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# SIN, GRACE, AND VIRTUE IN CALVIN: A MATRIX FOR DOGMATIC CONSIDERATION

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For as long as philosophers in the West have been spilling ink and chiseling into tablets of rock, virtue has been an important question. In his *Republic*, Plato criticized Homer for poorly depicting virtue in the person of Odysseus. His student Aristotle contended with his philosophical heritage in more ways than one, not least of which was an attempt to offer what he believed to be a more cogent reflection on virtue in the *Nichomachean Ethics*. Plotinus sought to reconcile some of Aristotle's thoughts to a generally Platonic system. Even prominent Christian theologians offered their insight, especially Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Yet, by and large, the broader quest for virtue disappeared in Modernity and was replaced with treatises on ethics: what is more realistic—deontology, utilitarianism, or pragmatism? However, since G. E. M. Anscombe's ground-breaking essay in 1958,<sup>1</sup> virtue studies have re-emerged in a powerful way, including in Christian communities.

Among the main Christian players in this realm for the past several decades has been Stanley Hauerwas, who has sought to bridge the gap between virtue ethics and Christian doctrine. He notes that the orthodox Christian Church has long seen an intimate connection between its doctrines and 'living worthily of the Lord' (Col. 1:10). He insists, 'Once there was no Christian ethics simply because Christians could not distinguish between their beliefs and their behaviour. They assumed that their lives exemplified (or at least should exemplify) their doctrines in a manner that made a division between life and doctrine impossible'.<sup>2</sup> Arguably the same

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<sup>1</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33 (1958), 1-19. Later, Alasdair MacIntyre offered another influential work that sought to reinstitute discussion of teleology and tradition into virtue discussions. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd edn (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, 'On Doctrine and Ethics', *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. by Colin E. Gunton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 22. He perhaps oversteps his bounds amid his denunciation of Modernity and its dismissal of formative elements to truth. Hauerwas does not stand alone in this increasingly popular posture. For example, see Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian*

has always remained true,<sup>3</sup> despite contemporary appraisals. Nevertheless, contemporary renewal of studies in theology and virtue (or theological virtue) requires careful exploration of the relationship of proper action to content of belief. The present exercise seeks to accomplish just this by doctrinally locating theological virtue within sanctification. While seemingly a modest claim, I shall specifically articulate an understanding of

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*Doctrine* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). While correct in their general analysis of the emphasis of Modernity, they prove far too reductionistic in their assumption that the concurrent theological enterprise—which certainly reflected the scientific rigidity of the period—failed to account for the formative aspects of doctrine. After all, as Colin Gunton remarks following an appeal to Spinoza as an example, “Systems”, then, are not necessarily abstract or merely theoretical; they are normally designs for living’. ‘A Rose by Any Other Name? From “Christian Doctrine” to “Systematic Theology”’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1 (1999), p. 11. The general emphasis toward the cognitive did overshadow protracted reflections upon the ‘renewing of your minds’ (cf. Charry), but it would be careless to ignore the historical situatedness of the times. Just as there is no coincidence that current theological emphases mirror Postmodern and contemporary priorities and critiques, Modern theology betrays its own historic preoccupations. The present awareness certainly calls for evaluation and correction, but it should also force us to tread humbly and graciously in light of the judgment that awaits us.

<sup>3</sup> We should not confuse poor choices in action or inadequate doctrinal formulations for sterile doctrine that does not affect life. Doctrine has always shaped life decisions. Indeed, the manner in which Christians have engaged the world has often directly reflected their doctrinal commitments. The growth of the missionary movement—amid the Enlightenment—demonstrates a deep concern for the lostness of people who had never heard the gospel of Christ. The rise of liberal theology and focus on the social gospel reflected distrust in traditional theological conceptions of anthropology and thus shifted to purely charitable versions of Christianity based upon an optimistic view of reason and a corresponding view to the universal truth that ‘all men are created equal’ (or some form thereof). The rise of fundamentalism was in direct response to this liberal theological anthropology and distrust of traditional biblical Christianity. The fundamentalists first reacted theologically and only later isolated themselves socially and culturally due to loss in public standing. Further, they began to emphasize the doctrinal aspects of the traditional gospel of Christ in response to its neglect. All of these examples indicate an intimate connection between doctrine and the Christian life, and each reveals the conviction that its adherents were living worthily of the Lord. For an analysis of theology and the Civil War, see Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). Also, cf. the Gunton reference in fn. 2 above.

virtue as the fruit of the work of the Spirit based upon the believer's union with Christ. Apart from this union, discussion of virtue seems meaningless or, at least, seriously lacking in integration with Christian doctrine and the human condition. In order to make this case, I shall appeal to John Calvin to provide a dogmatic matrix within which to discuss union with Christ and the effects of sanctification.

But why Calvin? Ellen Charry describes Calvin's focus in his *Institutes* as 'an aretegenically oriented teacher of the church who understands the implications of theology for public life'.<sup>4</sup> This is surely significant in light of the derivation of 'aretegenic' from the Greek *aretē* ('virtue' or 'excellence') and *gennaō* ('to beget' or 'to produce'), which together mean 'conducive to virtue', according to Charry.<sup>5</sup> Calvin's comments in the preface directed toward King Francis I of France certainly warrant this description. Here he proclaims that his initial intention in the undertaking of the *Institutes* 'was solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness'.<sup>6</sup> The shape that the *Institutes* eventually took reflected Calvin's recognition of the widespread doctrinal ignorance of his 'French countrymen'. Thus, he 'adapted' his work 'to a simple and ... elementary form of teaching'.<sup>7</sup>

This makes Calvin an instructive starting place for two reasons. First, in addition to the historic context in which he was principally a pastor (albeit reluctantly), Calvin himself acknowledged that his own theological exercise necessarily served the quest for 'true godliness'. Apart from this end, those who 'toil and labour ... do nothing better than wander about in endless windings, without making any progress'. Indeed, '[f]rom this follow good works, which are the fruits that God requires from us'.<sup>8</sup> Contrary to accusations that some volley in the direction of Reformed thought in general,<sup>9</sup> Calvin's writings directly addressed the need for practical

<sup>4</sup> Charry, *Renewing of Your Minds*, p. 199. She rightly continues, 'If we take doctrine and piety as belonging to two separate fields, one academic and the other pastoral, we will never understand Calvin. For Calvin, the purpose of treating articles of religion is to enhance godliness.'

<sup>5</sup> Charry, *Renewing of Your Minds*, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, trans. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), Preface, 1 (p. 9).

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, Preface, 1 (p. 9).

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians*, Rev. John Pringle, trans., In Calvin's Commentaries 21 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 1:10.

<sup>9</sup> For example, see Otto Hermann Pesch, 'The Theology of Virtue and the Theological Virtues', *Changing Values and Virtues*, ed. by Dietmar Mieth and

outworking from theology.<sup>10</sup> He understood quite well that thought and action are intimately linked.<sup>11</sup>

Second, we should not overlook Calvin's sense of theological precision as if a pastoral aim toward the spurring on of Christians allows for unreflective or loose doctrinal assertions. After all, Calvin spends much time refuting the claims of such troublesome thinkers as Michael Servetus<sup>12</sup> and Andreas Osiander.<sup>13</sup> What is more, the entire occasion of his ministry lay amid the Protestant Reformation, one of the most significant periods of theological remodelling in Church history. Therefore, it should be of little surprise that his heart for the sanctification of the Church provides a matrix for discussing theological virtue in light of specific and deliberate doctrinal reflection. It is precisely Calvin's specificity that I wish to draw upon here, for without the logic of union with Christ, virtuous living in the Christian life proves meaningless. I shall rehearse this logic below.

#### VIRTUE AND UNION WITH CHRIST

In addition to the reasons already provided above, the most important theological reason for calling upon Calvin for a dogmatic matrix is his emphasis upon union with Christ. Charles Partee<sup>14</sup> has persuasively argued that union with Christ is an important cohesive doctrine in Calvin's theology—even if not the organizing principle of his work—while several others have laboured intently to show the centrality of this doctrine to his work in soteriology.<sup>15</sup> This is certainly not the place to

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Jacques Pohier (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, Ltd., 1987), pp. 81-100.

<sup>10</sup> See Randall C. Zachman, "'Deny Yourself and Take up Your Cross': John Calvin on the Christian Life", *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11 (2009), 466-82.

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, upon reflection on 'right knowledge of self', Calvin finds it necessary to begin with creation. In this setting, he considers the image of God, whereby humans in the 'great nobility of our race' are distinguished from animals in general. God granted humanity with this gift in order that 'he might rouse our minds both *to zeal for virtue* and to meditation upon eternal life'. *Institutes*, II.1.1 (emphasis mine).

<sup>12</sup> See *Institutes* II.xiv.8.

<sup>13</sup> See *Institutes* III.xi.6.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Partee, 'Calvin's Central Dogma Again', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 18 (1987), 191-9.

<sup>15</sup> For just a few, see Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., 'Union with Christ: Some Biblical and Theological Reflections', *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, ed. by A. T. B. McGowan (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), esp. pp. 277-79; Marcus Johnson, 'Luther and Calvin on Union with Christ', *Fides et Historia* 39 (2007), 59-77; 'New or Nuanced Perspective on Calvin? A Reply

engage the opposition on this point nor even to establish the intricacies of this doctrine in Calvin's theology or elsewhere. Nevertheless, regardless of its place in his structure at large, few can deny his use of union with Christ especially to ground his soteriology, for he begins Book III of the *Institutes* with a discussion of just this doctrine. He asks, 'How do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only-begotten Son—not for Christ's own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men?' Invariably, the answer is that we must be united to Christ, for 'all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him'. In other words, 'he had to become ours and to dwell within us'.<sup>16</sup>

Significant for the current study is the fact that Calvin then continues in chapters 3-10 of Book III with discussion on sanctification rather than treating justification first. In light of Roman Catholic critiques that Luther's theology would lead to antinomianism, it is not surprising that Calvin would seek to quell potential complaints and concerns directed toward him by first addressing the Christian life. Several scholars have seen Calvin's treatment of sanctification before justification as a declaration of just this aim.<sup>17</sup> It is unlikely that this is a declaration of the logical priority of sanctification in the *ordo salutis* (admittedly an anachronistic use of the term), for the manner of Calvin's argument does not seem to allow for this.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the order of discussion is not pivotal precisely because the different aspects of soteriology each relate in like to

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to Thomas Wenger', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51 (2008), 543-58; Guenther H. Haas, 'Calvin's Ethic', *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. by Donald K. McKim (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 94-5. For a good summary of contending contemporary reflections on union with Christ in various schools of Reformed theology, see A. T. B. McGowan, 'Justification and the *Ordo Salutis*', in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. by Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), pp. 147-63.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.1.1.

<sup>17</sup> For example, see Charry, *Renewing of Your Minds*, p. 219 n. 1.

<sup>18</sup> See Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.1: 'Therefore we must now discuss these matters thoroughly. And we must so discuss them as to bear in mind that this is the main hinge on which religion turns, so that we devote the greater attention and care to it. *For unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation nor one on which to build piety toward God*' (emphasis mine). The implication is that in light of the reality of sin, apart from justification, holy living is meaningless. I shall touch on this more below. For the present purposes, also notice that the 'hinge' of the present statement concerns 'relationship to God', something that necessarily includes union with Christ in Calvin's thought.

union with Christ. In fact, Calvin sees justification and sanctification as intimately connected. He writes, '[N]evertheless, actual holiness of life, so to speak, is not separated from free imputation of righteousness'.<sup>19</sup> Later, he more strongly contends, '[A]s Christ cannot be torn into parts, so these two which we perceive in him together and conjointly are inseparable—namely, righteousness and sanctification'.<sup>20</sup>

If the priority of location that he gives to sanctification does not testify to its logical priority in soteriology, we must return to his prior and constantly resurfacing aim. His setting of sanctification first allows him to clarify its importance as a benefit that comes from Christ. In turn, this allows for the actual emphasis to lie with the person of Christ himself and the manner by which the different facets of his work become efficacious for the believer. In other words, while the topic of his discussion for much of the early portion of Book III is, in fact, sanctification, prominence actually lies with union with Christ, which the beginning of the title to Book III confirms: 'The Manner in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ'. This key element dictates 'What Benefits Comes to Us from It, and What Effects Follow', as the title continues.

Such is evident as Calvin unfolds his logic. The problem that underlies the entire question of virtue, at least as presently posed, is that of sin. The condition imbued by sin persists apart from rebirth.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, this is the lot of all people, a 'sorry spectacle of our foulness', unable to advance in the quest of original created humanity for virtue.<sup>22</sup> Drawing upon his interpretation of the apostle Paul, Calvin insists that it is not simply that all are subject to the corrupting effects of original sin but that all are com-

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Meanwhile, for additional support to my claim, see *Institutes*, III.11.11: 'For God so begins this second point [reformation into newness of life] in his elect, and progresses in it gradually, and sometimes slowly, throughout life, that they are always liable to the judgment of death before his tribunal. But he does not justify in part but liberally, so that they may appear in heaven as if endowed with the purity of Christ. No portion of righteousness sets our conscience at peace until it has been determined that we are pleasing to God, because we are entirely righteous before him.' Calvin refers to sanctification ('reformation into newness of life') as the 'second point' relative to justification. See also John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Henry Beveridge, ed., Christopher Fetherstone, trans., In Calvin's Commentaries 19 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), ch. 12 (opening thoughts to the chapter, p. 449).

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.3.1.

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.6.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.3.3.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.1.1.

pletely 'overwhelmed' by this inherent corruption such that everything anyone does in this fallen state is sin.<sup>23</sup> By no means does Calvin wish to insinuate that consequently no one ever does any good or even seeks what is good. To the contrary, since humanity discriminates good and evil with the use of reason, and since reason, though corrupted, is not altogether lost in the Fall people often know quite well what they ought to do.<sup>24</sup> Calvin notes that sometimes people become victims of weakness to urges that quite explicitly contradict personal knowledge of goodness while at other times their minds seek loopholes in the fine print (for example, by thinking adulterous thoughts though not engaging in adulterous actions),<sup>25</sup> but in general Calvin has no problem acknowledging that people know what is good and even act in a manner that seeks goodness for themselves.

However, due to the clutches of sin and the resultant bondage and corruption that it produces, Calvin intends to distinguish clearly between a general sense of good and the virtuousness that characterizes appropriate life before God.<sup>26</sup> He will only attribute such excellence to God. Even in a pre-Fall economy, 'participation in God' through creation in the image of God was the only sense in which humanity in original righteousness was truly good, for 'it is no less to our advantage than pertinent to God's glory that we be deprived of all credit for our wisdom and virtue.'<sup>27</sup> The Fall complicates matters by marring the image of God but does not change the rules of the game. That is, one may only attain to true excellence in a theological sense by the grace of God. Whereas this originally consisted of the untainted presence of the image of God, it now requires union with Christ.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.1.9: 'Here I only want to suggest briefly that the whole man is overwhelmed—as by a deluge—from head to foot, so that no part is immune from sin and all that proceeds from him is to be imputed to sin.'

<sup>24</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.2.12.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.2.23.

<sup>26</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.2.26: "[G]ood" refers not to virtue or justice but to condition, as when things go well with man. To sum up, much as man desires to follow what is good, still he does not follow it. There is man to whom eternal blessedness is not pleasing, yet no man aspires to it except by the impulsion of the Holy Spirit.' It is apparent from this passage that Calvin sees a 'good' that follows 'inclination of nature' toward what we might call 'civil good'. This means nothing for theological good (or the only real concept of good in Calvin's summation), which is impossible apart from God.

<sup>27</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.2.1.

<sup>28</sup> Calvin strongly attests to the extreme condition of humanity apart from Christ: '[W]e teach that all human desires are evil, and charge them with sin—not in that they are natural, but because they are inordinate. Moreover,



Thus, when Calvin finally engages his doctrine of justification, he insists that 'good works' only make sense if they come from 'vessels unto honor', for it is the Lord who 'is pleased to adorn them [the vessels] with true purity'. Nevertheless, lacking in perfection as these justified vessels remain, God counts the works good because of the vessels' connection to Christ rather than on account of their own deeds and condition.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, because the believer is united with Christ, her actions can truly be considered virtuous, for 'He [God] receives these very works with pardon, not imputing the imperfection with which they are all so corrupted that they would otherwise be reckoned as sins rather than virtues'.<sup>30</sup> Calvin apparently has no qualms with adopting the language of virtue but boldly proclaims that in the truest sense of excellence, it must begin with God. In the state of original righteousness, the purity of the image of God in humanity included a mandate towards virtue. However, due to the Fall and the all-encompassing effects of sin, people are unable to seek such excellence in a theological sense.<sup>31</sup> In order for humanity to reengage with life as God meant it to be, he provided the means of forgiveness and reconciliation, namely the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. In uniting the elect to Christ, God reinstates a project of holiness and excellent living that necessarily proceeds through him.

Calvin furthers this point in his commentaries, where he clearly recognizes that the realm of vice (as the opposite of virtue) is apart from Christ. Conversely, those who are united to him ought to be free from such enslavement. Indeed, Calvin recognizes the shameful nature that the Colossian believers 'should addict themselves any more to the vices', given that they have died with Christ.<sup>32</sup> After all, the believer's participation in the death and resurrection of Christ—as Paul intimates—translates to an ongoing 'fellowship' with Christ.<sup>33</sup> It is only fair to see these comments in light of Calvin's strong emphasis in the *Institutes* on union with Christ, for according to his own words in his letter to the reader, all of his commentaries assume the theological rigor that he already undertook in

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we hold that they are inordinate because nothing pure or sincere can come forth from a corrupt and polluted nature.' *Institutes*, III.3.12.

<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.17.5: 'But because the godly, encompassed with mortal flesh, are still sinners, and their good works are as yet incomplete and redolent of the vices of the flesh, he can be propitious neither to the former nor to the latter unless he embrace them in Christ rather than in themselves.'

<sup>30</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.17.3.

<sup>31</sup> It should be noted that for Calvin, it is apparent that there is no meaningful sense apart from the theological sense.

<sup>32</sup> Calvin, *Colossians*, 3:7.

<sup>33</sup> Calvin, *Colossians*, 3:9.

the *Institutes*.<sup>34</sup> Thus, we might conclude that apart from this union, vice is commonplace due to human fallenness. This is not to say that vice is excusable in such a circumstance. Rather, it is on account of fallenness that vice is so familiar, hence the need for Christ as the remedy for both the situation and the actual offences. However, when vice remains present among those buried and resurrected with Christ, this is truly appalling because it is contrary to the gracious fellowship with Christ.

In his *Commentary on Romans*, Calvin further clarifies that the fellowship that comes from being buried and raised with Christ does indeed refer to that 'secret union, by which we are joined to him' and consequently receive 'his own virtue'.<sup>35</sup> This compels believers to live faithfully for and before the Father, who 'requires from us ... those [fruits] of holiness and righteousness', for it would be unfitting to do otherwise.<sup>36</sup> A discussion of virtue and holy living can only begin at this point, after recognition that humanity is void of righteousness in and of itself. Apart from God at work in Christ, people have no basis to consider holiness or excellence of life. Thus, Calvin contends that Paul waits until chapter 12 to convey his own thoughts on the life which God expects of believers precisely to establish its dependency upon God and Christ.<sup>37</sup> There is no sanctification—and

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<sup>34</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, pp. 4-5. The editor notes (fn. 4) that these comments appear in the second edition of the *Institutes* (1539), which predates all of his commentaries. One might object that the theological fullness of the final edition of the *Institutes* should not reflect upon earlier commentaries. However, such a protest seems unnecessary considering Calvin's claim at the beginning of the same letter (p. 3) that he was 'never satisfied' with prior published versions of the *Institutes*, which implies that he always recognized a need to explore and explain more fully the precision that he eventually unveiled. Furthermore, that the letter in question accompanied the final edition confirms his continued affirmation of this point in 1559.

<sup>35</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 6:5.

<sup>36</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 7:4.

<sup>37</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 12 (introduction to the chapter, prior to v. 1). In this particular setting, Calvin seems to prefer 'holy living' to 'virtue'. However, he does use the term 'virtue' as well and that in a neutral manner. Calvin's concern is for the 'philosophers' and their attempts to locate the 'sources of virtues', which invariably are apart from Christ. The negative emphasis is on 'sources' other than Christ, not the notion of virtue, which Calvin seems to use at least roughly synonymously with 'holy living'.  
Meanwhile, returning to Calvin's contention for the reason of the delayed discussion of 'holy living' in *Romans*, he argues that Paul recognizes that 'we are redeemed by the Lord for this end' and, therefore, that this end is completely relative to the righteousness that comes to the truly redeemed through 'God and Christ'.

thus no virtue—apart from Christ and the benefits that proceed from him.

### VIRTUE AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

At this point, one more familiar with the ancient and contemporary trends in virtue debates might object, ‘Certainly Calvin provides a theological basis to speak of newness of life, but his extreme dependence upon sanctification as strictly a benefit, or gift, that proceeds from Christ automatically negates any attempt to speak of virtue based upon cultivated habit. Instead, it requires passivity that waits on God rather than nurturing of a dynamic wisdom’.<sup>38</sup> After all, as Otto Pesch deliberates, has this not been an enduring problem for Reformed theology in general as it has attempted to relate to virtue? For this reason, has it not sought to minimize discussion of virtue?<sup>39</sup> However, it is not immediately obvious to me that the previous discussion of virtue and union with Christ precludes a dynamic appreciation for theological virtue, indeed that it does not even

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<sup>38</sup> For example, see Jennifer A. Herdt’s complaint against Luther in ‘Virtue’s Semblance: Erasmus and Luther on Pagan Virtue and the Christian Life’, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25 (2005), 137-62. In end note 62, she succinctly connotes that her problem is with Luther’s ‘starting point’, by which she specifically means the passivity his doctrine of justification (and undeveloped, implied doctrine of sanctification) transmits to an understanding of virtue. It is based entirely upon the work of Christ applied to the believer who accepts the promise of God, thereby disallowing any meaningful role for the person to cultivate habits that result in virtuous living. Her complaint is well-taken, though it seems to misunderstand the larger issue with which Luther sought to contend, namely a synergistic understanding of justification. In other words, his concern was less about what became sanctification in later Protestant reflection and more about the free grace of God in Christ that justifies the sinner. Calvin, as noted above, perhaps aspired to avoid such critiques by speaking of sanctification before justification in his *Institutes*, yet a more thorough response to Herdt’s concern still awaits development below.

Further, it is debatable whether Herdt even accurately captures Luther’s ‘starting point’ concerning justification. For an alternate perspective, see Johnson, ‘Luther and Calvin on Union with Christ’.

<sup>39</sup> Pesch, ‘Theology of Virtue’, pp. 92-3. He writes, ‘[E]thics under the influence of Reformed theology becomes a doctrine of the *manifest consequences of salvation as a gift*, a doctrine of the instructions of God’s commandments which the justified man or woman now once again gladly fulfills.’ As shall become evident, this understanding is unnecessarily reductionistic.

promote such an emphasis. Instead, one further vital element remains to complete the present matrix for dogmatic consideration.

While the material principle of virtue thus far has been Christ and his benefits, it speaks little to the means by which believers receive his benefits. Calvin readily addresses this concern and contends for the ministry of the Spirit. This was not a mere afterthought for Calvin, who quite consciously maintained a robust triune basis for theology.<sup>40</sup> While the scope of this paper does not allow a full evaluation of theological virtue in light of the Trinity *in toto*, a discussion of virtue relative to union with Christ would be incomplete without considering the manner in which the Spirit accomplishes the virtuous effects of Christ's benefits throughout the body of Christ. Again, Calvin provides initial insights worth appropriating.

In his *Commentary on Colossians*, Calvin insists that it is only by the renewing work of the Spirit that anyone is 'made heavenly'. With reference to Paul's list of shameful acts of the flesh in 3:5, Calvin speaks of vice, which represents 'earthliness', or that which is far from excellent.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, 'newness of life' requires the 'illumination of the Holy Spirit', which results in a transformation of the entire person.<sup>42</sup> In the present context and following Paul's lead, Calvin can be speaking of nothing other than the external signs, or actions, that follow a life that is joined to Christ. In other words, whereas earlier he spoke of Paul's denouncement of vice which testifies to the flesh, he now speaks of the excellence of being that flows from the work of the Spirit.<sup>43</sup> Calvin recognizes this new life as

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<sup>40</sup> While it is no secret that Calvin made much of Christ as prophet, priest, and king, even these offices relate to triune economy. For example, Carl Trueman discusses the triune program relative to Christ's mediatory fulfilment as priest in 'From Calvin to Gillespie on Covenant: Mythological Excess or an Exercise in Doctrinal Development?' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11 (2009), 382-3.

<sup>41</sup> Calvin, *Colossians*, 3:5.

<sup>42</sup> Calvin, *Colossians*, 3:10.

<sup>43</sup> He is intent to distinguish this from justification, which is by faith alone. The work in question here is clearly sanctification, 'for Paul here is not reasoning as to the manner in which men are made perfect in the sight of God, but as to the manner in which they may live perfectly among themselves'. Contra the 'papists', justification must be by faith alone not because 'observance of the law is not righteousness, but rather on this ground, that as we are all transgressors of the law'. Therefore, 'in consequence of our being destitute of any righteousness of our own, [we are] constrained to borrow righteousness from Christ'. Calvin, *Colossians*, 3:14.

imbuing of virtue,<sup>44</sup> something that he sees as impossible apart from the work of the Holy Spirit.

That the presence and work of the Spirit are absolutely necessary is especially evident in his *Commentary on Romans*, where he notes the inseparability of union with Christ and the ministry of the Spirit. Those who have Christ also have the Holy Spirit. Calvin emphatically proclaims, 'Those in whom the Spirit reigns not, belong not to Christ; then they are not Christians who serve the flesh; for they who separate Christ from his own Spirit make him like a dead image or a carcase [*sic*]. And we must always bear in mind ... that gratuitous remission of sins can never be separated from the Spirit of regeneration'.<sup>45</sup> This is to say that though the benefit of sanctification that enables excellence in new life before God is available only through possessing Christ, the actual work of making this benefit effective belongs to the Spirit of Christ, who progressively destroys the ruins of sin left behind and enables fitting life before God.<sup>46</sup>

In the *Institutes*, Calvin constructively considers this reality. Whereas humanity in and of itself spoils even the greatest of its good deeds by the impurity of sinfulness under which the actions take place, God's grace at work in the redeemed allows him to 'recognize in them his own righteousness' at work.<sup>47</sup> This is purely on account of the believer's union with Christ,<sup>48</sup> yet Calvin also affirms that no one can will any good (in a true theological sense) without the ministry of the Holy Spirit.<sup>49</sup> It is significant that Calvin interchangeably attributes this life that amounts to virtue both to Christ and the Spirit. This is not theological confusion on his part but rather demonstration of a precise understanding of sanctification which necessarily links the ongoing work of the Spirit to the finished work of Christ through the unifying of the believer to Christ.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Calvin, *Colossians*, 3:14: 'That he may commend it [love] the more, he calls it the *bond of perfection*, meaning by this, that the troop of all the virtues is comprehended under it.'

<sup>45</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 8:9.

<sup>46</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 8:10: '[T]he power of quickening is in the Spirit of Christ, which will be effectual in swallowing up our mortality. He [Paul] hence concludes that we must patiently wait until the relics of sin be entirely abolished.'

<sup>47</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.15.3.

<sup>48</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.16.1.

<sup>49</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.2.27. For that matter, no one can even be united to Christ apart from the Holy Spirit. Cf. *Institutes*, III.1.1; III.2.34. See also Gaffin, 'Union with Christ', pp. 273-74.

<sup>50</sup> The role of faith in this relationship is especially significant, but due to present space restrictions, a single pertinent observation must suffice. Even

But why must these two aspects come together? Is it not possible that the Spirit's work of reconciliation might be equally effective without going through the trouble of establishing union with Christ as the material principle? In short, no, and Kathryn Tanner provides the relevant logic. Her concern is the Modernist division between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. She specifically focuses on Schleiermacher and Bultmann and sees the root of her unease in the former, though she acknowledges that he did not explicitly make the present distinction.<sup>51</sup> Schleiermacher follows Kant's 'subjectivist epistemological swerve'<sup>52</sup> and thereby reduces theological discussion of Christ to the 'nature of Christian piety itself'. The historical Jesus becomes a theological means of referring to the 'humiliation of Jesus', while the seemingly ahistorical resurrection speaks to the exaltation of Christ.<sup>53</sup> Ultimately, the historical has no significance in itself but rather is caught up in the larger theological enterprise to generate God-consciousness.<sup>54</sup>

Tanner sees Bultmann as carrying this tradition further by defining the 'Holy Spirit's relation to Jesus Christ simply in terms of human response to or apprehension of what has happened in Christ'. This is significant because 'what were different aspects of the order of reality by which humans are saved (say, saving acts for us in Christ and their actually becoming ours by way of the Holy Spirit) are now divided up between the objective (the events of Jesus' life and death) and the subjective (the experiential responses to them in human life)'. Tanner contends that this shifts soteriology from the saving 'efficacy of Christ' to the personal 'human experience' based on the 'fact' of Jesus. In turn this changes the crux of Christology to the individual proclamation, which then provides significance to the historical Jesus and his death, rather than *vice versa*.<sup>55</sup>

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with regards to faith, Calvin refuses to separate union with Christ and the ministry of the Spirit: 'Christ, when he illumines us into faith by the power of his Spirit, at the same time so engrafts us into his body that we becomes partakers of every good.' *Institutes*, III.2.35; cf. III.1.4.

<sup>51</sup> Kathryn Tanner, 'Jesus Christ', *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. by Colin E. Gunton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 270, n. 18.

<sup>52</sup> See Tanner, 'Jesus Christ', p. 253.

<sup>53</sup> Tanner, 'Jesus Christ', p. 258.

<sup>54</sup> Tanner, 'Jesus Christ', p. 259.

<sup>55</sup> Tanner, 'Jesus Christ', p. 259. She rightly criticizes that this subjectivist turn devalues a unique Christian gospel: 'But now if Jesus in so far as he is a historical person is not the sort of thing upon which one can feel absolutely dependent, the redemptive activity of Jesus that brings about the development of Christian God-consciousness should have, accordingly, only a rela-

Consequently, each person of the Trinity becomes diminished.<sup>56</sup> It should already be evident how this is so for the person of Christ, for his objective work—or active obedience—depends upon a subjective proclamation. The lack of historical affirmation for the objective work of Christ minimizes—indeed, eliminates—its significance for a factual transference of Christ's benefits to those united to him. This effects justification and sanctification (in addition to the other benefits, such as adoption), for both are effective acts of grace that depend entirely upon God in Christ. As noted above, Calvin will not allow for anything good to come from fallen humanity (even redeemed yet still fallen humanity) apart from the believer's connection to Christ. Thus, union with Christ becomes the necessary<sup>57</sup> means by which people can develop and attain virtue because they are incapable by themselves. Union with Christ as material principle for the attainment of virtue is far from an arbitrary reality or generic foundation. It distinguishes a Christian conception of salvation and holy living precisely by tying excellence to the specific and historic work of God in Christ.

But the logic must come full circle, for the subjective turn also harms an appropriate understanding of the Spirit's relation to the work of Christ. Again, as Tanner highlights, '[T]he Holy Spirit becomes very difficult to distinguish from the spirit of a Christian form of life once the Holy Spirit is closely identified with subjective human appropriation or response.'<sup>58</sup> Conversely, the heart of Christian proclamation echoes—in some form—the words of Augustine: '[Y]ou [God] have made us for your own and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.'<sup>59</sup> The drama begins and ends with God, not with a human subjective response or anthropological concern. And it is the Holy Spirit who ministers the remedy of God and continues the work unto the perfection of those united to Christ.<sup>60</sup>

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tive primacy: those influenced by Jesus should be both free and dependent with respect to him. The dependence of Christianity on Christ would seem to be quite similar, then, to the ordinary dependence of any religion on its founding moment. This, however, is a far weaker sense of dependence than one usually finds in the claim of dependence for salvation on divine initiative in Christ' (p. 263).

<sup>56</sup> Tanner, 'Jesus Christ', p. 260.

<sup>57</sup> By 'necessary', I refer to that nuance by which Aquinas appeals to the most 'fitting' option given the course God has chosen for reality.

<sup>58</sup> Tanner, 'Jesus Christ', p. 261.

<sup>59</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions*, Carolinne White, trans. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 1:1,1.

<sup>60</sup> Tanner sees the opposite trend in Schleiermacher and Bultmann: 'Christian experience therefore seems to revolve around itself without any opening to

The Spirit's work is both dependent upon and distinct from the work of Christ, for the Spirit is the agent of transformation in conjunction with his administration of the benefits of Christ. The Spirit moves believers to the formation of good fruit and life more abundantly based on and in line with the objective reality of Christ.

But does this preclude any active participation by the individual towards cultivation of virtue? Is Otto Pesch's concern that Reformed theology only allows for the passive acceptance of grace to be fulfilled through obedience to the law rather than cultivation of virtue justified? Most certainly not, for the reconciliatory ministry of the Spirit based on union with Christ allows for a more robust idea of living in wisdom by not just 'living in the Spirit' but also 'walking in the Spirit' (Gal. 5:25), or as David Ford eloquently relates, the 'eschatological transcendence of God's future anticipated now in the Spirit'.<sup>61</sup> So, with the present matrix in place, we now have opportunity to sketch the appropriateness of a distinctly Reformation brand of theological virtue. Calvin provides the road sign by calling for 'reason [to] give way to, submit and subject itself to, the Holy Spirit so that the man himself may no longer live but hear Christ living and reigning within him'.<sup>62</sup> This appeal is dynamic by nature and requires life lived in the wisdom that flows from above (cf. Colossians).

But it is John Webster who must blaze the trail to which Calvin points. In his article 'God and Conscience', Webster provides an avenue by which we may affirm an active development of theological virtue, namely the conscience. He reminds, 'It is crucial ... that a theological depiction of conscience and its moral field be governed by the conviction that the Christian life is hidden with God in Christ'.<sup>63</sup> This echoes well Paul's concern in Colossians, where he begins his letter with his desire to see the believers grow in their knowledge of how God would have them live (1:9-10). The rest of the epistle testifies to their need for true wisdom (1:9; 3:16).

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the very divine initiative which these theologians nevertheless continue to affirm as the only remedy for human incapacity' ('Jesus Christ', p. 261).

<sup>61</sup> David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 212.

<sup>62</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.7.1.

<sup>63</sup> John Webster, 'God and Conscience', *Word and Church: Essays in Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh & New York: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 2001), p. 246. After all, the very existence of the Christian Church depends upon God and the working of his drama: 'But, for Christian faith, and thus for Christian dogmatics, the life of the church is not only "a new social reality" (though it is that) but a reality which is ingredient within the history of God's dealings with humanity and therefore something for whose description talk of God is primary' (p. 245).



But where is this wisdom? It is entirely in Christ (2:2-3). Furthermore, the problem with the false teachers that they had encountered—and, thus, their problem—was a lack of nourishment from the head, that is, Christ (2:16-19). Therefore, their wisdom was worthless (2:23). Conversely, Paul had high expectations of the believers precisely because they were united with Christ (1:21-23; 2:8-13; 3:1-3), and it was on this basis that they were to live worthily of the Lord (1:10).

In line with the present study, it is the Spirit who unites believers to Christ and the Spirit in whom Paul then urges believers to walk (Gal. 2:25). This admonition is to turn away from all other sources of living and to turn toward the one in whom is life. Again, the ministry of the Spirit is necessarily connected to the objective work of Christ, whose benefits flow to those united to him. Consciously walking in this Spirit is akin to drinking from the abundant steady flow of a faucet attached to a fire hydrant, for the Holy Spirit is the one massaging the benefits (the water itself in my metaphor) of Christ to shape the believer. He is the means by which those united to Christ grow in the knowledge of God and learn to live dynamically according to the 'storehouses of wisdom', Christ (Col. 2:2-3). As Kevin Vanhoozer rightly quips, 'God is the "doable knowable" and to know God is to know what to say and do to glorify him in any given situation or context'.<sup>64</sup>

Webster provides the final note by reminding that in the Christian life, all appropriate action and speech are reactive to God's speech,<sup>65</sup> or in this case to God's work in Christ. Sin renders humanity incapable of reliable self-judgment.<sup>66</sup> Consequently, Christianly considered, theological virtue must be about God grasping people and thrusting them toward excellence, shaping them by his Spirit to conformity at all times to Christ.<sup>67</sup> Christianly considered, theological virtue is about dying to self and allowing Christ to live in you through walking in the Spirit.

<sup>64</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, 'On the Very Idea of a Theological System: An Essay in Aid of Triangulating Scripture, Church and World', *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, ed. by A. T. B. McGowan (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), p. 177.

<sup>65</sup> Webster, 'God and Conscience', p. 251: 'God is not anonymous or indefinite, but named and purposive; our speech proceeds from our being addressed. And so, in conscience we do not relate to some Other, but to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to the Spirit of the living God.'

<sup>66</sup> Webster, 'God and Conscience', p. 257.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Webster, 'God and Conscience', pp. 259-60: 'Freedom of conscience is not freedom to 'choose' the good (a 'chosen' good no longer has the absoluteness of truth; it is a mere contingent reality, which I have annexed to my projection

## CONCLUSION

Ellen Charry offers keen insight from her study of Calvin: 'It is not so much that a teaching is profitable because it is orthodox but that it is orthodox because it is profitable, since God only does for us that which is profitable for us.'<sup>68</sup> This rings true generally, though we might more appropriately alter it to view two facets of a single reality: 'Teaching is profitable *because* it is orthodox just as teaching is orthodox *because* it is profitable.' There is a dialectical relationship between these two elements due to the dependence of each upon the reality of God as revealed in Christ and the benefits that flow to believers through union with him.<sup>69</sup> Both virtue and theological truth consist therein, for the objective reality of Christ's work becomes the basis of the Christian life as is fitting of reconciliation and re-creation. The nature of the Spirit's work to bring about this actuality relies first and foremost upon the triune work that is accomplished in the historic work of Christ. On this basis, the Holy Spirit works the redemptive effects in those caught up in the *theodrama*. These redemptive results are not limited simply to applying a past action but also to making the past work of Christ effective for the ongoing perfection of those united to Christ. That is to say, sanctification is a key benefit that comes from union with Christ, and it is the Holy Spirit who works this in situations anew daily. As John Webster points out, it is only because the Christian is hidden with God in Christ that she may live worthily of the Lord, for it is God who is at work imbuing the wisdom of Christ in believers as they walk in the Spirit. This heavenly wisdom allows for a dynamic life of excellence, or virtuousness, provided persistency in walking in the Spirit.

In addition to answering the dogmatic call for a Reformation-based pattern to speak of virtue, the present sketch also opens new doors for speaking of virtue relative to other doctrines: the relationship of faith to virtue; the role of the Father in the mandate to be virtuous and in the fulfilment of this charge; the eschatological dimension of virtue relative to that of original righteousness—is there a difference? Additionally, much remains in the realm of pneumatology with regards to the manner in which the Spirit leads the believer in wisdom in particular instances and the ongoing battle between flesh and spirit to shape the believer. The

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of myself in the world). The good chooses me; it annexes my projects to itself; it binds me, and thereby sets me free.'

<sup>68</sup> Charry, *Renewing of Your Minds*, p. 204.

<sup>69</sup> This altered formulation seems more accurately to capture Calvin's heart on the relationship between orthodoxy and profitability as well. For evidence to support my assertion, see my introduction above and the comments related to Calvin's response to Servetus, Osiander, and the Roman Church.

intention of the present study has been to locate dogmatically theological virtue relative to union with Christ and thus Reformation understandings of sin and grace. It is my hope that future studies further the current work to build bridges with Reformation thought.