

# 1. John Hesselink

## “Calvin on the Proper Attitude Toward This Life and the Next”<sup>1</sup>

### *Introduction*

**T**ucked in the midst of Calvin’s lengthy discussion of regeneration, faith, sanctification, and justification in Book III of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is a discussion of the Christian life—chapters 6-10. They make up what is almost an independent unit which contains some of the most beautiful passages in the *Institutes*, so much so that an earlier version of this portion of the *Institutes* was published separately as *The Golden Booklet of the Christian Life*. This is based on the 1550 edition of the *Institutes* and was first published in English in 1549. It is still in print in English<sup>2</sup> and has been published in several other languages.

“In five chapters Calvin gives a brief directory for the Christian life that is balanced, penetrating and practical.”<sup>3</sup> Henry Van Andel, the American translator, goes even further and maintains that

There is no other devotional book in the world like the Golden Booklet which is so profound and yet so universal. As to style, spirit, and graphic language it can vie with the great classics, like Augustine’s *Confessions*, Thomas à Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*, and Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Only it is shorter, saner, sounder, more vigorous and to the point.<sup>4</sup>

Such praise may be extravagant, but it at least points to the merit of this portion of the *Institutes* that has not received enough attention either by Calvin scholars or the public.

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<sup>1</sup> 2009. október 21-én és 22-én a Sárospataki Református Teológiai Akadémia az Osterhaven tanulmányi napok sorozatában megrendezett nemzetközi Kálvin-konferencián és Nagy Barna-émlékülésen elhangzott előadás szerkesztett változata.

<sup>2</sup> In modern times it was translated by Henry J. Van Andel from the French and the Latin by Baker Book House in 1952 and has been reprinted many times since then.

<sup>3</sup> John T. Mc Neill, Introduction to Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by Mc Neill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), lx.

<sup>4</sup> Preface to the *Golden Booklet*, 4.

### ***I. The Life of the Christian***

I shall be quoting from the final 1559 edition of the *Institutes* which differs slightly from the version published as *The Golden Booklet of the Christian Life*. The greatest differences are in the shorter titles given by the translator of *The Golden Booklet*. For example he titles Chapter I “Humble Obedience, the True Imitation of Christ,” whereas the title of the equivalent chapter in the *Institutes* (Book III, Chapter 6) reads: “The Life of the Christian Man; and First, by What Arguments Scripture Urges Us to It.” Chapter VII is on “The Sum of the Christian Life: The Denial of Ourselves”; Chapter VIII, “Bearing the Cross, A Part of Self-Denial”; Chapter IX, “Meditation on the Future Life”; and Chapter X, “How We Must Use the Present Life and Its Helps.”

The focus of this lecture is on the last two chapters, which I shall discuss in that order, despite the title of this lecture. Before proceeding to the topic at hand, however, I want to quote at length one of the most eloquent passages in this part of the *Institutes*. It is an illustration of rhetoric at its best, in this case the repetition of the phrases “We are not our own . . . we are God’s.” This is based on two texts: Romans 12:1 and 2: “. . . present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. . . ; and 1 Corinthians 6:19: “. . . you are not your own.” Then follows one of the most frequently quoted passages from the *Institutes*:

Now the great thing is this: we are consecrated and dedicated to God in order that we may thereafter think, speak, meditate, and do, nothing except to his glory. For a sacred thing may not be applied to profane uses without marked injury to him.

If we, then, are not our own [cf. 1 Cor. 6:19] but the Lord’s, it is clear what error we must flee, and whither we must direct all the acts of our life.

We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours.

Conversely, we are God’s: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God’s: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God’s: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal [Rom. 14:8; cf. 1 Cor. 6:19]. O, how much has that man profited who, having been taught that he is not his own, has taken away dominion and rule from his own reason that he may yield it to God! For, as consulting our self-interest is the pestilence that most effectively leads to our destruction, so the sole haven of salvation is to be wise in nothing and to will nothing through ourselves but to follow the leading of the Lord alone.

Let this therefore be the first step, that a man depart from himself in order that he may apply the whole force of his ability in the service of the

Lord. I call “service” not only what lies in obedience to God’s Word but what turns the mind of man, empty of its own carnal sense, wholly to the bidding of God’s Spirit. While it is the first entrance to life, all philosophers were ignorant of this transformation, which Paul calls “renewal of the mind” [Eph. 4:23]. For they set up reason alone as the ruling principle in man, and think that it alone should be listened to; to it alone, in short, they entrust the conduct of life. But the Christian philosophy bids reason give way to, submit and subject itself to, the Holy Spirit so that the man himself may no longer live but bear Christ living and reigning within him [Gal. 2:20], *Inst.* III.7.1.<sup>5</sup>

The distinguished Reformation historian, Wilhelm Pauck, concludes, “One may say that this passage can serve as a motto for the entire interpretation of the Christian life that Calvin offers in the *Institutes*.”<sup>6</sup>

This eloquent passage only serves as an introduction to my subject, viz., Calvin’s perspective on this life and the life to come. I am not following the order suggested by my topic, however, but rather following the order in the last two chapters of the “Golden Booklet” and the final edition of the *Institutes*, i.e., “Meditation on the Future Life” (Chapter IX), and “How We Must Use the Present Life and Its Helps” (Chapter X).

The former chapter has received considerable attention, sometimes negatively because on the surface it seems to cast Calvin in an otherworldly light. Worse, that it seems to confirm the negative images of the reformer as a person who had a negative view of humanity and this world. The latter chapter is brief and has been largely ignored. This is most unfortunate because it is a necessary balance to Chapter IX and provides a positive, life-affirming view rarely recognized in popular Calvin studies. My main purpose in this lecture is to redress that imbalance.

## **II. Chapter 9: “Meditation on the Future Life”**

### *A. Meaning of meditation (meditation or practice?)*

The first problem we face here is not some of the negative passages found in the chapter but the translation of the title itself. The Latin reads “*De meditatione futurae vitae*.” The obvious translation would appear to be the standard English one “*Meditation on the Future Life*” (accent mine), and so it is translated by Allen, Beveridge, and Battles. The French title is similar: “*De la Meditation de la vie à venir*” and is also translated as ‘meditation’ in the new translation of the 1541 French edition by Elsie Mc Kee.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, almost

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<sup>5</sup> The Battles translation of the last sentence is awkward (“but *hear* Christ living and reigning”). The word translated ‘hear’ should probably be ‘bear’ (*ferat*). The Beveridge translation reads: “But Christian philosophy makes her [reason] move aside and give complete submission to the Holy Spirit, so that the individual no longer reigns, but Christ lives and reigns in him.”

<sup>6</sup> *The Heritage of the Reformation* (Glencoe: The Free Press, revised and enlarged edition, 1961), 67.

<sup>7</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1541 French Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 702. In this edition, however, there is just one long chapter “On the Christian

all of the translations of *meditation* in Calvin's commentaries read what appears to be obvious, viz., "meditation."

Scholars, however, in western Europe—at least in Germany and the Netherlands—seem to be averse to what appears to us in the English-speaking world as the obvious translation. For example, Otto Weber in the standard German translation of the *Institutes* translates the title this way: "Vom Trachten nach dem zukünftigen Leben"<sup>8</sup>—"On the Striving After the Future Life"; and a leading Dutch Calvin scholar, Willem Balke, in an article "Calvin's opvatting van de meditatie"<sup>9</sup> asks "What does Calvin mean by the word 'meditatie'?" He concedes that the word is usually translated 'overdenking', but adds that this is a great misunderstanding, for it suggests a "pious meditation (*overpeinzing*), whereas Calvin, a man of the Renaissance, would have been influenced by classical writers such as Virgil who would translate 'meditatio' as 'oefening,' i.e., exercise, practice or training. Balke, accordingly, proposes that the title of Chapter IX should be "The Practice of the Future Life," for what Calvin teaches here is not some introverted introspection but "the practice (or exercise) of faith today in the midst of life and of the world."<sup>10</sup>

I understand Balke's concern. He does not want Calvin to be viewed as an otherworldly ascetic or self-centered pietist. Nevertheless, in English to speak of the 'practice' or 'exercise' of the spiritual life—or the German the 'striving after' the spiritual life—doesn't speak meaningfully to me or most English-speaking scholars.<sup>11</sup> Let the text speak for itself and I think it will yield an accurate portrayal of what Calvin means by '*meditatio*.'

#### B. A medieval notion?

Admittedly there are passages in this chapter that have a very pessimistic medieval ring. Note, for example, how he begins Chapter IX: "Whatever kind of tribulation presses upon us, we must ever look to this end: to accustom ourselves to contempt (*contemptum*) for the present life and to be aroused thereby to meditate upon the future life." Later in this section he refers again to "contempt for the present life" and speaks of "the vanity of the present life" and its "miseries" (*Inst.* III.9.1).

Later he sounds even more negative:

If heaven is our homeland, what else is the earth but our place of exile?  
If departure from the world is entry into life, what else is the world but a  
sepulcher? And what else is it for us to remain in life but to be immersed

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Life," which concludes the *Institutes* and is not divided into sub-chapters as in "The Golden Booklet" and editions from 1555 to 1560.

<sup>8</sup> There is a perfectly good German word for 'meditation,' viz., "Nach-sinnen!"

<sup>9</sup> In the book *Johannes Calvijn. Zijn leven, zijn Werk*, Willem Balke, Jan C. Klok, and Willem van't Spijker editors (Kampen: Kok, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> *Johannes Calvijn*, 332. I am translating from the Dutch.

<sup>11</sup> I have found only one place where '*meditatio*' is translated as 'exercise.' In his commentary on Luke 16:8 Calvin writes, "The heathen are more industrious in taking care of this fleeting world" than "God's children are in caring for the heavenly and eternal life, or making it their study and *exercise (studium et meditationem)*," T. H. L. Parker translation.

in death? . . . . Therefore, if the earthly life be compared with the heavenly, it is doubtless to be at once despised and trampled under foot (III.9.4).

But then Calvin immediately adds an important warning which sets the above dour comments in perspective. For he continues, “Of course it [this earthly life] is never to be hated except in so far as it holds us subject to sin.” However, he seems to take back what he has just said, for he concludes this section (IX.4) with these grim words: “In comparison with the world to come, let us despise this life and long to renounce it, on account of the bondage of sin, whenever it shall please the Lord.”

Three things can be said in regard to these pessimistic statements and the seeming contradictory remark in regard to them. First, note that it is in *contrast* to the heavenly life that this life seems so grim. Calvin, as we shall see is not all that negative about our earthly existence, but over against heavenly existence it is bound to appear in a negative light. Second, it is due to “the bondage of sin” that this life is “a vale of tears.” God’s creation of humanity and the world was good. After the fall life becomes hard and miserable (see Genesis 3:16-19) and even the creation is “groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now” (Romans 8:22). When viewed from the perspective of Christ’s victory over sin, death, and the devil, the world and all its troubles can be seen in a different light. Third, we must understand Calvin’s negative remarks in the context of his culture. Life in the sixteenth century—and even more so in earlier times—was hard and precarious. Plagues such as the Bubonic Plague, which came to be known as “The Black Death” is estimated to have killed three-fourths of the populations of Europe and Asia in the fifteenth century.<sup>12</sup> In his own time Calvin courageously risked his life to minister to members of his congregation who were stricken with a very contagious deadly disease.

There is also another passage in Chapter IX where Calvin warns at greater length and with a different argumentation concerning the danger of having a one-sided view of this life.

The contempt which believers should train themselves to feel for this life must not make them hate it or be ungrateful to God. This life is so full of unhappiness, but we must also recognize it as a blessing from God. If we do not recognize God’s kindness to us, we are indeed ungrateful . . . . We are aware of God as Father by . . . the blessings he showers on us each day. So since this life makes us acquainted with the goodness of God, we must not scorn it as though it contained nothing good . . . . When we have discovered that our earthly life is a gift of God’s mercy, which we

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<sup>12</sup> Calvin is not unusual in taking a dim view of this life at times. In the famous devotional classic, *The Imitation of Christ*, written by Thomas à Kempis a century earlier, we find the same outlook. The title of Chapter 20 reads, Acknowledging Our Weakness and the Miseries of This Life,” version edited and translated by Joseph N. Tylenda, S. J. (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 1998), 104.

need to remember with gratitude, we can then come to assessing its wretchedness accurately (*Inst.* III.9.3).<sup>13</sup>

“In other words, earthly life deserves nothing but contempt when balanced against the future life; but inasmuch as it is the school through which we must pass to attain the life beyond and in which we begin to taste the blessings of God, it reveals itself on the contrary as a ‘gift of divine mercy.’”<sup>14</sup>

Already it is apparent that despite the negative references to this life and its “infinite miseries,” Calvin also sees life in this world in the light of God’s grace and fatherly mercy. Hence he cannot be written off as an otherworldly pessimist who is representative of the worst side of the medieval outlook on life. In this chapter in the *Institutes* there are also passages that are very positive. For example,

We begin in this life, through various benefits, to taste the sweetness<sup>15</sup> of the divine generosity in order to whet our hope and desire to seek after the full revelation of this. When we are certain that the earthly life we live is a gift of God’s kindness, as we are beholden to him for it we ought to remember it and be thankful (*Inst.* III.9.3).

### C. *The biblical basis for this perspective*

Although the language is extreme at times, for example when Calvin speaks of our bodies as “defective, corruptible, fleeting, wasting, rotting tabernacles,” he is actually quite Pauline. The apostle doesn’t use such graphic language, but he also speaks of “this body of death” (Romans 7:24).

Calvin refers to many New Testament texts in this chapter in the *Institutes*, but ironically a key passage which could be ‘the’ text for the theme of meditating on the future life is never mentioned here, viz., Colossians 3:1: “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.”<sup>16</sup>

In Calvin’s commentary on this passage we find echoes of what we have found in the *Institutes*. “Paul here,” Calvin says, “exhorts the Colossians to meditation on the future life . . . . If we are members of Christ, we must ascend into heaven . . . . Now we seek those things which are above when in our minds we are truly sojourners in this world and are not bound to it.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Here I am using the modernized version of the Beveridge translation by Tony Lane and Hilary Osborne (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 172-3.

<sup>14</sup> Francois Wendel, *Calvin. Origins and Development of His Religious Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 252.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin frequently refers to the ‘sweetness’ (*suavitas*) of God’s goodness and grace. Another illustration of this is in an earlier section (III.9.2) where he speaks of the “pleasantness, grace and sweetness” of the present life. In section 6 of this chapter Calvin also speaks of the “sweetness of his [God’s] delights” in the heavenly life.

<sup>16</sup> He does cite Colossians 3:1 and 2 in four other places in the *Institutes*: II.16.13; IV.17.36; III.6.3; and III.16.2.

<sup>17</sup> Comm. Colossians 3:1. T. H. L. Parker translation. Calvin’s translation reads “set your mind on” rather than “seek the things that are above.” He says this phrase

There are a number of other Scripture texts that can be appealed to in support of this notion of meditating on the future life. Think, for example, of Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount: “Seek ye first his kingdom” (Matt. 6:33). As Calvin interprets this, “Whoever puts God’s kingdom in first place will only exercise himself over the provision of his food with moderate energy” (i.e., will not become preoccupied with concern about this life); for “nothing was ever better suited to put a brake on the appetite of the flesh . . . than meditation upon the life in heaven.”<sup>18</sup>

D. *Living sub specie aeternitatis*

Or take Philippians 3:20: “Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” In commenting on this text, the reformer does not speak of meditating on the future life or the life to come but rather “believers ought to lead a heavenly life in this world.”<sup>19</sup> Here we have a different accent. To meditate on the future life is not primarily to dream about the future, but to experience the future here and now in our everyday lives—a sort of realized eschatology.

Calvin continues his reflections on this text (Phil. 3:20) with comments that bear this out:

We are exposed to the common troubles of this life; we require also meat and drink and other necessities, but we must nevertheless exist (*versari*) in heaven in mind and affection. For, on the one hand, we must pass swiftly through this life, and, on the other hand, we must be dead to the world that Christ may live in us and that we, in turn, may live in him.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, we are to live in the light of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*). Calvin suggests this further in comments on some other texts. Concerning 2 Peter 3:14: “Anyone who hopes for new heavens will begin renewal within himself and will aspire to this with all his energy.”<sup>21</sup> And in a sermon on Matthew 27:11-26: “Although in this world we are poor, ill-starred creatures, may we never cease to rejoice in God from the foretaste he gives us by faith in the heavenly glory and of this inheritance which he has acquired at such a price and from the hope of which we can never be cheated.”<sup>22</sup>

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means “Let your whole meditation be on this; i.e., apply your abilities and mind.” This suggests that to meditate on the future life means more than simply lying back and reflecting on the life to come.

<sup>18</sup> Comm. On Matthew 6:33, A. W. Morrison translation. Here Calvin says that we are meditate on “life in heaven.” Elsewhere he says that we are to “meditate on holiness” (Comm. Romans 12:1); “on holy and profitable meditation on the proper regulation of life (*vitae rite formandae*)”; on the “blessed resurrection” (*Inst.* III.25.1); and even on “the life of the angels”! (*Inst.* III.7.3).

<sup>19</sup> Comm. Philippians 3:20, T. H. L. Parker translation.

<sup>20</sup> Comm. Philippians 3:20.

<sup>21</sup> Comm. 2 Peter 3:14, W. B. Johnston translation.

<sup>22</sup> “The Fifth Sermon on the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” *The Deity of Christ*, translated by Leroy Nixon (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 149.

At the same time, Calvin balances off this ‘sense’ or ‘foretaste’ of the heavenly life that we experience now with a longing for the full realization of the life to come when we shall be with our risen Lord. “It is for us to hunger for, seek, look to, learn and study Christ alone until that great day dawns when the Lord will fully manifest the glory of his kingdom [1 Cor. 15:24] and will show himself for as to see him as he is [1 John 3:2]” (*Inst.* IV.18.20).

Thus the “*meditatio vitae futurae*” is for Calvin more than mere reflection, meditation, or contemplation of eternity and beyond; it is “the orientation of the whole man and his whole temporal life towards the future goal which can best be represented by the biblical idea of endeavor.”<sup>23</sup>

### **III. Chapter 10. “How We Must Use the Present Life”**

#### **A. A question of balance**

The problem, which Calvin recognizes, is how to live a balanced life, that is, one which is very much involved in the challenges and problems of this world and at the same time lives in the light of eternity. On the one hand, there is the danger of a “perverse love of this life” (*Inst.* III.9.4); on the other, an unhealthy longing for heaven whereby the concerns of this world are ignored (typified by a chorus that was popular in youth circles when I was young: “This world is not my home, I’m just a passing through. If heaven’s not my home, O Lord what shall I do?”)

Some of the balance is already in Chapter IX—“On the meditation of the Future Life”—where Calvin refers to “the gifts of divine generosity” and the gratitude we owe God for all his blessings (*Inst.* III.9.3). Even so, taken by itself this chapter would give a one-sided portrayal of Calvin’s theology. This is why it is fortunate that he closes this “Golden Booklet” section of the *Institutes* with a chapter (X) that emphasizes the goodness of creation and how we should enjoy it.

#### **B. The main principle: use God’s gifts aright**

This chapter—“How We Must Use the Present Life and Its Helps”—is the shortest of the five chapters that make up this section on the Christian life, but it is extremely important in order to get a balanced understanding of the person of Calvin and his theology. Unfortunately, unlike Chapter IX, this chapter has gotten very little attention by Calvin scholars and in some cases has been totally ignored. In the outstanding study of Calvin’s life and theology

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Elsewhere Calvin points out that with the resurrection and ascension of Christ and the sending of the Spirit, believers are given “a taste (*gustandam*) of the newness of the heavenly life,” *Comm. Matthew* 16:28. Earlier, in his comment on the previous verse (*Matt.* 16:27) Calvin says “we must be deeply touched by a sense (*sensu*) of the heavenly life.”

<sup>23</sup> Heinrich Quistorp, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Last Things* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1955), 40-1. This is a translation from the original German text. The last word ‘endeavor’ reflects Otto Weber’s translation of *meditatio* as *Trachten*, endeavor or strive after.

by Francois Wendel<sup>24</sup> there is only one reference to Chapter X. He discusses meditation on the future life at some length and then moves on to the chapter on prayer followed by a lengthy discussion of justification by faith. Wilhelm Niesel, in his standard work on Calvin’s theology,<sup>25</sup> does little better. He makes two meaningless references to Chapter X and says nothing about the theme of the chapter.

Yet, despite the brevity of this chapter, Calvin indicates immediately how important this subject is. For he points out that Scripture “duly informs us what is the right use of earthly benefits—a matter not to be neglected in the ordering of our life (*Inst.* III.10.1, emphasis mine). At the same time, he warns about the dangers in the approach he is taking. For one thing, we ought to use the “good things of this world in so far as they help rather than hinder our course.” He finds scriptural support for this in 1 Corinthians 7:30-31 where the apostle urges us “to use this world as if not using it” (*Inst.* III.10.1).

Secondly, the reformer realizes that this is a “slippery topic” with “slopes on both sides into error.” The danger on the one side is intemperate use of God’s good gifts; on the other side an unduly strict and severe approach to eating and drinking that “fetters consciences more tightly than does the Word of the Lord” (*Inst.* III.10.1). So Calvin advises, in view of the danger of slipping down on either side of the slippery slope, “that we should try to plant our feet where we may safely stand” (*Inst.* III.10.1).

This is where Christian freedom becomes important. It must “not be restrained by any limitation but be left to every man’s conscience to use as far as seems lawful to him.” Our consciences must not be bound by “precise legal formulas” but rather by the “general rules” of Scripture (*Inst.* III.10.1).

What is remarkable about Calvin’s approach to our use of this world’s goods, whether food or clothing or natural resources, is that he is not content simply to deal with earthly or daily necessities but with their enjoyment. There are, of course, what we call the necessities of life. Most people would settle for that but not Calvin. For if we are to live, he says, we “cannot avoid those things which seem to serve delight more than necessity” (*Inst.* III.10.1).<sup>26</sup>

“Let this be our principle,” he says, “that the use of God’s gifts is not wrongly directed when it is referred to that end to which the Author himself created and destined them for us, since he created them for our good, not for

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<sup>24</sup> Calvin, *Origins and Developments of His Religious Thought*, 247.

<sup>25</sup> *The Theology of Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956). There is no reference at all in Paul Helm’s large book *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) to the Christian life, let alone the meditation on the future life and the proper use of the present life. T. H. L. Parker does much better in his brief introduction to Calvin’s theology in that he proceeds straight through the *Institutes* and allots two pages to this subject—*Calvin. An Introduction to His Thought* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 93-5. Charles Partee, in his massive *Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), devotes one page to “The Present Life,” 221-2.

<sup>26</sup> The Lane-Osborne version reads, “We should not exclude many things which seem to have more to do with pleasure than necessity. We must find a happy medium, so that we use everything in the right way, with a clear conscience.”

our ruin” (*Inst.* III.10.2). Then follows a delightful passage which must be quoted at length:

Now if we ponder to what end God created food, we shall find that he meant not only to provide for necessity but also for delight and good cheer. Thus the purpose of clothing, apart from necessity, was comeliness and decency. In grasses, trees, and fruits, apart from their various uses, there is beauty of appearance and pleasantness of odor [cf. Gen. 2:9]. For if this were not true, the prophet would not have reckoned them among the benefits of God, “that wine gladdens the heart of man, that oil makes his face shine” [Ps. 104:15 p.]. Scripture would not have reminded us repeatedly, in commending his kindness, that he gave all such things to men. And the natural qualities themselves of things demonstrate sufficiently to what end and extent we may enjoy them. Has the Lord clothed the flowers with the great beauty that greets our eyes, the sweetness of smell that is wafted upon our nostrils, and yet will it be unlawful for our eyes to be affected by that beauty, or our sense of smell by the sweetness of that odor? What? Did he not so distinguish colors as to make some more lovely than others? What? Did he not endow gold and silver, ivory and marble, with a loveliness that renders them more precious than other metals or stones? Did he not, in short, render many things attractive to us, apart from their necessary use? (*Inst.* III.10.2).

This is not the only place where Calvin speaks so eloquently about God’s generous provisions for our enjoyment. In the introduction to his Genesis commentary we find a similar passage:

We see, indeed, the world with our eyes, we tread the world with our feet, we touch innumerable kinds of God’s works with our hands, we inhale a sweet and pleasant fragrance from herbs and flowers, we enjoy boundless benefits; but in those very things of which we attain some knowledge, there dwells such an immensity of divine power, goodness, and wisdom, as absorbs all our senses.<sup>27</sup>

Later, in his comments on the story of Joseph feasting with his brothers he writes:

Should any one object, that a frugal use of food and drink is simply that which suffices for the nourishing of the body: I answer, although food is properly for the supply of our necessities, yet the legitimate use of it may proceed further. For it is not in vain, that our food has savour as well as vital nutriment; but thus our heavenly Father sweetly delights us with his delicacies. And his kindness is not in vain commended in Psalm civ. 15, where he is said to create “wine that maketh glad the heart of man.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Genesis Argumentum, 57 (CO 23, 5-6).

<sup>28</sup> Comm. Genesis 43:33. Then Calvin adds a cautionary note: “Nevertheless, the more kindly he indulges us, the more solicitously we ought to restrict ourselves to a frugal use of his gifts.”

“Away, then, with that inhuman philosophy which, while conceding only a necessary use of creatures, not only malignantly deprives us of the lawful fruit of God’s beneficence but cannot be practical unless it robs a man of all his senses and degrades him to a block” (*Inst.* III.10.3) Here Calvin may be thinking of the stoics or ascetic groups within Roman Catholicism. Ronald Wallace points out that Calvin here “shows more breadth than many of his predecessors.” Augustine, for example, in reference to God giving us all things to enjoy applied them to things eternal, not temporal use.<sup>29</sup>

This is one side of the coin. God provides earthly goods for us not merely to use but to enjoy, but always with moderation. The other side of the coin is that “material affluence is a dangerous thing.”<sup>30</sup> So Calvin is almost as eloquent in his warnings about the dangers of the abuse of the aforementioned gifts.

Where is your thanksgiving if you so gorge yourself with banqueting or wine that you either become stupid or are rendered useless for the duties of piety and of your calling? Where is your recognition of God if your flesh boiling over with excessive abundance into vile lust infects the mind with its impurity so that you cannot discern anything that is right and honorable? Where is our gratefulness toward God for our clothing if in the sumptuousness of our apparel we both admire ourselves and despise others, if with its elegance and glitter we prepare ourselves for shameless conduct? Where is our recognition of God if our minds be fixed upon the splendor of our apparel? For many so enslave all their senses to delights that the mind lies overwhelmed. Many are so delighted with marble, gold, and pictures that they become marble, they turn, as it were, into metals and are like painted figures. The smell of the kitchen or the sweetness of its odors so stupefies others that they are unable to smell anything spiritual . . . Paul’s rule is confirmed: that we should “make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” [Rom. 13:14], for if we yield too much to these, they boil up without measure or control (*Inst.* III.10.3).

Finally, to avoid the slippery slopes of undue austerity and excess and abuse, one must not only use one’s conscience, as we have seen, but also exercise a wise use of Christian freedom. Interestingly, in his discussion of Christian freedom Calvin sums up his discussion at one point with a reference to the proper use of God’s gifts: “To sum up,” Calvin says,

We see whither this freedom tends, namely, that we should use God’s gifts for the purpose for which he gave them to us, with no scruples of conscience, no trouble of mind. With such confidence our minds will be at peace with him and will recognize his liberality toward us (*Inst.* III.19.8).

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<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Geneva and the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 2003.

<sup>30</sup> Comm. 1 Timothy 6:17, T. A. Smail translation. In this text Paul is warning the rich not to “have their hope set on the uncertainty of riches.”

In our age of affluence—despite the international recession—how relevant these warnings are, especially for the wealthy people in our countries. However, gluttony and greed are not limited to a few rich.

Calvin follows his admonition with three rules<sup>31</sup> for living properly in the light of God's gifts to us:

One, a paraphrase of Paul's exhortation in 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; i.e., "those who use this world should be so affected as if they did not use it."

Two, that we should learn how to "bear poverty peaceably and patiently, as well as to bear abundance moderately" (*Inst.* III.10.4).

Three, that we must "render an account of our stewardship" (Luke 16:2) and in all things follow "the precepts of love" (*Inst.* III.10.5).

Two themes that run through all of these exhortations and warnings, both in chapters IX and X, are gratitude and moderation. We saw several references to gratitude in Chapter IX in relation to meditation on the future life, but this motif crops up again in Chapter X in relation to the proper use of this world's goods. In section 3, for example, he reminds us that we should "recognize the Author (*authorem*)" of all good things "and give thanks for his kindness toward us." Again, "where is our gratefulness toward God for our clothing...?" (*Inst.* III.10.3). In section 3 the theme of moderation is especially prominent.<sup>32</sup>

Calvin concludes Chapter X with a section that does not quite fit in with the overall theme of how to use the present life. The editors of the Mc Neill-Battles edition of the *Institutes* have given this section (6) the title "The Lord's calling a basis of our way of life." This is an important subject, but it does not appear directly germane to the thrust of this chapter.<sup>33</sup>

#### **IV. Addendum. The glory of God's creation**

However, in the midst of Calvin's list of things God has given us to enjoy he mentions not only tasty food, good wine, fine clothing, and objects of beauty, but, as we have seen, also the beauty and sweet smells of "grasses, trees and fruits" as well as flowers that "the Lord has clothed with great beauty" (III.10.2).

This love of nature is a major motif in Calvin's theology and deserves more attention; for of all of God's gifts in the natural order none impressed Calvin more than the beauty of creation, "the theater of God's glory" (*Inst.* I.5.8;

<sup>31</sup> In section 4 Calvin says "two rules follow" and quickly lists them, but in section 5 he lists two more rules, one of which is an elaboration of rule two in section 4.

<sup>32</sup> See III.10.4 and 5. Ronald Wallace has taken special note of the importance of moderation in Calvin's theology. In his book *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1959) he has a whole chapter on "Christian Moderation," the first section titled "Moderation and restraint an essential element in the ordered Christian Life," 170.

<sup>33</sup> However, in a summary statement the reformer sounds a familiar note, i.e., be moderate in all things: "Your life will then be best ordered when it is directed to this goal. For no one, impelled by his own rashness, will attempt more than his calling will permit, because he will know that it is not lawful to exceed its bounds" (*Inst.* III.10.6).

I.6.2; I.14.20). For “the glory of God shines out in the enticing beauty of the earth, which is evidence of His Fatherly love.”<sup>34</sup>

The young Calvin, as well as the more mature Calvin, could get rhapsodic in expressing his appreciation for the beauties of nature. About a year after his conversion to Protestantism in his “Preface to Olivetan’s New Testament,” he reflects on the Apostle Paul’s words in Romans 1:20: “In all places and in all things . . . the sovereign Lord “has in all parts of the world, in heaven and on earth, written and as it were engraved the glory of his power, goodness, wisdom and eternity.” Thus far only a paraphrase of the Apostle’s words, but then Calvin adds these lovely lines, “For the little birds that sing, sing of God, the beasts clamor for him; the elements dread him; the mountains echo him, the fountains and flowing waters cast their glances at him, and the grass and flowers laugh before him.”<sup>35</sup> Here Calvin is obviously no longer thinking only of Romans 1:20 but also of those psalms in which the psalmist refers to the praises of the Creator by the whole created order. One illustration should suffice: Psalm 104 speaks of the greatness of God in relation to his creation and refers to God as “clothed with splendor and majesty; covering yourself with light as with a garment” (vss. 1 and 2). This moves Calvin to comment,

Those who try to see God in his naked majesty are certainly very foolish. In order to enjoy the sight of him we must cast our eyes upon the very beautiful fabric of the world (*pulcherimam mundi fabricam*) in which he wishes to be seen by us, and not be too curious and rash in searching into his secret essence.<sup>36</sup>

Calvin obviously is in awe of the universe and would have us enjoy it in all of its beauty and majesty. Such testimonies abound but I will close with only one more, this one from the *Institutes* (I.5.2): “Wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of his glory. You cannot in one glance survey this most vast and beautiful system of the universe, in its wide expanse, without being completely overwhelmed by the boundless force of its brightness (*vi immensa fulgoris*).

## V. Conclusion

A careful reading of these two brief chapters in the *Institutes* reveals that they are more than an incidental interlude in Calvin’s theology. Here we have an eschatological outlook that at times is surprisingly modern and an aesthetic sensitivity that undercuts the all too common image of a dour and grim

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<sup>34</sup> Comm. Isaiah 6:4-5, Haroutunian translation in *Calvin: Commentaries*, translated and edited by Joseph Haroutunian in collaboration with Louise Pettibone Smith (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), 124.

<sup>35</sup> A translation of this “Preface” is found in *Calvin: Commentaries*, 59-60.

<sup>36</sup> Comm. Psalm 104:1-2, James Anderson translation adapted. Calvin does not object, however, to the study of astronomy which “not only gives great pleasure but is also extremely useful. No one can deny that it admirably reveals the wisdom of God,” Comm. Genesis 1:16. Cf. *Institutes* I.5.2. Cf. further, A. Mitchell Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin*, Chapter XV, “Attitude to Art, Music and Science” (London: James Clarke, revised edition 1950).

Calvinism, not to mention Puritanism.<sup>37</sup> Meditating on the future life does not mean lying around and dreaming about heaven. Calvin was too much of an activist to be able to do that. Calvin did indeed long to realize the joy of life with the risen and ascended Lord.<sup>38</sup> That element is certainly there. However, the underlying motif is that of the future hope impinging on our present existence and making it meaningful and in difficult times tolerable.

What is surprising is that in Calvin, despite a life of illness, conflict, frustration, and occasional defeats, there is a certain *joie de vivre* (enjoyment of living) that transcends these difficulties. “It is downright dishonest to glory in dark austerity,”<sup>39</sup> writes Calvin. Rather, “wherever God’s gifts appear, we ought to have our hearts filled with joy.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> On this issue see Marilynne Robinson’s chapter “Puritans and Prigs” in *The Death of Adam. Essays on Modern Thought* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> This is especially apparent in the way Calvin concludes his impromptu prayers at the end of his lectures on the prophets, e.g., “Until we attain to the enjoyment of that blessed inheritance which is laid up for us in heaven,” etc. For more examples see my *Calvin’s First Catechism*, 138-9.

<sup>39</sup> Comm. James 3:17. Then he elaborates, “We are warned that there is no reason for our being so very woeful (*morosos*), except that we are too indulgent towards ourselves, and overlook our own faults,” A. W. Morrison translation adapted.

<sup>40</sup> Comm. Lamentations 2:15.