue of whether to ordain self-avowed, practicing homosexuals, the question of regeneration is tantamount. If Calvin and historic Reformed theology are correct in their understanding of sin, then the issue before the PC (USA) is not so much about ordination, but the definition of sin and whether or not homosexuality is a sin. More pointedly, are those who are self-avowed, practicing homosexuals unrepentant sinners? Moreover, is regeneration simply a matter of spiritual assent without a corresponding lifestyle that is congruent with a regenerated will? Those who champion gay and lesbian ordination often cite the notion that the *ecclesia reformata* is an *ecclesia semper reformanda*. Jack Rogers affirms the idea that Paul's teaching against homosexuality is culturally conditioned and not to be universally applied. Regarding the authority of Scripture Rogers writes, "The authority of Scripture as God's revelation and guidance for our lives for example, is an essential. Particular interpretations of individual passages are not."²³ Is regeneration a transformation of the will or simply parts of the will? Calvin and the Reformed tradition seem to teach that regeneration is of the entire will and that impacts both personal faith and a corresponding lifestyle that is commensurate with the teaching of Scripture.

Regeneration in the broad evangelical Protestant tradition is "necessary for man to be renewed or awakened in his understanding, affection, and will so that he can respond to God's initiating grace. However, this regenerating grace is not irresistible."²⁴ Although a doctrine affirmed by the broad evangelical Protestant tradition, regeneration can be resisted. For Bill Bright and others within the tradition, becoming a Christian is simply a

²³Jack Rogers in *Covenant Network of Presbyterians* (San Francisco, CA: Calvary Presbyterian Church, June 1999), 7.

²⁴See Article 2 and 3 in *The Five Articles of the Remonstrants, 1610*. (Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1983), 3.545).

process that acknowledges the difference between a self-directed life and that of a Christ-directed life. Although this position gives credence to the intellectual thought processes involved in rationally assenting to the movement of God in one's life, the responsibility for conversion seems still to rest with the individual not God. And, if this were the case, it is understandable for a believer then to make a rational case for why certain sins in the Bible might no longer be sins. If human nature is so depraved that the human will needs God to set it free then it would seem necessary to conclude that the human will would not resist grace but receive it.

4.4 Practical Issues

Several practical issues arise in light of the examination of Calvin's understanding of conversion through this paradigm of a transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. First, Calvin's emphasis on the aforementioned transition places the initiative in God and solely in him. Calvin writes,

We have all our trust fixed in God the Father, whom we acknowledge to be creator of ourselves and of absolutely all things that have been created, which have been established by the Word, his eternal Wisdom (who is the Son) and by his Power (who is the Holy Spirit). And, as he once established, so now he sustains, nourishes, activates, preserves, by his goodness and power, apart from which all things would immediately collapse and fall into nothingness.²⁵

Second, God's covenant with Israel is rooted in God's choice of an unworthy people and is a choice not based on merit. "He calls to mind how gloriously he manifested his strength and power, when he aided the Israelites in getting free from the bondage of Pharaoh; he daily shows the same power when he takes away his chosen ones (the true Israelites) from bondage to sin."²⁶ Calvin continues,

²⁵John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 49.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 19.

We believe Christ, sent by the Father out of divine kindness and mercy, descended to us for our sake to release us from the devil's tyranny, to which we had been bound; from the bonds of sin, by which we were held tied; from the bondage of death, both of body and of soul, into which we had been thrust; from eternal punishment, to which we had been given over (since our ability was not equal to releasing and extricating us from it). We confess that he, sent by the Father out of divine kindness and mercy, descended to us to take on our flesh, which he joined to his divinity. Thus it was for our benefit that he was to become our Mediator was true God and man.²⁷

Third, no particular people group had merit, so God's choice of Israel over other possible people groups demonstrates purpose on God's part to redeem the unredeemable. Fourth, mankind is unredeemable without God initiating a plan for redemption in Israel, which culminated in the Incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Calvin writes,

Indeed all these things (*how God sustains, nourishes, activates, preserves*)²⁸ are done to us by him, not through any worth of ours, nor by any merit to which he owes this grace, not because we can force his beneficence to make any reciprocal payment. Rather, it is through his fatherly kindness and mercy that he has to do with us, the sole cause of which is his goodness.²⁹

Fifth, the matrix of revelation and reconciliation in and through Israel and then Jesus places the context of the church as the relational experience in which we receive mediated revelation and reconciliation. Calvin writes, the church "...is also holy because as many as have been chosen by God's eternal providence to be adopted as members of the church—all these are made holy by the Lord."³⁰ Sixth, the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas* is ongoing in the life of the individual in and through the context of the church. God works through a people.

Furthermore, "...from the beginning the human race was, by Adam's sin, corrupted and vitiated, yet from this as it were polluted mass, he sanctifies some vessels unto honor, so

²⁷Ibid., 50.

²⁸*Italics mine.*

²⁹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 49.

³⁰Ibid., 58.

there is no age that does not experience his mercy.”³¹ Thus, if God initiates the transition and sustains it then human responsibility is to respond to God’s initiating activity of regeneration throughout life. This response and ongoing act of responding continues the transition of progress. It also demonstrates one’s redemptive presence as a member of the body of Christ, providing the context for the ongoing redemptive work of God through the church. Calvin writes, “We believe in the holy catholic church, that is, the whole number of the elect whether angels or man.”³² Moreover, “Besides, it must have been so decreed that there was no time from the creation of the world when the Lord did not have his church upon the earth, also that there will be no time, even to the end of the age, when he will not have it, even as he himself promises.”³³

³¹Ibid., 59.

³²Ibid., 58.

³³Ibid., 59.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Answering the Two Questions Raised

Given the understandings of conversion that are outlined in the traditions cited in this study, two questions arise: What can the Reformed tradition and the evangelical Reformed subset of the broad evangelical Protestant tradition learn from Calvin regarding conversion and its processes? Second, how does Calvin's view of conversion compare to that of the broad evangelical Protestant tradition in the United States?

Regarding the first question, the Reformed tradition, evangelical and non-evangelical, can learn from Calvin that conversion has both punctiliar and process components. Calvin's understanding of conversion in his early writings argues for conversion as change in both its punctiliar and process forms. Both personal and corporate conversion must be done according to Scripture and Scripture alone. Thus, the Reformed tradition, in its evangelical and non-evangelical expressions, must examine personal and corporate understandings of conversion according to the teaching of Scripture. Addressing the nature of conversion without using the word, but using descriptive words of conversion, Calvin writes,

He bestows upon us according to his own good will a new heart in order that we may will, and a new power, whereby we may be enabled to carry out his commandments [Ezek. 36:26]...Through him we are reborn, wrested from the power and chains of the devil, freely adopted as children of God, sanctified for every good work...Through him we are renewed from day to day [II Cor. 4:16], that we may walk in newness of life [Rom. 6:4] and live for righteousness.¹

Regarding the second question, Calvin and the broad evangelical Protestant tradition could not be further apart in their understandings of conversion. Calvin argues

¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 17-18.

that God moves (regenerates) only those to salvation that He elects. The punctiliar act of regeneration and the subsequent punctiliar acts of faith and repentance cannot be resisted. Following those initial and punctiliar events, the human will is freed to obey or disobey the ongoing call to growth, a process that can be comprised of many punctiliar events. For Calvin, conversion involves the initial, punctiliar, and exclusive work of God in regeneration. Conversion also involves our ability to respond in no other way than to have faith and to repent, both punctiliar in nature. Then, conversion continues as a process, which requires further responses of the human will in faith and repentance. That God and God alone initiates conversion and we cannot determine that salvific event through our own decision is clear in Calvin's early writings. Although in *Psychopannychia*, Calvin has not fully developed his doctrine of election, he does mention that God has chosen some to life and condemned others to destruction.² This life is only possible through the justifying work of Jesus Christ. Christ's righteousness becomes ours by imputation. Regarding justification Calvin writes,

No common thing it was that the Mediator was to accomplish: to make children of God out of children of men; out of heirs of Gehenna to make heirs of the heavenly kingdom. Who will have done this had not the Son of God become the Son of Man, and had not so taken what was ours as to impart what was his to us, and to make what was his by nature ours by grace? Therefore our most merciful Lord, when he willed what be redeemed, made himself our Redeemer... Our justification rests upon God's mercy alone, and faith, when it lays hold of justification, is said to justify.³

Furthermore, being sanctified to the Lord in complete purity of life is God's will.⁴ Jesus Christ is our sanctification as a result of his work of justification. The whole of the

²John Calvin, *Psychopannychia in Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, vol. 3, translated by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 480.

³John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 edition*, 51.

⁴*Ibid.*, 40, 66.

Christian life is to be a work of sanctification, which Calvin calls “a sort of practice of godliness.”⁵ Calvin writes, “We are indeed sanctified, that is, consecrated to the Lord in complete purity of life, our hearts formed to obedience to the Law... We hate all the filth of our flesh reposing in us.”⁶

5.2 Summary

I have demonstrated that Calvin has a particular understanding of conversion. Calvin stresses a transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*, which has an initial punctiliar event of regeneration, which elicits a sure faith. That sure faith is a gift from God. Calvin’s emphasis shifts from the initial surety of faith to the continuous nature of the transition, which encompasses a series of punctiliar events that involves an ongoing reliance on the Holy Spirit through faith. As Calvin’s understanding of the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas* developed, his use of *convertere* and *conversio* increased. However, his use of *convertere* and *conversio* is infused with his understanding of election, regeneration, union with Christ, faith, repentance, justification, and sanctification, all aspects of the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. The theological implications of such a reading are significant in correcting a non-Reformed understanding of conversion that is prevalent within both the Reformed tradition and the evangelical Reformed subset of the broad evangelical Protestant tradition.

Additionally, ancillary questions like, “When were you converted? or When did you accept Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord?” ignore Calvin’s fundamental understanding of conversion, which is the lifelong transition from *impietas* toward *pietas*. This is a critical and necessary reading of Calvin in *Psychopannychia* and the 1536

⁵Ibid., 177.

⁶Ibid., 35.

edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin's overall commitment to such a perspective is consistent throughout his theological writings and not simply in his later writings, most particularly his definitive 1559 edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

In its *ordo salutis*, the Reformed tradition stresses that faith precedes repentance. Whereas the Roman Catholic Church taught that repentance preceded faith⁷, Calvin insisted otherwise. If repentance precedes faith, then the transition from *impietas* toward *pietas* remains subjected to the law and its feeble attempts at works righteousness. If repentance precedes faith, then *unio cum Christo* is not an immediate consequence of justification by faith. For the effectual calling of the Holy Spirit gives us faith to believe that all that Christ did is ours now in Him. Then and only then, do we have courage to repent. As long as conversion is perceived as a punctiliar and conclusive event, the question of human responsibility both before and after conversion will remain a particular issue of theological significance with unique pastoral implications.

For Calvin, then, conversion is never completed until our consummation in Christ. It is then when we fully realize being led into God's kingdom. This understanding of conversion is initially articulated in *Psychopannychia* and the 1536 edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

⁷The emphasis on repentance preceding faith affirms the notion that there is some preparatory work we can do before we receive God's grace. Calvin would deem the notion of us being able to prepare for grace as semi-Pelagian.

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