

DEATH, FUNERALS AND PRAYERS FOR THE DEAD IN CALVIN'S THEOLOGY

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William Bouwsma's "portrait" of John Calvin displays a man riddled with anxiety. "Calvin was a singularly anxious man," Bouwsma writes, "and, as a reformer, fearful and troubled."¹ Anxiety was the driving force through Calvin's career of "strenuous and distinguished accomplishment," reflecting as it did his "more somber vision of human existence" compared to the style of the "genial Erasmus."

Ultimately, according to Bouwsma, Calvin's anxiety focused in concern about death. The "uncertainties surrounding death" make all anxiety "about death, which may either redeem all previous suffering or obliterate all previous happiness."² This means, says Bouwsma in sobering prose:

Death is therefore not just one among the various matters about which human beings may be anxious; it is qualitatively different. Death and judgment are finally what every twinge of a more mundane anxiety is about. The fear that brings into focus particular dangers, and anxiety as a response to danger in general, are fused in the confrontation with death and judgment, for what is dimly apprehended by anxiety is here seen face to face, becomes specific, takes on a terrifying identity so that at last it too can be feared.³

All this, he says, "Calvin understood." Anxiety formed the "subjective link between his perception of the human condition and his doctrine." This meant Calvin gave "particular attention...to the distress of contemporaries about death, judgment, and ultimate destiny, in passages whose intensity suggests his personal acquaintance with such anxiety." This anxiety of the sinner, Bouwsma proclaims, "for Calvin makes Christianity at once plausible and necessary."⁴

These comments suggest a fundamental importance to the topic of death in Calvin's theology. Attendant to this, from a liturgical perspective, would also be the topics of funerals and prayers for the dead since they would be worshipful expressions of Calvin's theological thought.

But Bouwsma's explications here should not merely be taken at face value. Indeed, as reviewers have pointed out, there is more to Calvin than he presents, particularly in relation to "certain central purposes and convictions of the main character."⁵ A wider view of Calvin's thought on death is needed, and a fuller context. For death is part of the whole theological network of Christian theology. It was viewed by the Reformer in light of other matrices of Christian faith which inform and guide both his thought and his life. How death relates to the rest of Christian theology must also be considered as well.

Presence of Death

Undeniably, Calvin everyday was aware of the presence of death. The very precarious nature of life in medieval times was a fact of life down through the early modern period and beyond.⁶ Bouwsma's citations from Calvin about death could be multiplied in Calvin's writings: To "flee and shudder at death" is "a natural disposition that can never be fully controlled"; no one "willingly hurries toward it."⁷ The sight of a corpse reminds us that "the same annihilation will swallow us as it does the brute beasts."⁸ Death is unnatural. It is "the curse of God" on human sin which should produce "an astonishing horror in which there is more of misery than in death by

itself.”⁹ In short, says Bouwsma, “Calvin shared and intensified the unusual terror of death that afflicted the later Middle Ages.” For

all change, all variety, all confusion reminded him of it, and he thought the absence of terror like his own not admirable or enviable but obtuse and inhuman, no more than devilish pride. Those who are indifferent to death [says Calvin] ‘see the whole earth mixed together in confused variety and its individual elements, so to speak, tossed hither and yon; and yet, as if they did not belong to the human race, they imagine that they remain always the same, liable to no changes.’¹⁰

Death as ever-present intruder is portrayed by Calvin in a graphic and memorable passage from Book I of the *Institutes*:

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 [person] 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 [one] 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 [we] be most miserable, since, but half alive in life, [we] weakly draw [our] anxious and languid breath, as if [we] had a sword perpetually hanging over [our] neck.¹¹

The presence of death was real for Calvin; and it was powerful.

Perspectives on Death

But the prominence of death and its potency are ultimately for Calvin set within the wider contexts of his theological understandings. This citation from Book I of the *Institutes*, for example, is from Calvin’s discussion of God’s providence and is used by him to indicate the misery humans feel if they feel they are “brought under the sway of fortune” (1.17.10). His next section begins with the word “yet”: “Yet, when that light of divine providence has once shone upon” a godly person, that person is “relieved and set free not only from the extreme anxiety and fear” that were pressing before, but, says Calvin, “from every care” (1.17.11).

This example illustrates the truth of Edward Dowey’s critique of Bouwsma’s use of anxiety as a central theme for Calvin. As Dowey indicates, Calvin’s world is one of “sheer frightening power and a source of terror” but only

‘if Fortune rules’ and only if one does not know and trust God who falls with the sparrow, wills each drop of rain, and to whom Jesus called out forsaken on the cross (Calvin on Psalm 22). In this setting Calvin’s rhetorical pyrotechnics about nature and human nature are foils or negative hyperbole for praising the trustworthiness of God. Bouwsma, too, takes brief account of this (171), but as a minor tint in a portrait of anxiety. Under his program anxiety becomes the

dominating reality of Calvin's life and thought, around which all else (including this volume) is organized, and from which his lifework flows.¹²

All this is to say we need to see Calvin's comments about death in the wider perspectives of his theology as a whole and particularly in relation to his understandings of the person and work of Jesus Christ who was himself, "dead and buried" and in whose resurrection, the resurrection of believers is pledged; and in whose church, through the sacraments as means of grace, believers are enabled to resist the ultimate fear of death.¹³

Christ's Death

In expounding the phrase "dead and buried" from the Apostles' Creed, Calvin indicates the death and burial of Jesus Christ sets forth "a twofold blessing...for us to enjoy: liberation from the death to which we have been bound, and mortification of our flesh" (2.16.7).

Christ liberates us from death because he "in every respect took our place to pay the price of our redemption. Death held us captive under its yoke; Christ, in our stead, gave himself over to its power to deliver us from it" (1.16.7). This is Calvin's substitutionary doctrine of the atonement. Believers gain redemption through the obedience of Jesus Christ (2.16.5), the transferral of the guilt of their sin to him (2.16.6), and freedom from the condemnation (2.17.4) of the law which accuses us (2.7.7) and threatens eternal death (2.8.4). Christ's death is the price of our redemption (2.17.5). Jesus Christ suffered our death in his own person.¹⁴ The wonderful effect is that "by dying, he ensured that we would not die, or—which is the same thing—redeemed us to life by his own death" (2.16.7). Christ's death liberates believers from "the abyss of death."¹⁵

Christ's death also, says Calvin, brings us the blessing of the mortification of the flesh. By our participation in Christ's death, says Calvin, our "earthly members" experience mortification in that "they may no longer perform their functions." The "old man" in us is killed so our former natures do not "flourish and bear fruit." Christ's burial has the same effect. Picking up the language of Romans 6, Calvin says we have been united with Christ in his death (Rom. 6:5) and "buried with him...into the death' of sin" (Rom. 6:4), so we have "died together with him" (Col. 3:3). This means, says Calvin, that we are exhorted to "exhibit an example of Christ's death" and also that there "inheres in it an efficacy which ought to be manifest in all Christians" (2.16.7). Later in the *Institutes* Calvin discussed mortification as the first part of "repentance" (3.3.3). Mortification is a means to vivification—the new life in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Mortification means the destruction of the sinful corruption which has been humanity's lot since the fall.¹⁶ Jesus Christ is the great example to be followed in the process of mortification-vivification. Now, through his death, says Calvin, and our participation in it by faith, the process of mortification has begun. The death of Jesus Christ makes this mortification of the flesh possible and actual.

Baptism

Yet how do we know this? How do the benefits of Christ's liberating us from sin come to us? And how does this mortification of the flesh as an expression of repentance begin to take shape in our Christian lives? Quite simply, we know it by baptism. Calvin indicates in Book IV of the *Institutes* that "we are baptized into the mortification of our flesh, which begins with our baptism and which we pursue day by day and which will, moreover, be accomplished when we pass from this life to the Lord" (4.15.11). The process of mortification of the flesh is not completed in this life, only begun.

Calvin knows well that the "works of the flesh" (Gal. 5:19) persist, "just as a glowing furnace continually emits flame and sparks, or a spring ceaselessly gives forth water. For lust never actually dies and is extinguished in [us] until, freed by death from the body of death, [we] are completely divested of [ourselves]" (4.15.11). But baptism, Calvin says, "indeed promised to us the drowning of our Pharaoh [Ex. 14:28] and the mortification of our sin, but not so that it no longer exists or gives us trouble, but only that it may not overcome us" (4.15.11). God's

covenant promises received in baptism are the beginning of our mortification process and are the promises that the benefits and efficacy of Christ's death are real for us. The fellowship of Christ's death is "the focal center of baptism."¹⁷ Physical death marks the end of the mortification process, our freedom from the "body of death" which is our sin.

But liberation, that freeing has now begun in baptism. As Calvin says, baptism means that "being dead to ourselves, we may become new creatures."¹⁸ It "shows us our mortification in Christ, and new life in him" (4.15.5). With "right faith" we "truly feel the effective working of Christ's death in the mortification of [our] flesh." Baptism is thus the token of our mortification and renewal in Christ, just as it is the token of our union with Christ (4.15.6) and the token of cleansing for our whole life long (4.15.3).

Lord's Supper

As baptism begins the mortification process to be completed at death¹⁹ and is a token of our renewal in Christ, so in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper God provides the "food to sustain and preserve us in that life into which he has begotten us by his Word" (4.17.1). In the Lord's Supper we are likewise driven back to the cross of Christ. There the promise that Jesus is "the bread of life" who feeds us "unto eternal life" (John 6:55) so we may "live forever" (6:48, 50) is "indeed performed and in all respects fulfilled" (4.17.4). In the Supper we continually receive Christ's promises, made possible through his death. These promises of eternal life renew us as "Christ pours his life into us, as if it penetrated into our bones and marrow" (4.17.10). These benefits of Christ are to "nourish, refresh, strengthen, and gladden" us (4.17.3). The Supper "assures us that all that Christ did or suffered was done to quicken us; and again, that his quickening is eternal, we being ceaselessly nourished, sustained, and preserved throughout life by it" (4.17.5). The Supper is "a spiritual banquet, wherein Christ attests himself to be the life-giving bread, upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality [John 6:51]" (4.17.1). As

a sharer in our human mortality, he made us partakers in his divine immortality; when, offering himself as a sacrifice, he bore our curse in himself to imbue us with his blessing; when, by his death, he swallowed up and annihilated death [cf. I Peter 3:22, and I Cor. 15:54]; and when, in his resurrection, he raised up this corruptible flesh of ours, which he had put on, to glory and incorruption [cf. I Cor. 15:53-54] (4.17.4).

The sacraments, then, Baptism and the Lord's Supper are important in our perspectives of death for Calvin. In them the benefits and promises of Christ's death are made efficacious and real for believers. They are "signs and seals" of the covenant whereby God lavishes the riches of grace upon us and manifests himself to us (4.14.6). They confirm our faith (4.14.11) and are the "guarantees" of God's promises (4.14.12). These promises and benefits come to us in the present life. But they also launch us forward to the future life, beyond our physical death. The sacraments point us toward the resurrection. Calvin says: "Thus baptism, according to Paul, is the seal of our future resurrection [Col. 2:12]; no less does the sacred Supper invite us to confidence in it, when we receive by mouth the symbols of spiritual grace" (3.25.8).

Resurrection of the Body

As Mary Potter Engel has pointed out, the resurrection of the body is "a constant theme of Calvin's anthropology." It forms "an essential element in Calvin's understanding of the eschatological structure of human existence."²⁰

In the human existence portrayed in Scripture, Adam and Eve enjoyed life in the Garden of Eden in the fullness of "body" and "soul." God created them to enjoy the future life, also full for body and soul with no rupture between the two. But sin entered and death followed. Sin caused the body to be subjected to physical death. Soul and body are violently separated.²¹ The soul is subject to spiritual death.²² The soul is violently alienated from God. Both kinds of death are now realities for all humans. As Calvin says, "estrangement from God is eternal death" (3.18.3; cf. 3.25.12).

Some have seen Calvin's vocabulary here as making him a philosophical "dualist," or of elevating the soul and denigrating the body and thus making a hierarchical distinction. Indeed, at points Calvin refers to "the prison house of the flesh" (3.25.1) or "the earthly prison of the body" (3.6.5).²³ But as Engel indicates, more generally for Calvin,

the body has a positive, though limited, value. It is much less than the soul, but not evil. It is important to remember that it is only when the body is compared to the soul, a created essence and the seat of the *imago dei*, from the perspective of humankind that it appears to be a house of mud and dust. Seen from the perspective of God as redeemer, on the other hand, the body appears similar to and in unity with the soul as worthy of God's creating, preserving and restoring grace.²⁴

For Calvin, as Engel explains, "body" is used as "a synecdoche for the temporal life," for "sinful existence." "Soul" is "a synecdoche for redeemed existence."²⁵ The contrast is equivalent to the contrast of "flesh" and "spirit," between "eternal and temporal lives."²⁶ Thus, "this meaning of the image of the body as the prison house of the soul has to do not with the evils of matter but the servitude of sin."²⁷ Calvin uses the image to refer to "the sinful condition of humankind after the Fall, the servitude of sin; and to refer to the transience of the temporal lives which all mortals share, the exile from the kingdom of God."²⁸ This means, according to Engel, it is "impossible to classify him neatly as a dualist."²⁹

If "body" and "soul" are separated from each other because of sin and alienated from God, physical death means the "loosing" of soul from body.³⁰ Physical death is a threat to humans because it witnesses to sin, to God's judgment, and alienation from God. In commenting on Hebrews 2:15, Calvin wrote:

This passage expresses very well the misery of the life of those who are afraid of death, since it must of necessity be terrible to those who think of it without Christ: for in that case it appears to be nothing but a curse. Where does death come from but from God's anger against sin? Hence arises that state of servitude through the whole of life, that is the constant anxiety in which unhappy souls are imprisoned. The judgment of God always shows itself in consciousness of sin.³¹

For, "death here means not only the separation of soul from body, but the punishment which is imposed on us by an angry God to bring about our eternal damnation."³² So the anxiety of death is real; the threat of judgment is real; and the fear of death is a most natural human reaction.

It is here that faith in Jesus Christ brings transformation. Calvin indicates that "it is from this fear that Christ has released us, by undergoing our curse, and thus taking away what was fearful in death." For "although we must still meet death, let us nevertheless be calm and serene in living and dying, when we have Christ going before us."³³ It is Jesus Christ who "leads the way before us to encounter death. The bitterness of death is therefore moderated and, in a way, made sweet when we undergo it in common with the son of God."³⁴

Here is the significance of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism as the seal of our future resurrection and the Supper as the nourishment we need for confidence in it now point to the importance of the resurrection doctrine. In the fear of death, anxiety, and portents of God's judgment on sin, so the body is subjected to physical death and the soul is separated from the body and alienated from God—in these dire straits, Jesus Christ and the power of his resurrection makes the transformation.

By his death and resurrection, Christ is "the pledge of our coming resurrection" (3.25.3). He "obtained victory over death by rising again." He was raised by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Christ “rose again that he might have us as companions in the life to come.” Believers’ union with Christ means they “retain in death the union which we have with Christ, for those who are ingrafted into Christ by faith share death in common with Him, in order that they may share with Him in life.”³⁵ Christ’s resurrection as the guarantee of the resurrection of the body for all believers transforms attitudes and anxieties about death. Fear gives way to faith. For, as Engel writes: “Believers...have the threat of physical death removed in this life through faith, the hope of the immortality of the soul between the death of the body and its final resurrection, and the assurance that they will reach the final consummation of their salvation in body and soul.”³⁶ The final resurrection for believers entails “eternal happiness” and enjoyment of God’s presence; for unbelievers, eternal misery and separation from God (4.25.10-12).

Transformation of Death

All this, then, transforms death in Calvin’s theology, from the curse of God to the blessing of God. Calvin devoted Book III, chapter 9 of the *Institutes* to “Meditation on the Future Life.” There and in his commentaries he urges gratitude for earthly life (3.9.3) and says that this present life, “however crammed with infinite miseries it may be, is still rightly to be counted among those blessings of God which are not to be spurned” (3.9.3).

Yet believers are also to “meditate upon that eternal life to come” (3.9.4). In comparison to heaven, “our homeland,” earth seems a “place of exile,” the world a “sepulcher.” To remain in life is, in a sense, “to be immersed in death.” Compared to the heavenly life, earthly life is “doubtless to be at once despised and trampled under foot.” Though, “it is never to be hated,” says Calvin, “except in so far as it holds us subject to sin; although not even hatred of that condition may ever properly be turned against life itself.”

But death is transformed because of the eternal life found in Jesus Christ, his resurrection and the pledge of the future resurrection of the Body. Like Paul, believers are to be ready for either life or death (Phil. 1:23-24). But Christian confidence in death means believers “live and die to the Lord” and leave to God the decision of “the hour of our death and life, but in such a way that we may both burn with the zeal for death and be constant in meditation” (3.9.4). In commenting on Paul’s dilemma of whether it is better to live or die to the Lord (Phil. 1:23-14), Calvin wrote: “Believers willingly hasten to it [death], because it is a deliverance from the bondage of sin, and a passing into the Kingdom of heaven....Believers do not cease to regard death with horror, but when they turn their eyes to that life which follows death, they easily overcome their dread by that consolation.”³⁷

In commenting on Jesus’ promise that those who keep his word “will never see death,” Calvin said, “When faith quickens a [person’s] soul, the sting of death is already blunted and its poison wiped off, and so it cannot inflict a deadly wound.”³⁸ Put another way, in commenting on the phrase: “the last enemy to be destroyed is death” (I Corinthians 15:26), Calvin wrote: “I reply that it has been destroyed in such a way as to be no longer fatal for believers, but not in such a way as to cause them no trouble.” He then presented a simile: “The sword of death used to be able to pierce right to the heart, but now it is blunt. It wounds still, of course, but without any danger; for we die, but in dying, we pass over into life.” He hearkens back to Romans 6 (vv. 12-14) and says “we must look upon death in this light, that it undoubtedly dwells in us, but that it has no dominion over us.”³⁹ Death dwells within it; but it does not reign.

No Fear of Death

The most practical expression of all this is that Christians need not fear death. It is human nature to “dread and shrink from death.” We can “never completely free” ourselves from it; “*but*,” says Calvin, “faith must overcome that fear and refuse to let it keep us from leaving the world obediently, whenever God calls us.”⁴⁰ Calvin found it “monstrous” that many who call themselves Christians have such a “great fear of death, rather than a desire for it, that they tremble at the least mention of it, as of something dire and disastrous” (3.9.5). There should be, says

Calvin, a “light of piety to overcome and suppress that fear, whatever it is, by a greater consolation.” For “if we deem this unstable, defective, corruptible, fleeting, wasting, rotting tabernacle of our body to be so dissolved that it is soon renewed unto a firm, perfect, incorruptible, and finally, heavenly glory, will not faith compel us ardently to seek what nature dreads?” (3.9.5). Pointedly, Calvin writes: “No one has made progress in the school of Christ who does not joyfully await the day of death and final resurrection.” “‘Rejoice,’ says the Lord, ‘and raise your heads; for your redemption is drawing near’” (Luke 21:28 paraphrase).

This transformation of death by Christ, for Calvin, means believers can ultimately lift their heads “above everything earthly,” even as they see the wicked flourish, gaining wealth and honor, while apparently “enjoying deep peace, taking pride in the splendor and luxury of all their possessions, abounding with every delight” (3.9.6).⁴¹ Those who have been baptized into Christ and who are nourished by his Supper through the course of their days and who look for the final and future resurrection to the blessed presence of God can endure injustices perpetrated upon them. For they may look forward to the peace of God’s kingdom, when they will be fed “with the unspeakable sweetness of [God’s] delights” and be elevated to God’s “sublime fellowship,” in short, when they are made “sharers in [God’s] happiness” (3.9.6). This is “the victory of faith.”⁴² In contrast to unbelievers who “are in a constant ferment of anxiety and are for ever stubbornly murmuring against God because they think they will soon perish and they place in this life their highest and final hope of happiness,” Calvin says believers “live with a quiet mind and go on to meet death without hesitation because a better hope is laid up for us.”⁴³ “To conclude in a word,” he says, “If believers’ eyes are turned to the power of the resurrection, in their hearts the cross of Christ will at last triumph over the devil, flesh, sin, and wicked [persons]” (3.9.6).

Funerals and Prayers for the Dead

On funerals and prayers for the dead, Calvin indicates that the continuing presence of “the sacred and inviolable custom of burial” has been sanctioned and permitted as “an earnest of new life” (3.25.5). Burial rites were practiced by the Old Testament patriarchs and, says Calvin, “God willed that the same custom remain among the Gentiles so that an image of the resurrection set before them might shake off their drowsiness.” For why, he argues, “should a burial rite arise...unless to let [people] know that a new life was prepared for the bodies laid away? (3.25.8). Funerals can be useful if we look to their purposes. But in a sermon on Job, Calvin warned that pompous funerals and magnificent tombs were a rebellion against God.⁴⁴ In his piece, “On Luxury,” he chided: “I must speak about funeral services, and the way we extend our pleasures after death. What we cannot give to ourselves we give to an unfeeling corpse, as if we would get some pleasure from that.”⁴⁵

Yet while one can find historical precedents for the custom of burial, all such is lacking, according to Calvin, for the practice of prayers for the dead (3.5.10). The ancients who did utter such prayers were not grounded in God’s command or example but were yielding to human nature. Thus their example is not an example to imitate. Also, Calvin allowed, they were moved to seek comfort for relieving their sorrow and “it seemed unhuman to them not to show before God some evidence of their love toward the dead.” All people know by experience how human nature is “inclined to this feeling.” Even Augustine yielded to human custom and affection for his mother in his book *The Care to Be Taken for the Dead*. But later this practice of prayers for the dead “became the papacy’s principal mark of holiness.” Calvin rejects the practice because it is not Scripturally grounded: “The entire law and gospel do not furnish so much as a single syllable of leave to pray for the dead, it is to profane the invocation of God to attempt more than he has bidden us,” he writes.⁴⁶ Also, it does no good. For even Augustine taught that all the godly, “immediately after death enjoy blessed repose.” If this then is their condition, “what, I beg of you,” he asks, “will our prayers confer upon them?” (3.5.10). Theologically, Calvin believed that “to take part in prayers made for the dead can only diminish the unique sacrifice of our Lord Christ.”⁴⁷

Death in Calvin's Theology

Our survey has indicated that the anxiety theme, while present in Calvin's theology, is primarily a reality for those who do not know the benefits of Jesus Christ. We have seen this theologically by understanding how death is perceived by Calvin in the whole web of Christian theology. It is also true, again as Engel has pointed out, in Calvin's contrast of "heavenly" and "earthly" wisdom.⁴⁸

Platonists saw the goal of philosophy to be in providing persons with the right attitude toward death. Philosophy was "preparation for death," a *meditatio mortis*. Calvin knew this about Platonism, but criticized it because he believed earthly philosophy had no power to produce tranquility in the human heart anxious over death; and also because it simply could not provide the resources to cultivate a right attitude for the present life.

God can positively use the insights of earthly philosophies. But it is ultimately the "heavenly philosophy" alone—the authentic knowledge that comes from God—which gives the true knowledge of the "eschatological structure of human existence, that is able to bestow the hope of the future life upon believers."⁴⁹ This is its difference from all other philosophies. Believers have a confident and certain hope of their celestial heritage in Jesus Christ, so they can fulfill God's will and live and die according to God's will. They may thus, as Calvin says, "face death with a joyous courage and not with clenched teeth, as unbelievers do."⁵⁰ Calvin's understanding of death distinguishes his heavenly philosophy from all other philosophies for "it reconceives the task of philosophy as *meditatio futurae vitae* rather than continuing it as *meditatio mortis*."⁵¹

Thus, both theologically and "philosophically," Calvin viewed death in the full confidence of Christian faith. He saw stark contrast between understandings and attitudes of unbelievers and believers. Anxiety may be real; death may be the unique anxiety of human existence. But this is not the last word for Calvin; indeed it is not the primary word, nor the determinative word. For anxiety and death are both captive to the magnificent triumph of Jesus Christ who was "dead and buried," but who also "on the third day rose again from the dead." Here is the "fulfillment of salvation" and, says Calvin, "the victory of our faith over death lies in his resurrection alone" (2.16.13). Here is where death and anxiety are ultimately laid to rest. Perhaps it all comes down to Calvin's comment on II Corinthians 5:8, on the phrase, "we are of good courage, I say, and are willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be at home with the Lord." There he wrote: "The greatest of evils is death and yet believers long for it, because it is the beginning of perfect blessedness."⁵²

NOTES

¹William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 32.

²Bouwsma, p. 40.

³Bouwsma, p. 40.

⁴Bouwsma, p. 40.

⁵See Edward A. Dowey, Jr.'s review in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (1990), p. 847.

⁶See my "Some Aspects of Death and Dying in Puritanism," *Calviniana*, ed. Robert V. Schnucker, *Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies*, Vol. X (Kirksville, Missouri: NMSU Press, 1988), pp. 165-83 for some elaboration of this.

⁷*Comm. II Timothy 4:6; Deuteronomy 32:48.*

⁸*Comm. Genesis 50:2.*

⁹*Comm. Acts 2:24f.*; cf. Sermon No. 98 on Job, 468.

¹⁰*Comm. Psalm 30:6* cited in Bouwsma, p. 40.

¹¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, *Library of Christian Classics*, 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.17.10. Further citations will be indicated in the text. Bouwsma also cites Calvin's *Comm. Ezekiel 5:18* where he says "we cannot move one step without meeting ten deaths," p. 40.

¹²Dowey, p. 847.

¹³*Comm. Matthew 10:32.*

¹⁴*Comm. Gal. 2:20 (in nostra a persona passus est).* Calvin combines many biblical images for salvation in his discussions of Christ's atonement. For example: "Christ was offered to the Father in death as an expiatory sacrifice that when he discharged all satisfaction through his sacrifice, we might cease to be afraid of God's wrath" (2.16.6). Cf. *Comm. Gal. 2:21.*

¹⁵Sermon No. 41 on Deuteronomy, 383 cited in Bouwsma, p. 46. Calvin says Jesus began to "pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us" from the time of his baptism and "from the time when he took on the form of a servant" (2.16.5).

¹⁶*Institutes 3.3.8.* Cf. John H. Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), pp. 74ff.

¹⁷*Comm. Romans 6:3.*

¹⁸*Comm. Romans 6:4.*

¹⁹Ronald S. Wallace writes that for Calvin death is "the completion of the process of our mortification in Christ which helps to complete our vivification in Christ. To die in faith is the last act in bearing our Cross with Jesus Christ in faith," *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), p. 268.

²⁰Mary Potter Engel, *Hon Calvin's Perspectival Anthropology* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1988), p. 176. Cf. Charles Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy*, Studies in the History of Christian Thought, ed. Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977), ch. 5 and Thomas F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (London: Lutherworth Press, 1949).

²¹Partee writes that "according to Calvin, there would have been no separation of soul and body if there had not been sin. Without sin the body itself would have been immortal," p. 63. Cf. *Comm. Genesis 3:19*.

²²Margaret R. Miles points out that "the body plays no role, for Calvin, either in the corruption of the soul or in its own corruption, but is the helpless victim, along with the soul, of the destructive hegemony of 'flesh.'" See "Theology, Anthropology, and the Human Body" in Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, *Harvard Theological Review*, 74:3 (1981), p. 314.

²³Cf. *Institutes* 1.15.2; 3.9.4. Calvin also frequently used this image in his *Psychopannychia*, written in 1534 and published in 1542. See the work in Calvin's *Tracts and Treatises*, 2 vols., ed. T.F. Torrance, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1958), 2:439, 442, 429, 266. Cf. Engel's discussion in Appendix V.

²⁴Engel, pp. 169-70. Engel's approach to Calvin's "perspectival anthropology" involves making the distinctions between the perspectives by which elements are viewed: God's or humanity's. Miles indicates that for Calvin, "like sexual lust, death is not located in the body but in 'flesh,' as the outcome and symptom of the fallen condition of humanity," p. 316.

²⁵Engel, pp. 170, 172.

²⁶Engel, p. 173.

²⁷Engel, p. 171. Partee points out that "Calvin, whose body was constantly wracked with pain, does call the body, that is the body under the condition of sin, a 'reformatory' (*ergastulum*; 1.15.2), and 'prison' (*carcer*, 3.9.4). At the same time he knew that men are called to present their bodies as a living sacrifice to God. The body is the temple of God [*Excuse de Jehan Calvin a Messieurs les Nicodemites, Calvini Opera* 6, 611]. The fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer shows that God does not disdain to take the body under his providence [3.20.44]," p. 64. On Calvin's illnesses see Charles L. Cooke, "Calvin's Illnesses and Their Relation to Christian Vocation," *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 59-70.

²⁸Engel, p. 174.

²⁹Engel, p. 174.

³⁰*Comm. Philippians 1:23*. Cf. *Comm. II Corinthians 2:8*: "Souls loosed from their bodies live with God"; *Comm. II Timothy 4:6*: "When we die we do not altogether perish; it is only a departing of the soul from the body;" *Comm. I Thessalonians 4:16*: Death "ordinarily is the separation of the soul from the body."

³¹*Comm. Hebrews 2:15*. Cf. *Comm. Philippians 2:27* where Calvin wrote that "at the death of any one, they [believers] are reminded of the anger of God against sin"; and "God's judgment cannot be felt without evoking the dread of death," *Institutes* 2.8.3.

³²*Comm. Hebrews 2:5*. Cf. *Comm. Genesis 2:16*: “Death, therefore, is now a terror to us; first, because there is a kind of annihilation, as it respects the body; then, because the soul feels the curse of God. We must also see what is the cause of death, namely, alienation from God.”

³³*Comm. Hebrews 2:15*.

³⁴*Comm. John 12:26*.

³⁵*Comm. I Thessalonians 4:14 (coniunctio cum Christo)*.

³⁶Engel, p. 177. Engel continues: “The resurrection of the body, then, for Calvin is a completion of the process of being restored to the incorruptible life for which mankind was created. This process begins during the life of the believer, is continued after his or her death, and is consummated with the final resurrection.

³⁷*Comm. Philippians 1:23*.

³⁸*Comm. John 8:51*.

³⁹*Comm. I Corinthians 15:26*.

⁴⁰*Comm. II Timothy 4:6*. Cf. *Comm. John 21:18* where Calvin writes: “The fear of death is naturally implanted in all, for it is repugnant to nature to wish to be destroyed.” This however, “urges us to prayer, for we should never be able without God’s special help to overcome the fear of death.”

⁴¹Cf. *Institutes 1.10.2; 3.7.8* and *Comm. Luke 12:17* where Calvin writes of those who “oppose their heaped up riches like a brazen rampart against death.”

⁴²*Comm. Hebrews 10:35*.

⁴³*Comm. II Corinthians 5:6*.

⁴⁴Wallace, p. 268 n. 4 from Sermon on Job 1:20-2: “*Et neantmoins on en voit beaucoup qui bataillent contre une telle nécessité: ils feront des sepulchres braves, ils auront des funerailles triomphantes: il semble que telles gens veulent resister à Dieu.*”

⁴⁵“On Luxury,” in *Calvin’s Ecclesiastical Advice*, trans. Marty Beaty and Benjamin W. Farley (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), p. 85.

⁴⁶Cf. *Comm. I Corinthians 1:10* where Calvin says prayers for the dead has “no scriptural support”; and *Comm. Colossians 4:3*.

⁴⁷*Calvin’s Ecclesiastical Advice*, p. 156 from a circular letter Calvin sent to several churches on various matters of order and discipline.

⁴⁸See Engel, ch. 3 particularly, pp. 110-14.

⁴⁹Engel, p. 112. Partee writes: “It is true that Calvin’s Christian *philosophy* does not differ significantly from Christian *theology* except that the designation “Christian philosophy” places Calvin in the context of Christian humanism and indicates a humanistic interest in classical thought,” p. 23.

⁵⁰Sermon 159 on Job 42 in Engel, p. 112.

⁵¹Engel, p. 112. Calvin wrote: “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 hear Christ living and reigning within him [Gal. 2:20].” See *Institutes* 3.7.1.

⁵²*Comm. II Corinthians* 5:8.