

Sanctification in Calvin's Institutes

In his *Institutes*, Calvin had a great deal to say about the believer's sanctification, showing how highly it figured in his understanding of the gospel. Moreover, as he told us:

I have endeavoured [here in the *Institutes*] to give such a summary of religion in all its parts... Having thus... paved the way, I shall not feel it necessary, in any *Commentaries* on Scripture which I may afterwards publish, to enter into long discussions of doctrine... In this way, the pious reader will be saved much trouble and weariness, provided he comes furnished with a knowledge of the [*Institutes*] as an essential prerequisite... seeing that I have in a manner deduced at length all the articles which pertain to Christianity.¹

With that in mind, here is Calvin on the believer's sanctification,² according to his *Institutes*. For all his mistaken emphasis on the law, Calvin has given us some gems on both sanctification and holiness.

Calvin on sanctification

Under this heading, Calvin does not distinguish between positional and progressive sanctification, but I think the distinction is clear enough.

The pious soul has the best view of God, and may almost be said to handle him, when it feels that it is quickened, enlightened, saved, justified, and sanctified by him.

Our justification is his work; from him is power, sanctification, truth, grace, and every good thought, since it is from the Spirit alone that all good gifts proceed.

¹ Calvin: *Institutes* in his prefixed explanations for the work dated 1539 and 1545.

² I have not specified the location of these extracts. The simplest way to unearth them is to search a pdf of Calvin's *Institutes* (on, for example, ntslibrary.com).

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The Old Testament is the name given to the solemn method of confirming the covenant comprehended under ceremonies and sacrifices. Since there is nothing substantial in it [the old covenant], until we look beyond it, the [inspired writer] contends that it behoved to be annulled and become antiquated (Heb. 7:22), to make room for Christ, the surety and mediator of a better covenant, by whom the eternal sanctification of the elect was once purchased, and the transgressions, which remained under the law, [were] wiped away.

There is no access to God for us or for our prayers until the priest, purging away our defilements, sanctifies us, and obtains for us that favour of which the impurity of our lives and hearts deprives us. Thus we see, that if the benefit and efficacy of Christ's priesthood is to reach us, the commencement must be with his death.

For we, though in ourselves polluted, in him being priests (Rev. 1:6), offer ourselves and our all to God, and freely enter the heavenly sanctuary, so that the sacrifices of prayer and praise which we present are grateful and of sweet odour before him. To this effect are the words of Christ: 'For their sakes I sanctify myself' (John 17:19); for being clothed with his holiness, inasmuch as he has devoted us to the Father with himself (otherwise we were an abomination before him), we please him as if we were pure and clean, indeed, even sacred.

'When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive' (Eph. 4:8). Spoiling his foes, he gave gifts to his people, and daily loads them with spiritual riches. He thus occupies his exalted seat that, thence transferring his virtue unto us, he may quicken us to spiritual life, sanctify us by his Spirit, and adorn his church with various graces.

Christ came provided with the Holy Spirit after a peculiar manner; namely, that he might separate us from the world, and unite us in the hope of an eternal inheritance. Hence the Spirit is called the Spirit of sanctification, because he quickens and cherishes us... because he is the seed and root of heavenly life in us.

Since faith embraces Christ as he is offered by the Father, and he is offered not only for justification, for forgiveness of sins and peace, but also for sanctification, as the fountain of living

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waters, it is certain that no man will ever know him aright without at the same time receiving the sanctification of the Spirit; or, to express the matter more plainly, faith consists in the knowledge of Christ; Christ cannot be known without the sanctification of his Spirit.

The Spirit of the Lord... *first*, that he is given to us for sanctification that he may purge us from all iniquity and defilement, and bring us to the obedience of divine righteousness... *secondly* that, though purged by his sanctification, we are still beset by many vices and much weakness, so long as we are enclosed in the prison of the body. Thus it is that, placed at a great distance from perfection, we must always be endeavouring to make some progress, and daily struggling with the evil by which we are entangled. Hence, too, it follows, that, shaking off sloth and security, we must be intently vigilant. A complete summary of the gospel is included under these two heads – *viz.* repentance and the remission of sins. Do we not see that the Lord justifies his people freely, and at the same time renews them to true holiness by the sanctification of his Spirit?

[Christ] alone ought to be preached, alone held forth, alone named, alone looked to, whenever the subject considered is the obtaining of the forgiveness of sins, expiation, and sanctification.

Being sanctified by his Spirit, we aspire to integrity and purity of life.

As Christ cannot be divided into parts, so the two things, justification and sanctification, which we perceive to be united together in him, are inseparable... Those whom God freely regards as righteous, he in fact renews to the cultivation of righteousness... Scripture, while combining both, classes them separately, that it may the better display the manifold grace of God. Nor is Paul's statement superfluous, that Christ is made unto us 'righteousness and sanctification' (1 Cor. 1:30). And whenever he argues from the salvation procured for us, from the paternal love of God and the grace of Christ, that we are called to purity and holiness, he plainly intimates that to be justified is something else than to be made new creatures.

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There is no sanctification without union with Christ... The most splendid works performed by men, who are not yet truly sanctified, are so far from being righteous in the sight of the Lord, that he regards them as sins.

Why, then, are we justified by faith? Because by faith we apprehend the righteousness of Christ, which alone reconciles us to God. This faith, however, you cannot apprehend without at the same time apprehending sanctification; for Christ 'is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption' (1 Cor. 1:30). Christ, therefore, justifies no man without also sanctifying him. These blessings are conjoined by a perpetual and inseparable tie. Those whom he enlightens by his wisdom he redeems; whom he redeems he justifies; whom he justifies he sanctifies. But as the question relates only to justification and sanctification, to them let us confine ourselves. Though we distinguish between them, they are both inseparably comprehended in Christ. Would you then obtain justification in Christ? You must previously possess Christ. But you cannot possess him without being made a partaker of his sanctification: for Christ cannot be divided. Since the Lord, therefore, does not grant us the enjoyment of these blessings without bestowing himself, he bestows both at once but never the one without the other. Thus it appears how true it is that we are justified not without, and yet not by, works, since in the participation of Christ, by which we are justified, is contained not less sanctification than justification.

'For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that you should abstain' from all illicit desires: ours is a 'holy calling', and we respond not to it except by purity of life. 'Being then made free from sin, you became the servants of righteousness'. Can there be a stronger argument in eliciting [from] us [the response of] love than that of John? 'If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another'. 'In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever does not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loves not his brother'. Similar is the argument of Paul: 'Know you not that your bodies are the members of Christ?' 'For as the body is one, and has many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ'. Can there be a stronger incentive to holiness than when we are told by John: 'Every man that has this hope in him purifies himself; even as he is pure'? and by Paul:

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'Having, therefore, these promises, dearly beloved, cleanse yourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit?' or when we hear our Saviour hold forth himself as an example to us that we should follow his steps?

There will be no impropriety in considering holiness of life as the way, not indeed the way which gives access to the glory of the heavenly kingdom, but a way by which God conducts his elect to the manifestation of that kingdom, since his good pleasure is to glorify those whom he has sanctified (Rom. 8:30).

But as the Lord seals his elect by calling and justification, so by excluding the reprobate either from the knowledge of his name or the sanctification of his Spirit, he by these marks in a manner discloses the judgment which awaits them.

I have observed that the Scriptures speak of the church in two ways. Sometimes when they speak of the church they mean the church as it really is before God – the church into which none are admitted but those who by the gift of adoption are sons of God, and by the sanctification of the Spirit true members of Christ. In this case it not only comprehends the saints who dwell on the earth, but all the elect who have existed from the beginning of the world.

The whole human race was vitiated and corrupted by the sin of Adam, yet of this kind of polluted mass [God] always sanctifies some vessels to honour, that no age may be left without experience of his mercy.

Let us surely hold that if we are admitted and ingrafted into the body of the church, the forgiveness of sins has been bestowed, and is daily bestowed on us, in divine liberality, through the intervention of Christ's merits, and the sanctification of the Spirit.

It is true, therefore, that the church is sanctified by Christ, but here the commencement of her sanctification only is seen; the end and entire completion will be effected when Christ, the holy of holies, shall truly and completely fill her with his holiness.

Regeneration we obtain from [Christ's] death and resurrection only, when sanctified by his Spirit we are imbued with a new and spiritual [heart, mind, will, disposition, being made a new

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creature].³ Wherefore we obtain, and in a manner distinctly perceive, in the Father the cause, in the Son the matter, and in the Spirit the effect of our purification and regeneration.

None of the elect is called away from the present life without being previously sanctified and regenerated by the Spirit of God.

Redemption, justification, sanctification, eternal life, and all other benefits which Christ bestows upon us.

[Since], on the cross, [Christ] offered himself in sacrifice that he might sanctify us for ever, and purchase eternal redemption for us, undoubtedly the power and efficacy of his sacrifice continues without end.

'Now once in the end of the world has he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself'. Again: 'By the which will⁴ we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all'. Again: 'For by one offering he has perfected for ever them that are sanctified'. To this he subjoins the celebrated passage: 'Now, where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin'. The same thing Christ intimated by his latest voice, when, on giving up the ghost, he exclaimed: 'It is finished'. We are accustomed to observe the last words of the dying as oracular. Christ, when dying, declares, that by his one sacrifice is perfected and fulfilled whatever was necessary to our salvation.

Christ is God and man: God, that he may bestow on his people righteousness, sanctification, and redemption; man, because he had to pay the debt of man.

We receive Christ the Redeemer by the power of the Holy Spirit, who unites us to Christ; and, therefore, he is called the Spirit of sanctification and adoption, the earnest and seal of our salvation.

The elect are called by the preaching of the word and the illumination of the Holy Spirit, are justified, and sanctified, that they may at length be glorified.

³ Calvin had 'nature'.

⁴ Calvin had 'act'.

As I indicated at the very start of this volume, a great deal hangs upon the translation of words like 'sanctification' and 'holiness'. Here is a sample of what Calvin had to say on holiness.

Calvin on holiness

See what particulars Paul comprehends under this renovation. In the first place, he mentions knowledge, and in the second, true righteousness and holiness.

Christ is the most perfect image of God, into which we are so renewed as to bear the image of God in knowledge, purity, righteousness, and true holiness.

[The natural] man... is now an exile from the kingdom of God, so that all things which pertain to the blessed life of the soul are extinguished in him until he recover them by the grace of regeneration. Among these are faith, love to God, love towards our neighbour, the study of righteousness and holiness.

What is said as to the Spirit dwelling in believers only, is to be understood of the Spirit of holiness by which we are consecrated to God as temples.

God enjoins meekness, submission, love, chastity, piety, and holiness, and... forbids anger, pride, theft, uncleanness, idolatry.

Innumerable passages testify that every degree of purity, piety, holiness, and justice, which we possess, is his gift.

When God erects his kingdom in [the godly], he, by means of his Spirit, curbs their will, that it may not follow its natural bent, and be carried hither and thither by vagrant lusts; bends, frames, trains, and guides it according to the rule of his justice, so as to incline it to righteousness and holiness, and establishes and strengthens it by the energy of his Spirit, that it may not stumble or fall.

The only legitimate service to [God] is the practice of justice, purity, and holiness.

Seeing that an eternal priesthood is assigned to [Christ], it is clear that the priesthood in which there was a daily succession

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of priests is abolished. And [the inspired writer] proves that the institution of this new priest must prevail, because confirmed by an oath. He afterwards adds that a change of the priest necessarily led to a change of the covenant. And the necessity of this he confirms by the reason, that the weakness of the law was such, that it could make nothing perfect. He then goes on to show in what this weakness consists, namely, that it had external carnal observances which could not render the worshippers perfect in respect of conscience, because its sacrifices of beasts could neither take away sins nor procure true holiness. He therefore concludes that it was a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, and accordingly had no other office than to be an introduction to the better hope which is exhibited in the gospel.

[Christ has] received power from the Father to forgive sins; as to his quickening whom he will; as to his bestowing righteousness, holiness, and salvation.

A man is justified freely by faith alone, and yet that holiness of life, real holiness, as it is called, is inseparable from the free imputation of righteousness.

The Holy Spirit, instilling his holiness into our souls, so inspired them with new thoughts and affections, that they may justly be regarded as new.

'Be renewed in the spirit of your minds' and 'put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness'. Again: 'Put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him'.

The image of God [consists] in righteousness and true holiness.

We can now understand what are the fruits of repentance – *viz.* offices of piety towards God, and love towards men, general holiness and purity of life.

When mention is made of our union with God, let us remember that holiness must be the bond; not that by the merit of holiness we come into communion with him (we ought rather first to cleave to him, in order that, pervaded with his holiness, we may follow whither he calls), but because it greatly concerns his glory not to have any fellowship with wickedness and impurity. Wherefore he tells

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us that this is the end of our calling, the end to which we ought ever to have respect, if we would answer the call of God.

The spiritual commencement of a good life is when the internal affections are sincerely devoted to God, in the cultivation of holiness and justice.

Godliness... separates us from the pollutions of the world, and connects us with God in true holiness... by an indissoluble chain [that] constitute[s] complete perfection. But as nothing is more difficult than to bid adieu to the will of the flesh, subdue – indeed, abjure – our lusts, devote ourselves to God and our brethren, and lead a [spiritual] life amid the pollutions of the world, Paul, to set our minds free from all entanglements, recalls us to the hope of a blessed immortality, justly urging us to contend, because as Christ has once appeared as our Redeemer, so [at] his final advent he will give full effect to the salvation obtained by him.

We are called to purity and holiness.

God by his Spirit forms us anew to holiness and righteousness of life.

Christians... are [those] regenerated by the Spirit of God, and aspire to true holiness.

We have been 'delivered out of the hands of our enemies', that we 'might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life'; that being 'made free from sin', we 'become the servants of righteousness'; 'that our old man is crucified with him', in order that we might rise to newness of life. Again: 'If you then be risen with Christ (as becomes his members), seek those things which are above', living as pilgrims in the world, and aspiring to heaven, where our treasure is. 'The grace of God has appeared to all men, bringing salvation and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ'. 'For God has not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ'. 'Know you not that you are the temple of the Holy Spirit', which it were impious to profane? 'You

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were sometimes darkness, but now are you light in the Lord: walk as the children of light'.

'God has not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness'. 'For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that you should abstain' from all illicit desires: ours is a 'holy calling', and we respond not to it except by purity of life. 'Being then made free from sin, you became the servants of righteousness'. Can there be a stronger argument in eliciting [from] us [the response of] love than that of John? 'If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another'. 'In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever does not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loves not his brother'. Similar is the argument of Paul: 'Know you not that your bodies are the members of Christ?' 'For as the body is one, and has many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ'. Can there be a stronger incentive to holiness than when we are told by John: 'Every man that has this hope in him purifies himself; even as he is pure'? and by Paul: 'Having, therefore, these promises, dearly beloved, cleanse yourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit'? or when we hear our Saviour hold forth himself as an example to us that we should follow his steps? I have given these few passages merely as a specimen; for were I to go over them all, I should form a large volume. All the apostles abound in exhortations, admonitions and rebukes, for the purpose of training the man of God to every good work, and that without any mention of merit. Indeed, rather their chief exhortations are founded on the fact that, without any merit of ours, our salvation depends entirely on the mercy of God. Thus Paul, who during a whole letter had maintained that there was no hope of life for us save in the righteousness of Christ, when he comes to exhortations beseeches us by the mercy which God has bestowed upon us (Rom. 12:1). And indeed this one reason ought to have been sufficient, that God may be glorified in us. But if any are not so ardently desirous to promote the glory of God, still the remembrance of his kindness is most sufficient to incite them to do good. But those men, because, by introducing the idea of merit... falsely allege that as we do not adopt the same course, we have no means of exhorting to good works... We are justified solely by the merits of Christ as apprehended by faith, and not by any merit of works; [and] the study of piety can be fitly

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prosecuted only by those by whom this doctrine has been previously imbibed [and experienced]. This is beautifully intimated by the Psalmist when he thus addresses God: 'There is forgiveness with you, that you may be feared' (Ps. 130:4). For he shows that the worship of God cannot exist without acknowledging his mercy, on which it is founded and established. This is specially deserving of notice, as showing us not only that the beginning of the due worship of God is confidence in his mercy; but that the fear of God... cannot be entitled to the name of merit, for this reason, that it is founded on the pardon and remission of sins. But the most futile calumny of all is, that men are invited to sin when we affirm that the life of believers, when formed to holiness and justice, is said, not without cause, to be pleasing to him.

There will be no impropriety in considering holiness of life as the way, not indeed the way which gives access to the glory of the heavenly kingdom; but a way by which God conducts his elect to the manifestation of that kingdom, since his good pleasure is to glorify those whom he has sanctified (Rom. 8:30).

The whole lives of Christians ought to be a kind of aspiration after piety, seeing they are called unto holiness (Eph. 1:4; 1 Thess. 4:5).

A good conscience... is a lively inclination to serve God, a sincere desire to live in piety and holiness.

No heart will ever rise to genuine prayer that does not at the same time long for holiness.

Holiness of life springs from election, and is the object of it.

For when it is said that believers were elected that they might be holy, it is at the same time intimated that the holiness which was to be in them has its origin in election.

The end for which we are elected is 'that we should be holy, and without blame before him' (Eph. 1:4). If the end of election is holiness of life, it ought to arouse and stimulate us strenuously to aspire to it, instead of serving as a pretext for sloth. How wide the difference between the two things, between ceasing from well-doing because election is sufficient for salvation, and its being the very end of election, that we should devote ourselves to the study of good works.

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[Paul] connects the resurrection with chastity and holiness, as he shortly after includes our bodies in the purchase of redemption.

There always have been persons who, imbued with a false persuasion of absolute holiness, [act] as if they had already become a kind of aerial spirits.

[The church's] holiness is not yet perfect. Such, then, is the holiness of the church: it makes daily progress, but is not yet perfect; it daily advances, but as yet has not reached the goal... Let us not understand it as if no blemish remained in the members of the church, but only that with their whole heart they aspire after holiness and perfect purity.

Whatever be the holiness which the children of God possess, it is always under the condition, that so long as they dwell in a mortal body, they cannot stand before God without forgiveness of sins.

The church is sanctified by Christ, but here the commencement of her sanctification only is seen; the end and entire completion will be effected when Christ, the holy of holies, shall truly and completely fill her with his holiness. It is true also, that her stains and wrinkles have been effaced, but so that the process is continued every day until Christ, at his advent, will entirely remove every remaining defect.

His will is to us the perfect rule of all righteousness and holiness, and that thus in the knowledge of it we have a perfect rule of life.

[The new covenant]⁵ comprehend[s] forgiveness of sins and the spirit of holiness.

God enters into covenant with us, and we become bound to holiness and purity of life, because a mutual stipulation is here interposed between God and us.

Christ was sanctified from earliest infancy, that he might sanctify his elect in himself... For as he, in order to wipe away the guilt of disobedience which had been committed in our

⁵ Calvin had 'the covenant of grace', a non-biblical term which, within a few years of Calvin, was warped by covenant theologians and woven into their scholastic scheme.

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flesh, assumed that very flesh, that in it he might, on our account, and in our stead, perform a perfect obedience, so he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, that, completely pervaded with his holiness in the flesh which he had assumed, he might transfuse it into us.

The Lord intended it to be a kind of exhortation... both to purity and holiness of life, and also to love, peace, and concord.

With zeal for purity and holiness [the believer] aspires to imitate Christ.