

CALVIN'S ILLNESSES  
AND THEIR RELATION TO CHRISTIAN VOCATION

by  
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John Calvin suffered from a number of severe medical problems throughout the last twenty-three years of his life. These problems have long been noted by Calvin's biographers, most notably by Emile Doumergue.<sup>1</sup> Calvin's most recent biographer, William J. Bouwsma, presents a man anxiously animated by external events and internal impulses which drove him to exhaustion and physical decline. Illness and death, as Bouwsma observes, were much on Calvin's mind:

[Calvin] thought much, not only about weakness and fatigue, but also about aging, illness, and death. He sought to impress his congregation . . . that life consists in growing older. . . . He followed closely his own bodily decline, a personal momento mori. "Well, it is true," he observed, "That I see my body decaying. If any strength remains, it declines from day to day, and I contemplate death without having to seek it ten leagues away."<sup>2</sup>

The preceding observation by Calvin of his bodily decay was made in a sermon on Job when he was about forty-five. Although his condition only worsened, Calvin not only endured but remained quite productive for another ten years until his demise in 1564 at the age of fifty-five.

One gains some sense of the progression of Calvin's illnesses from his portraits, beginning with one done about the time he received his graduate degree and ending with a death-bed scene.<sup>3</sup> One of the earliest portraits depicts a handsome and distinguished-looking Calvin as a young man in a robe. Similarly, portraits thought to have been done about 1536, the year in which he completed the first edition of his Institutes of the Christian Religion, reveal a man of vigor. Turning to portraits of Calvin's later years, however, we confront a cachectic, emaciated individual. As the years advance, Calvin is pictured with a white beard, a significant amount of weight loss, and looking bent over and physically decrepit.

Our purpose here is to examine Calvin's illnesses from a clinical perspective. Too often we overlook the influence of the body and its illnesses upon the mind. We undertake this examination not merely as an exercise in medical autopsy, but with the conviction that some understanding of these problems may help to illumine Calvin's personality and theological perspective and elicit greater appreciation for his achievements.

## I

Several sources of information on Calvin's illnesses have informed our investigation. We know the names of Calvin's physicians.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Benedict Textor, who practiced in Geneva, was Calvin's<sup>5</sup> principal physician until Textor's death sometime after 1556. Textor was succeeded by Dr. Philibert Sarrazin, who remained Calvin's physician until Calvin died. Some of Calvin's comments about these physicians are available. Professionally, they were quite capable; as for religion, they adhered to the evangelical faith. Unfortunately, their medical records are no longer extant. We do have, however, certain of Calvin's letters to and from friends which touch upon his medical problems, as well as a letter to a group of consultant physicians in Montpellier, France. The Life of Calvin by Calvin's contemporary biographer, Theodore Beza, also gives<sup>6</sup> us a good deal of medical information relating to the reformer.

One may wonder whether reliable diagnosis of Calvin's illnesses is possible after the passage of 424 years. Speculation about medical diagnoses without the appropriate diagnostic tools, such as a physical examination, x-ray, laboratory studies, CAT scans, and similar devices is a hazardous undertaking. Still, of all the instruments used in medical diagnoses, the carefully-taken medical history remains the most important. It is safe to say that about 85% of diagnoses will come from medical history. A corollary to this is that if one finishes a careful medical history and yet has no good idea of the patient's problem, the odds are considerable that the problem will remain a mystery.

Here, Calvin himself has helped us immensely, for he wrote about his medical problems with the same superb prose style which characterized all his work. His letter to the Montpellier physicians dated February 8, 1564, just over two months before his death, remains the most important evidence he produced in this regard. Presented here is a new translation of Calvin's Montpellier letter. It is by Mary Beaty, Ph.D., of Davidson College, NC. Most of the currently available English translations of Calvin's works are Victorian and are heavily sanitized. Like Luther, Calvin was quite blunt and direct. He does not hesitate to describe his hemorrhoids to a duchess. Here Calvin enumerated his problems with a meticulousness that would satisfy any contemporary hospital inspection team:

When Saracenus, the doctor most concerned with looking after my health, recently brought me the remedies you have prescribed for relieving my illnesses, I asked him who had undertaken this task without my knowledge. He replied that, at the request of a colleague of ours who is with you, he had put together a summary of facts which might enable you to give me useful advice. From your thorough response I realize how dear my life is to you, since you have been, of your own accord, so anxious to

prolong it. If you had been willing to undertake this labor for someone requesting it of you, even this would have been a service not to be scorned; as it is, because you have taken the initiative, I am all the more indebted, but I have no method or opportunity of expressing gratitude unless you, in turn, take some spiritual medicine from my writings.

Twenty years ago the outstanding Parisian doctors Acatius, Tagautius, and Gallus showed me the same kindness. But at that time the pain of gout was not attacking me, and I had no trouble with kidney stones or gravel or with gripings of the bowels or with anal pain, and I was not threatened with a discharge of blood. All these enemies have rushed upon me with a unified attack, troop upon troop, as it were. Just as I was recovering from a quartan fever, an intense, sharp pain seized the calves of my legs and recurred a second and a third time after lessening a little. Finally it turned into a disease of the joints which extends from my feet to my knees. For a long time a sore on my hemorrhoidal veins tortured me, since at that time worms (from which I am free now) were causing me to itch and I had scratched with my nails in my sleep. When the itching returned, my nails made the trouble recur.

The next summer nephritis seized me. I was carried into the countryside on a litter since I could not endure the motion of a horse, and on the way back I wanted to make part of the trip on foot. I had scarcely gone a mile when a weakness of the kidneys forced me to stop. When I tried to urinate, I was surprised that blood came out instead of urine. I went to bed when I got home. Nephritis attacked me very sharply, with only moderate relief from remedies. At last a stone was passed, though only after very distressing effort, and this relieved the trouble. The stone was so large, however, that it injured the veins, and the flow of blood could only be stopped by the injection of a woman's milk through a syringe. Since then, I have forced out many stones, and the heavy feeling which presses upon my kidneys shows clearly that there are still stones there. Nevertheless, it is a good thing that very small<sup>10</sup> ones, or at least ones of moderate size, are coming out.

The disease in my feet forces me to be inactive, and this takes away any hope of good health. I am even prevented from horseback riding by anal pain. For although no sore is apparent, the veins are so swollen that, because of the constriction, whatever I force out is rather like a chicken's droppings.<sup>11</sup> To add to my troubles, my poorly digested food turns into thick liquids which, by their

very thickness, block the anus<sup>12</sup> as if with glue. I am often forced to take injections for this.<sup>13</sup>

But it is inconsiderate of me to repay your labor by doubling that labor, forcing you not only to give advice but to read my trifles. Farewell, you distinguished men who are taking care of me with sincere attention. May the Lord always guide you with his spirit, sustain you with his goodness, and enrich you more and more with his gifts.

Based on this letter and the other sources mentioned above, there can be little question that Calvin suffered from chronic tophaceous gout. Indeed, as the above quotation shows, he calls the disease by name. In Calvin's day gout was a term used for any form of arthritis. It was not until the twentieth century that the numerous forms of arthritis were distinctly separated in medical literature. Nevertheless, Calvin describes attacks of the disease in enough detail to render diagnosis certain. The pain began in the feet, coming quite intermittently and spreading to other joints. Consider the following remarks to Theodore Beza, October 7, 1561:

My joint pain is not pleasant. I still have not had much rest, because for two days I suffered from intense pain in my right foot. It got better the day before yesterday, but<sup>14</sup> not to the point of no longer keeping my foot cradled.

Or consider this comment over a year later:

God keeps me bound by my feet. The acute pains have ceased, but it is difficult for me to creep from the bed to the table. Today I preached. But I had to be carried to the church.<sup>15</sup>

A closer look at gout will convey an idea of the severity of the problems which Calvin faced. Gout is a disease of purine metabolism, and the key to understanding the disease is a substance called uric acid, which is a natural product of the body. It is dissolved in body fluids, including blood and urine, and as long as it remains dissolved in solution, it causes few problems --if any at all. When uric acid comes out of solution and forms crystals, however, trouble soon sets in. These crystals have the ability to produce an intense inflammatory reaction. Monosodium urate crystals can be seen under a polarizing microscope and are indeed quite beautiful. It is difficult to imagine that anything so lovely can cause so much distress. When these crystals are formed within a joint, the pain is exquisite, and the joint becomes swollen and fiery red. Typically these attacks start in the great metatarsophalangeal toe joint (i.e., the "big toe") and are so characteristic that they have a particular name, "podagra." Attacks begin quite abruptly. The initial attacks

subside, but as the disease continues, more joints are involved and destroyed. Advanced untreated gout is called chronic tophaceous gout from the large deposits of monosodium urate which appear in many locations on the body, including the ears, bursae, and joints. In the advanced stage, these have a grotesque appearance and often open and drain monosodium urate crystals, which closely resemble chalk dust. They are not only grotesque in appearance but can be painful. Monosodium urate does not just linger in or around the joint but actually has the ability to erode the joint tissues and to destroy them completely. To make matters worse, in Calvin's time and in our own time, the diagnosis of gout carried with it something of a stigma in some circles. It was once thought that gout was the result of too much wine, rich food, and riotous living. The cartoon caricatures of the rich man indulging in all these vices while at the same time suffering the pangs of an attack of gout are all too familiar.

Uric acid is excreted mostly by way of the kidneys, and if crystals form in the urine, they are capable of producing kidney stones. This was unquestionably the cause of the multiple kidney stones about which Calvin writes. Indeed, one of his contemporaries said of him that he formed so many stones his body was a quarry. Passage of these kidney stones, which Calvin describes quite vividly, is even more painful than an acute attack of gout.

At present, I am relieved from very acute suffering, having been delivered of a [stone] about the size of the kernel of a filbert. As the retention of urine was very painful to me, by the advice of my physician, I got upon horseback that the jolting might assist me in discharging the [stone]. On my return home I was surprised to find that I emitted discoloured blood instead of urine. The following day the calculus had forced its way from the bladder into the urethra. Hence still more excruciating tortures. For more than half an hour I endeavoured to disengage myself from it by a violent agitation of my whole body. I gained nothing by that, but obtained a slight relief by fomentations with warm water. Meanwhile, the urinary canal was so much lacerated that copious discharges of blood flowed from it. It seems to me now that I begin to live anew for the last two days since I am delivered from these pains.<sup>16</sup>

Calvin also had chronic pulmonary tuberculosis. Tuberculosis can involve many areas of the body, but most commonly the lungs. It often starts with infection of the pleura or covering of the lungs by the causative organism, mycobacterium tuberculosis. At this stage it produces severe and prolonged pleurisy or pain with breathing. Most people with tuberculosis experience fever and drenching sweats. Finally, when the disease is quite advanced in the lungs, it produces cavities in the lungs and

bleeding which leads to expectoration of blood. The disease causes severe weight loss or emaciation. In fact, another name for it in the past was consumption. The body was consumed by the disease. Even in the twentieth century tuberculosis also carries with it a stigma. As evidence for this condition, Calvin gave an excellent description of an episode of pleurisy, sharp cutting pain in his chest, aggravated by coughing or breathing. Doumergue relates the incident as follows:

March 14, 1558 [Calvin] speaks of a pain in his side which stops him from dictating more than a few lines, and made him almost "useless" for an entire month. Sunday, December 24, 1559, it became more serious. The next day, as he was eating, he was seized with a violent cough and began to cough up a lot of blood. The doctors thought he had burst a vein. <sup>17</sup> Fortunately, the day after that the hemoptysis stopped.

Calvin's pleurisy had been compounded by what were known in his time as tertiary and then quartan fevers (Calvin first experienced these in 1556). <sup>18</sup> He had severe sweating at night and then developed a much-feared complication of tuberculosis, namely hemoptysis or coughing up blood. The hemoptysis confined him to bed. This phase of his illness lasted for approximately eight months, according to Beza, although Calvin remained debilitated thenceforth. <sup>19</sup> As testimony to his indefatigable resolve, Calvin dictated the final and definitive edition of his Institutes of the Christian Religion in Latin and then translated the work into French during the time he was confined to bed with hemoptysis. In this same period he revised his commentary on Isaiah and saw the printing of his lessons on the minor prophets. This would have been a tremendous amount of work even for someone in robust health.

Calvin also had intestinal parasites. There are a number of intestinal parasites which infest the intestine. There visible to the eye without aid of a microscope are worms, such as hookworms, tapeworms, and the like. As was typical, Calvin left little to the imagination, vividly describing passage of these parasites in his bowel movements. <sup>20</sup> Intestinal parasites of this nature are usually accompanied by a great deal of blood loss; if severe, they can produce profound anemia and weakness. They can cause abdominal pain and some of them cause severe itching around the anus.

Furthermore, Calvin had hemorrhoids, described them in detail, and referred to an "ulcer" which held him captive. <sup>21</sup> From his description of the pain involved, it is obvious that some of these became thrombosed or developed blood clots, which can be extremely painful. Today with medications and surgery hemorrhoids really are quite a transient problem. In the sixteenth century, however, hemorrhoids had one very devastating

result. The only method of rapid land transportation was on horseback; hence one with severe hemorrhoids could hardly travel. This helps to explain why Calvin spent his latter years in Geneva and traveled little, if at all. In his earlier years, he had traveled quite widely. This malady not only deprived Calvin of transportation but also deprived him of a great source of pleasure, since he had been quite fond of horseback riding in his younger years.

Calvin also seems to have had what would be diagnosed today as spastic bowel syndrome or irritable colon. Irritable colon is, as the name suggests, spasm in the large intestine. It produces cringing abdominal pain and constipation alternating with diarrhea. Stools are mixed with a great deal of mucus. Not only the presence of these symptoms, antedating his intestinal parasites and hemorrhoids, but their great duration is typical. Beza tells us that for at least ten years, Calvin ate only one meal a day.<sup>22</sup> Eating one meal a day would worsen the nutritional status of a man who already had tuberculosis and parasites.

Additionally, Calvin gives an excellent clinical description of migraine headaches. These bothered him sometimes for days on end, and he found that with fasting for thirty-six hours they would often abate. The headaches continued for years and therefore could not have been caused by a brain tumor or other similar illnesses. He would never have survived as long as he did with a tumor.

An intractable lifelong case of "workaholism" also seems to have characterized Calvin's condition. Theodore Beza wrote of Calvin's boundless energy.<sup>23</sup> He worked until quite late at night and then arose early in the morning to review his previous day's work. Calvin had little time, says Beza, for things not directly related to his work. While dictating, Calvin could be interrupted, return a few hours later and pick up dictation in the middle of the sentence where he had left off. As his most recent biographer, William J. Bouwsma, puts it, Calvin was "a driven man, driven by external demands but above all by powerful impulses within himself. We might now call him an overachiever; he was never satisfied with his own performance, always contrasting the petty done with the undone vast."<sup>24</sup>

Calvin therefore had multiple medical problems, problems that did not come and go in sequence but rather were additive. To use his own words in the letter to the physicians of Montpelier, "At present all of these ailments, as it were, muster in troops against me." These illnesses have several things in common. All are capable of causing severe pain or severe difficulty in breathing. All are capable of producing severe weight loss, anemia, and weakness. Calvin's single daily meal and fasting for relief from migraine headaches may have aggravated the situation. He was described several years before his death as a

skeleton covered by skin. But, as Beza puts it, "a brave spirit was the master of a feeble body." For the last several years of his life, and until eight days before his death, Calvin continued to write and to preach. So seriously did he take his work of preaching that he was carried into the pulpit in Geneva in a chair. Calvin's remark in the dedication to his commentary on Second Thessalonians is more than hyperbole: "my ministry . . . is dearer to me than life."

The immediate cause of his death was probably septicemia, or shock due to bacteria growing in his blood stream. In other times, this was known as "blood poisoning." Calvin's gout and many kidney stones could well have caused renal failure or uremia. In his Life of Calvin, Beza records that Calvin died quietly and peacefully.<sup>26</sup> This is quite consistent with the manner of death in persons dying of septic shock.

## II

Our purpose has been to evaluate Calvin's medical problems from a clinical perspective. Insight into the gravity of his illnesses can only enhance our admiration of Calvin's achievement. Although it must be left to Calvin specialists to evaluate the historical and theological significance of the foregoing material, three lines of inquiry can at least be suggested.

First, Calvin lived with a vivid awareness of the tenuousness of life. Nowhere is this awareness more strikingly recorded than in the Institutes:

Hence appears the immeasurable felicity of the godly mind. Innumerable are the evils that beset human life; innumerable, too, the deaths that threaten it. We need not go beyond ourselves: since our body is the receptacle of a thousand diseases--in fact holds within itself and fosters the causes of diseases--a man cannot go about unburdened by many forms of his own destruction, and without drawing out a life enveloped, as it were, with death. For what else would you call it, when he neither freezes nor sweats without danger? Now, wherever you turn, all things around you not only are hardly to be trusted but almost openly menace, and seem to threaten immediate death.

Embark upon a ship, you are one step away from death. Mount a horse, if one foot slips, your life is imperiled. Go through the city streets, you are subject to as many dangers as there are tiles on the roofs. If there is a weapon in your hand or a friend's harm awaits. All the fierce animals you see are armed for your destruction. But if you try to shut yourself up in a walled garden, seemingly delightful, there a serpent sometimes lies



hidden. Your house, continually in danger of fire, threatens in the daytime to impoverish you, at night even to collapse upon you. Your field, since it is exposed to hail, frost, drought, and other calamities, threatens you with barrenness, and hence, famine. I pass over poisonings, ambushes, robberies, open violence, which in part besiege us at home, in part dog us abroad. Amid these tribulations must not man be most miserable, since, but half alive in life, he weakly draws his anxious and languid breath, as if he had a sword perpetually hanging over his neck?<sup>26</sup>

Doubtless, the contingency of Calvin's own physical well-being contributed to this sense of life's frailty.

Second, an understanding of Calvin's illnesses renders all the more poignant the various remarks about sickness found in his letters. In 1546, in a letter to Monsieur de Falais, who himself had been suffering from protracted illness, Calvin wrote:

Although your weakness may be protracted, it is much that you go on steadily, though by slow degrees, in the way of amendment. And when I consider the complaint, I feel that there is still greater reason to be well content. Notwithstanding, we shall not give over praying to God that it would please him to confirm you entirely, with thanksgiving that he has brought you back from the brink of the grave. Besides, I hope, from present appearances, that he is minded yet to make use of you in health, since he has employed you in sickness. For although laid powerless upon a bed, we are by no means useless to him, if we testify our obedience by resigning ourselves to his good pleasure,--if we give proof of our faith by resisting temptation.--if we take advantage of the consolation which he gives us in order to overcome the troubles of the flesh. It is in sickness, especially when prolonged, that patience is most needful; but most of all in death. Nevertheless, as I have said, I confide in this good God, that after having exercised you by sickness he will still employ your health to some good purpose. Meanwhile, we must beseech him that he would uphold us in steadfast courage, never permitting us to fall away because of lengthened on-waiting.<sup>27</sup>

Calvin's appeal to "usefulness" in illness is somewhat ironic in view of his own herculean efforts to work in spite of his ailments. In 1563, the year before he died, he wrote in a letter to Madame de Coligny, "[Illnesses] serve us for medicines to purge us from worldly affections, and retrench what is superfluous in us, and since they are to us the messengers of death, we ought to learn to have one foot raised to take our departure when it shall please God."<sup>28</sup>

Third, Calvin's many illnesses may help explain his teaching on passivity of the body in relation to the active soul. William Bouwsma has noted that the body stands at the lowest place in Calvin's anthropology.<sup>29</sup> Another scholar, Margaret Miles, has spoken of Calvin's "rather curious ambivalence about the body." Calvin, says Miles, casts the body "in the role of helpless victim."<sup>30</sup> Given the severity of Calvin's illnesses, such assessments as these are entirely understandable.

John Calvin had a goal, a purpose, and a power which enabled him to overcome his many physical impediments. His illnesses were not alleviated, they were not cured, nor were they controlled. Notwithstanding the tremendous drain on his energy, Calvin became one of the most productive and influential thinkers in history. The source of Calvin's strength and power, a strength that enabled him to withstand the ravages of the painful diseases detailed in this paper and a power that enabled him to be productive up to the very last weeks of his life, remains a source of inspiration to us today.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Emile Doumergue, La Genève Calviniste (Lausanne: Geo. Bridel, 1905), 509-526; "La Maladie Secrète de Calvin" from Le Christianisme au XX<sup>e</sup> Siècle 59 (1930), 471-72.

<sup>2</sup>William J. Bouwsma, John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 30.

<sup>3</sup>Emile Doumergue, Iconographie Calvinienne (Lausanne: Geo. Bridel & Co., 1909).

<sup>4</sup>Doumergue has conveniently collected much of the material pertaining to Calvin's illnesses. Doumergue, La Genève Calviniste, 509-526.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 511.

<sup>6</sup>Theodore Beza, Life of John Calvin, trans. Francis Sibson (Philadelphia: J. Whetham, 1836).

<sup>7</sup>For an older English translation, see Letters of John Calvin, ed. Jules Bonnet, trans. Marcus Robert Gilchrist (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1958) 4: 358-60; CR XLVIII, 252-54.

<sup>8</sup>Calvin obviously had hemorrhoids, which were aggravated by the intense itching associated with the passage of intestinal parasites or worms. Scratching at the area in his sleep with his fingernails perpetuated the problem.

<sup>9</sup>Here Calvin describes laceration of the bladder and urethra due to passage of a kidney stone. Milk contains blood group antigens and other factors which will clot blood and help stop bleeding. Hence, human milk was injected through the urethra into the bladder.

<sup>10</sup>The pain associated with passage of any stone is excruciating. Who but Calvin could ever be thankful for the passage of small ones?

<sup>11</sup>A footnote to this says, "The text seems corrupt."

<sup>12</sup>The Latin word here is "exitum." Possibly "bowels" would be a good translation.

<sup>13</sup>Calvin's rectal problems were so severe that he developed a stricture, i.e., a partial obstruction of the passage of feces. By "injections," here he means "enemas."

<sup>14</sup>Letter to Theodore Beza, October 7, 1561, OC XIX, 30, quoted in Doumergue, La Genève Calviniste, 521. Cradling of the foot refers to the use of a device to hold the sheets off the painful foot. The pain of acute gout is so severe that even the weight of a sheet on the involved joint is very painful.

<sup>15</sup>Letter to Bullinger, December 27, 1562, OC XIX, 602, quoted in Doumergue, La Genève Calviniste, 522.

<sup>16</sup>Letter to Bullinger, July 2, 1563, in Letters of John Calvin, 4:321.

<sup>17</sup>Doumergue, La Genève Calviniste, 519.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Beza, 71.

<sup>20</sup>Doumergue, La Genève Calviniste, 516.

<sup>21</sup>OC XII, 341, quoted in Doumergue, La Genève Calviniste, 516. See also Letter to Peter Martyr, March 2, 1559 in which Calvin speaks of "hemorrhoids from which it is not possible to force blood, as they are of that kind which are commonly called blind." Letters of John Calvin, 4:31.

<sup>22</sup>Beza, 78.

<sup>23</sup>See, for example, Beza, 94-95.

<sup>24</sup>Bouwsma, 30-31.

<sup>25</sup>Beza, 93.

<sup>26</sup>Inst. I.17.10.

<sup>27</sup>Letters of John Calvin, 2:82.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 4:331.

<sup>29</sup>Bouwsma, 80.

<sup>30</sup>Margaret R. Miles, "Theology, Anthropology, and the Human Body in Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion," Harvard Theological Review 74 (1981):303-323, 311, 319.