CHAPTER 8

‘A prison house of riches’: Calvin’s theology of the human body

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Margaret Stiles is correct when she suggests that a study of Calvin’s theology of the body must be approached by first considering Calvin’s theological agenda and the context in which he wrote his theology.[1] This consideration is especially important in this case for Calvin did not write a separate volume dedicated to a theology of the body, nor did he designate a specific section of his major theological work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, to a discussion of the human body. Thus, our study will draw upon statements made by Calvin about the body provided throughout the *Institutes* as they are given in the context of other important topics.[2]

The goal of this study, however, is not merely the recitation of texts from the *Institutes* related to Calvin’s view of the body, organized under their respective categories. It is the argument of this essay that Calvin succumbed to some Pla-

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1 Margaret L. Stiles, ‘Theology, Anthropology and the Human Body in Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*,’ *Harvard Theological Review* 74.3 (1981), 303.

2 Even in light of the fact that Calvin did not designate a section in his *Institutes* or set out to write a separate volume on a theology of the body, it is somewhat surprising to find so little written on this topic. For example, in secondary works that broadly examine Calvin’s teaching, very little to no attention is given to Calvin’s theology of the body. Books in which you might expect such discussion yield meager results. For example, John Leith’s *John Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox: 1989) says little about Calvin’s view of the body or the physical aspects of life. Paul Helm’s book, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 129-132, provides a brief discussion of the body in relation to Calvin’s view of the soul, but nothing beyond this short inquiry. A. Michael Hunter’s *The Teaching of Calvin: A Modern Interpretation* (London: James Clarke, 1950) says very little and many biographies follow this same pattern. Mary Potter Engel, *John Calvin’s Perspectival Anthropology* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), ix, confirms this observation when she notes that a study of Calvin’s general anthropology, to say nothing of Calvin’s view of the human body, ‘has been one of the doctrines most neglected by scholars’. See also Jason Van Vliet, *Children of God: The Imago Dei in John Calvin and his Context* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 16.

tonic influence as he formulated his statements on the human body thus tarnishing—albeit slightly—his otherwise edifying and biblically faithful theology of the body. I will examine specifically this issue in the latter portion of this essay.

Accordingly, this study will proceed in three stages.[3] First, I will establish Calvin's general view toward the human body. In this section I will demonstrate the many ways in which Calvin valued and exalted the body and spoke positively about the physical character of earthly life. Second, I will examine the places in which Calvin demonstrates hints of Platonic influence with regard to the human body, noting especially Calvin's penchant for referring to the body as a 'prison house.' Finally, I will offer a brief biblical and theological evaluation of Calvin's theology of the human body.

A storehouse overflowing with inestimable riches: Calvin's positive view of the human body

As I have noted above, Calvin's view of the human body throughout the *Institutes* is largely positive. He speaks explicitly of the beauty of the body and defends the goodness of marriage and sex against the Roman Catholic Church's insistence on singleness and celibacy for members of the clergy. Calvin recognizes the necessity of food and drink for physical sustenance and rejoices in God's care for the body through the supply of its daily needs. He also condemns physical cruelty and exhibits compassion for those who are suffering persecution, while decrying not only laziness and gluttony but any spiritual activity that suppresses the impulse to serve others physically. Finally, Calvin exalts the humanity of Christ and the hope of the resurrection. We will examine each of these ideas more thoroughly under their respective headings.

The beauty and wonder of the human body

Calvin clearly recognizes the magnificence of the human body and the divine wisdom displayed in its configuration. To Calvin, the human body is a masterpiece—'a storehouse of inestimable riches'.[4] Indeed, Calvin views the human

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[3] The primary source for developing Calvin's theology of the body in this essay will be Calvin's *Institutes*, although some reference will be made to his commentaries as well. The method for choosing passages of Scripture upon which to concentrate in Calvin's commentaries will depend mainly on references made to Scripture in the text or footnotes of the *Institutes*.

[4] John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (translated by Ford Lewis Battles and edited by John T. McNeill; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.5.4. See also *Inst* 1.5.2. Page 54n.7 directs us to Calvin's comments on Psalm 139.15 where he ponders God's immense wisdom in creating the human body. Calvin reminds us how fittingly the body has been made for the world in which we live. Any change in our bodily structure brings about serious inconvenience for life in this world as we see in those who have suffered major physical injury, such as an amputation or paralysis. See John Calvin, *Psalms 93-150* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), Ps. 139.15.

person as the pinnacle of God's creation.[5] The very complexity and wonder of the human body is, according to Calvin, a '[sign] of divinity'.[6] For this reason, Calvin strongly condemns unbelievers for not recognizing the 'workshop' of God's creativity in their own bodies and for failing to praise God for his goodness and manifold wisdom apparent therein.[7] The refusal to recognize the hand of God in the intricate complexity of the human body, then, was inexcusable.[8] Nevertheless, the body is not to be worshipped, despite its glorious complexity and unfathomable intricacy; nor is it to become a representation for the invisible God. Calvin condemned all idolatry, especially worship of the human form.[9] Calvin's rejection of idolatry, however, did not stem from disdain for the human body in and of itself, but from the fact that God had forbidden any attempt to domesticate his divine nature by use of a human form.[10]

The goodness of marriage and sex

Although Calvin says little in the *Institutes* about sex specifically, he does speak often of marriage, upholding it as a sacred and honorable institution. For example, he acknowledges the kindness of the Lord in providing marriage for both companionship and for the promotion of purity.[11] Thus, lust and fornication are condemned with the latter viewed with stronger disdain than the former because fornication 'brands the body with its own mark'.[12] According to Calvin, fornication is most abominable since it is a sin committed against the body, whereas, echoing Paul, other sins are committed outside the body. Marriage, then, acts as a prophylactic, preventing men and women from indulging in sexual relations outside the marriage covenant by providing the proper context for sexual expression and enjoyment.[13]

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5 *Inst* 1.14.20.

6 *Inst* 1.5.4. See also Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (London: Lutterworth, 1956), 41-44.

7 *Inst* 1.5.4.

8 See also John Calvin, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 70.

9 *Inst* 1.11.1-2.

10 *Inst* 1.11.2. Calvin has no problem with images and sculptures of the body as such—he views these forms of art as gifts from God that can provide legitimate pleasure (see 1.11.12). What Calvin is primarily concerned about here is the corruption of *worship* through the use of such images and sculptures. See also John Calvin, *Commentary on the Last Four Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 107-108.

11 *Inst* 2.8.41.

12 *Inst* 2.8.41. See also John Calvin, *First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 221.

13 Although there has been some speculation on whether or not Calvin himself enjoyed the sexual component of marriage, John Witte Jr. and Robert M. Kingdom set the record straight, noting that Calvin and his first wife enjoyed a 'very happy honeymoon', while Calvin was known to repeatedly counsel couples to enjoy each other

In his censures against the Roman Catholic Church and their view of marriage, it is clear that when Calvin affirms the goodness of marriage, he includes sexual intercourse between husband and wife within the scope of his blessing. For example, he strongly disapproves of the Catholic Church's 'rigid and inexorable'[14] requirement of celibacy for priests. This obligation for priests, according to Calvin, not only defies clear biblical teaching; it also exasperates sin among Catholic priests and pitches souls 'into a pit of despair'.[15] The Catholic Church even went so far as to label marriage 'uncleanness and pollution of the flesh'.[16] Calvin, on the other hand, elevated the institution of marriage to a place of high honor, affirming the biblical vision of marriage: that the earthly reality portrayed the spiritual reality of Christ's relationship with his bride, the church.

Furthermore, Calvin chastises individual clergy for their injudicious willingness to bind themselves to a vow of celibacy, reproving them for not only disregarding Scripture, but for the folly in thinking they are able to endure a celibate lifestyle. Those who enter rashly into vows of celibacy have not adequately considered their propensity to sin and, as a result, have developed an unrealistic view of their ability to resist temptation and remain pure. The gift of celibacy, according to Calvin, was usually temporary in nature and provided by God as particular occasions required it.[17] To resist marriage or to place the yoke of celibacy upon the clergy was, among other things, to misunderstand both Christ and Paul's teaching about such matters.[18] According to Calvin, marriage was not only to be held in high honor and viewed as a gift from God; it was a means by which God helps his people remain sexually pure.

God's providential care for the body

Throughout the *Institutes*, Calvin makes many references to both the necessity of food and drink for the nourishment of our bodies and to the kindness of the Lord in supplying these provisions.[19] In his lengthy discussion on the Lord's Supper, Calvin establishes Christ's spiritual nourishment of the believer

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sexually. See *Sex, Marriage, and Family in John Calvin's Geneva* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1.99.

14 *Inst* 4.12.23.

15 *Inst* 4.12.23.

16 *Inst* 4.12.24.

17 *Inst* 2.8.43. Calvin offers similar remarks in his commentary on Genesis, strongly reproving those who suggested that the celibate lifestyle is to be preferred above marriage. See John Calvin, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 128-29.

18 *Inst* 2.8.42. In his comments on Matthew 19.12, Calvin strongly emphasizes the notion that voluntary celibacy was not something chosen or declined by one's own free will (like the Papists had suggested), but was something given by God to certain individuals. It is folly, therefore, for a man to remain unmarried if he has not received this gift. See John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 387.

19 *Inst* 1.16.3.

through the table's elements upon a person's need of bread and wine for bodily sustenance.[20] In other words, Calvin does not disregard the body's need for physical nutrition or suggest that we should forego such provision in favor of a severe asceticism. For Calvin, the very meaning of the Lord's Supper hinges on the reality that God created a universe in which people need food and drink to live.

Calvin also speaks of God's providential care for the physical welfare of his creatures.[21] God's sovereign care for his creatures' safety and wellbeing is often expressed in the furnishing of secondary means by which people are able to guard and preserve their own life; the refusal of these gracious provisions is folly.[22] Indeed, human beings have the responsibility to make use of the wisdom and other advantages God gives his creatures in order to protect one's life and welfare.[23] Further, he recognizes the respect due to the body by his affirmation of the sixth commandment, 'You shall not kill.' Within the sixth commandment, Calvin saw the desire of God for the safety of all people,[24] yet he understood the underlying principle in this commandment to be God's concern, not merely for the safety of his creatures, but for the preservation of the image of God in humanity.[25]

Accordingly, people can freely give themselves over to God's care because God is concerned with both his spiritual and physical welfare.[26] Thus, by acknowledging and exalting God's care and provision for our physical wellbeing, Calvin demonstrates his own attitude toward the body: it is a gift from God, worthy of nurture and protection. This is not to imply, however, that Calvin condoned the preservation of life and health at all costs. Certain sections in the *Institutes* suggest that there are situations in which it is both good and right to give the body over to harm—and, quite possibly, to death—in order to fulfill

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20 *Inst* 4.17.1; 4.17.3; 4.17.5.

21 Calvin saw the world as abundantly fitted for humanity's flourishing. See his helpful comments in *Psalms 1-33* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 105-106. See also T.F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1977), 25.

22 *Inst* 1.17.4. See also, Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 75.

23 *Inst* 1.17.4. Calvin practiced what he preached by attending to the means that God had given people to take care of their bodies. Calvin himself diligently sought the help of physicians for his many physical ailments, which included cancer, hemorrhoids, gout, kidney stones, and several other serious problems. See John Calvin, *The Letters of John Calvin* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1980), 242-46. While thankful for the remedies God had provided his creatures to aid their various ailments, Calvin also believed that physical disease was a result of sin. See Davis Young, *Calvin and the Natural World* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007), 146, and John Calvin, *Isaiah 33-66* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 400-401. See Young's chapter, 'Calvin on the Human Body, Medicine and Origins', 147-49, for an interesting survey of Calvin's discussion of various physical maladies in specific texts of Scripture.

24 *Inst* 2.8.39.

25 *Inst* 2.8.40.

26 *Inst* 3.20.44.

God's will.[27] Yet, Calvin also observes that we tend to care more for our body than we do for our soul,[28] much like the Israelites did to their own spiritual peril.[29] Hence, Calvin maintains that spiritual blessing is more important than physical blessing[30] and reminds his readers that their happiness does not consist primarily in an abundance of material blessings, but in the hope of a future heavenly life.[31]

Compassion for those suffering persecution, condemnation of physical cruelty

Calvin further demonstrates his esteem for the human body in his compassion for those suffering persecution and in his condemnation of physical cruelty. His concern for those suffering persecution first arises in the *Institutes*, not from explicit statements, but in his appeal to King Francis I in the introduction. One of the primary reasons for writing the *Institutes* was to promote the relief of suffering for persecuted evangelicals by quelling rumors about and establishing the soundness of Christian doctrine.[32] Inherent in the plea to King Francis to end the persecution against French Christians was Calvin's recognition that a desire for physical peace and health is a legitimate concern.[33] Thus, he diligently sought reprieve from physical suffering for his brothers and sisters in Christ. Calvin also demonstrated his regard for the human body by his disapproval of physical cruelty.

Calvin's condemnation of physical cruelty is found most overtly in the latter portions of the *Institutes* and specifically in his discussion of government. Although he maintained the government's divine right to exercise vengeance upon wrongdoers, he objected to cruel and unfair use of force. To Calvin's mind, rulers were to give the utmost attention to the issue of retributive justice so that they neither failed to exercise appropriate constraint when they executed punishment nor neglected their duty to castigate lawbreakers out of misdirected kindness.[34] Governments, according to Calvin, were also allowed to engage in lawful war. In the pursuit of just war, however, magistrates were to watch over themselves to ensure they acted with restraint and mercy toward their enemy.[35]

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[27] *Inst* 2.15.4. See also 1.8.13 where Calvin displays his admiration of the martyrs who died for true Scripture doctrine. Calvin, however, did not accept the idea that martyrdom was somehow meritorious, or that it purchased the forgiveness of sins (3.5.3).

[28] *Inst* 3.20.44.

[29] *Inst* 2.9.23.

[30] *Inst* 3.20.44.

[31] *Inst* 2.15.4.

[32] See Calvin's 'Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France,' sections 1 and 2. For more on this, see T.H.L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Full Scale Life of the Controversial Reformation Leader and Influential Theologian* (Batavia, IL: Lion, 1975), 40-43.

[33] See Calvin's 'Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France,' section 3.

[34] *Inst* 4.20.10.

[35] *Inst* 4.20.12.

Criticism of monastic orders

In Calvin's criticism of the monastic orders, we find that he disapproved of laziness and gluttony as well as any spiritual practice that led devotees away from physical work or service. According to Calvin, the contemporary monastic order had degenerated from ancient practices—practices that he, for the most part, respected. In order to compare the present-day monastic order to the ancient practices, Calvin cites Augustine at length. According to Augustine, the early monastics were an example of true piety. In order to escape 'the allurements of the world,'[36] they had gathered together into a 'most chaste and holy common life,'[37] devoting themselves to the monastic community, to prayer, to readings, and to theological discussion. These men were not guilty of pride, laziness or materialism; they lived together, holding everything in common and feeding themselves only by what they had provided by their own hands. And although these men approved of fasting, they did not require those who were physically sick to abstain from food, nor did they advocate severe asceticism in order to attain holiness. Indeed, they rebuked those who promoted such restrictions.[38]

The present day monastics were, however, guilty of legalism, laziness and gluttony. In their observances and requirements, Calvin contends that the contemporary monks had departed from Augustine—although they claimed him as their predecessor—by obligating men to abide by extra-biblical constraints and by perverting the underlying purpose of the monastic lifestyle.[39] They had also failed to recognize that brotherly love and church unity were essential components to the monastic life.[40] Moreover, the contemporary monastics had fallen into the temptation of equating true spirituality with indolence—masking their laziness with appeals to meditation and other non-physical activities—and had also bound themselves to vows of perpetual virginity; a practice Calvin considered both dangerous and presumptuous.[41] On the whole, the existing monastic order had drifted so far from the ancient practice that it left no room for genuine comparison.

Yet, Calvin did not fully endorse the ancient practices either. While acknowledging many of the positive aspects of the ancient monastics, he disapproved of their overly rigid lifestyle and other significant elements of their praxis. He notes that although their lifestyle was not motivated by superstition, the ancient monks exhibited an 'immoderate affectation and perverse zeal'.[42] According to Calvin, the ancient monks had misunderstood the call to holiness

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[36] *Inst* 4.13.9—quoted from Augustine, *Morals of the Catholic Church*.
[37] *Inst* 4.13.9.
[38] *Inst* 4.13.9.
[39] *Inst* 4.13.10.
[40] *Inst* 4.13.10.
[41] *Inst* 4.13.17.
[42] *Inst* 4.13.16.

insofar that they attempted to pursue piety detached from the world in which they lived. It was God's design that devotion to Christ and the pursuit of holiness would occur within the greater community of believers and the world. Thus, although he did not note any other practices among the ancient monastics that were liable to correction, Calvin does go so far as to say their example in this respect was both useless and dangerous.[43] Here, in his critique of the ancient and contemporary monastic order, Calvin holds a view toward the body and to earthly life that rejected unnecessary rigidity and pseudo-spiritual sloth.

Calvin's defense of Christ's humanity

We learn much about Calvin's value of the human body from his discussion on the humanity of Christ. Calvin exalted the fact that the eternal Son of God had come to earth, not by taking on the appearance of human flesh as the Marcionites claimed, but by engrafting himself in a fully human nature. Nor did Christ take upon himself 'heavenly flesh,' as the Manichees asserted; on the contrary, he was truly human, susceptible to all the infirmities to which humankind is, by nature, disposed.[44]

Calvin goes to great length to defend the notion that Christ was fully human. He appeals to several biblical texts while affirming Christ's human decent from the line of David and, ultimately, the line of Adam. He sets his assertion of Christ's physical decent alongside his discussion of the virgin birth in order to demonstrate that Christ, though conceived miraculously, clothed himself in genuine humanity. The Marcionites had argued that Christ took his body 'out of nothing,' appealing to the fact that Matthew's genealogy only provided a list of Joseph's ancestors and that Mary, being a woman, was 'without seed,' and therefore unable to contribute to Christ's humanity. Calvin dismisses their argument and reaffirms the reality that Christ was, in fact, 'engendered by Mary from her seed'.[45] Thus Calvin concludes that Christ was not only true God, he was true man. The significance of this point for our purposes is the acknowledgment that Calvin esteemed the human body: it was, of all things, a suitable *telos* for the Son of God who will be embodied for all eternity.[46]

The resurrection of the body

Finally, Calvin's understanding of the resurrection confirms the notion that he greatly valued the human body. Practically, the resurrection from the dead was an appropriate, Spirit-guided hope for believers,[47] and Christian practice was incomplete unless the resurrection was the object of regular reflection.[48] Thus,

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43 *Inst* 4.13.16.
44 *Inst* 4.13.16.
45 *Inst* 2.13.3.
46 *Inst* 4.17.29.
47 *Inst* 3.25.8.
48 *Inst* 3.25.1.

Calvin pondered the truth of the resurrection at length in the *Institutes*, arguing for its biblical basis and defending it against both denial and misunderstanding.[49]

Against the Manichaeans, who could not countenance the idea of resurrection because they regarded the flesh to be 'consumed with rottenness', or who imagined that the resurrection would provide Christians with new bodies unlike our current, earthly bodies, Calvin argued for a resurrection not only of our flesh, but of the same flesh in which we were embodied while on earth. [50] While Calvin admitted that our bodies were not, in their fallen state, fit for heaven, he nonetheless recognized the intrinsic goodness of God's design and creation of the body by his assertion that we will receive the same bodies we once had (albeit glorified) at the resurrection.[51]

From this brief survey, we can clearly see that Calvin valued the human body as marvelous work of divine creativity, worthy of care, protection and, finally, resurrection. Earthly life is a blessing, while physical enjoyments—especially those found in food and marriage—were to be received with thanksgiving; abuse of the body through gluttony and neglect of the body from laziness were to be avoided. Nevertheless, Calvin's theology of the body is not entirely positive. Although he remains tethered to Scripture throughout the *Institutes*, thus forming a generally positive view of the human body, Calvin fails to separate himself fully from Platonic ideas about the body. It is to this issue I now turn.

Longing for escape from this prison? Platonic influence on Calvin's view of the body

Throughout the *Institutes*, Calvin clearly discerns two essential components in the human being: body and soul.[52] To Calvin, this is an issue to which Scripture and reason so clearly testify that it should be 'beyond controversy'. Furthermore, he saw the image of God residing in the composite human being—not exclusively in either body or soul, but in the whole person.[53] There is, however, a tendency in the reformer to value the soul over the body and, at some points, to view the body with contempt. For example, in the introduction to the section

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[49] *Inst* 3, 25.3.

[50] *Inst* 3.25.7.

[51] *Inst* 3.25.7.

[52] See Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 129-132; John Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). For Calvin's own statements about Plato, see *Inst* 1.5.11 and 1.15.6.

[53] See Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, 38-39 and David Vandunren, 'The Content of Natural Law: Calvin's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,' *Journal of Church and State* 46 (2004), 511. According to Vandunren, the placement of the divine image in the body in addition to the soul was a 'remarkable move' for Calvin's day. See also Engel, *Perspectival Anthropology*, 43-47.

in which Calvin aptly defends the notion that we consist of two essential components, he also, in passing, ascribes greater honor to the immaterial part, calling it his 'nobler part'.[54] In a discussion on the image of God in in humans, Calvin designates the soul as the primary seat of the *imago*.[55]

Calvin further strengthens a disjunction between the body and soul with statements in which he classifies the body as a 'prison' or 'prison house'. The influence here in the use of this phrase is clearly Platonic.[56] He first uses these designations in reference to the body in his discussion and defense of humanity's immaterial nature.

> For even when these terms [soul and spirit] are joined together they differ from one another in meaning; yet when the word 'spirit' is used by itself, it means the same thing as soul; as when Solomon, speaking of death, says that then the 'spirit returns to God who gave it [Eccl 12.7]. And when Christ commended his spirit to the Father [Luke 23.46] and Stephen to his to Christ [Acts 7.59] they meant only that when the *soul is freed from the prison house of the body*, God is its perpetual guardian.[57]

In this example, Calvin appears to access the phrase 'prison house' chiefly as a passing reference in his defense of the existence of the soul. Nevertheless, the very terminology of 'prison house' and Calvin's attachment of this phrase to the human body is somewhat unexpected, given what we have seen throughout

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[54] *Inst* 1.15.2.

[55] *Inst* 1.15.3. In addition, in his discussion of the sixth commandment Calvin uses the fact that God has established rigorous laws for the protection of the body to infer that the soul is valued higher than the body in God's economy (*Inst* 2.8.40). Although Calvin ties the image of God to both a person's material and immaterial aspects, he, like elsewhere, appears to place greater worth upon the immaterial. See also Engel, *Perspectival Anthropology*, 162-63, where she quotes from Calvin's remarks on Job 37, that 'our souls are more precious to [God] than our bodies'.

[56] Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, 131. According to Francois Wendel, Plato's influence on Calvin appears to have come during subsequent publications of his *Institutes*. See, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 115. See also Randall Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 15. Charles Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 51, suggests that Calvin's view of human beings is 'perhaps more indebted to the insights of the philosophers than any other area of his thought'. Partee, however, wants to avoid the conclusion that Calvin's anthropology is philosophical in its entirety. In this we are agreed: Calvin does depart from the Plato in significant areas and tethers his doctrine of human beings to the Scriptures. The argument of this essay, however, is not primarily concerned with demonstrating that Calvin's anthropology was basically biblical, but that it retained some unhelpful vestiges of Platonism, especially in Calvin's discussion of the human body. See also Henri Blocher, 'Calvin's Theological Anthropology,' in Sung Wook Chung (ed.), *John Calvin and Evangelical Theology: Legacy and Prospect* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 75-76.

[57] *Inst* 1.15.2.

the *Institutes* of his generally positive view of the body. Moreover, he continues in another paragraph to suggest that, 'we journey away from God so long as we dwell in the flesh, but that we enjoy his presence outside the flesh [1 Cor 5.6,8].'[58] In other words, not only did Calvin utilize the phrase 'prison house' to defend the notion that we possess an immaterial nature; he also viewed this 'prison' as something from which to escape in order to fully enjoy God's presence.

Accordingly, we find that Calvin uses the label of 'prison house' in reference to the body primarily in his discussion of the Christian's pursuit of holiness. Christians, though called and exhorted to pursue genuine purity of life, are unable to fully apprehend perfection this side of glory. In Calvin's judgment, the origin of righteous living was spiritual, located in the desires of the inner being. The body, on the other hand, was an encumbrance, hindering one's spiritual progress and obedience.[59] Thus, Christians were to remind themselves that perfection cannot be attained until they 'cast off the weakness of the body, and [are] received into full fellowship with [Christ]'.[60]

These passages seem to suggest that Calvin attributes, in some measure, spiritual inability and lethargy to the body. This inclination to view the body as impediment to spiritual progress increases his desire to break free from this prison so that he might enjoy unencumbered worship and enjoyment of God. Calvin is explicit at this point in his discussion of our inability to fulfill the law. While we are incarcerated in our bodies, we cannot wholly fulfill the commandments; it is not until we put off the weight of our bodies through death that we can do so.[61]

Thus, in light of these passages that suggest our current embodied condition provokes sin and hinders us from fulfilling the law in its entirety, it is not surprising to find Calvin, several sections later, instructing his readers to set their eyes upon their spiritual inheritance and to 'betake themselves wholly to mediate upon that eternal life to come'.[62] Given their current state of suffering and misery, Christians should look to their heavenly future for hope and encouragement. He explains,

> When it comes to a comparison with life to come, the present life can not only be safely neglected but, compared to the former, must be utterly despised and loathed. For, 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 sep-

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58 *Inst* 1.15.2.
59 *Inst* 1.15.2.
60 *Inst* 1.15.2.
61 *Inst* 2.7.4; 2.7.13.
62 *Inst* 3.9.4.

ulcher? And death? *If to be freed from the body is to be released into perfect freedom, what else is the body but a prison*?[63]

Calvin also admits that our current bodily condition disposes us to a situation in which we need to fight vigorously against our sinful flesh. 'Accordingly, so long as we dwell in the *prison house of our body* we must continually contend with the defects of our corrupt nature, indeed with our own natural soul.'[64] Deliverance from the body, then, was a welcome event.[65]

A failure to integrate: an evaluation of Calvin's theology of the body

As we saw in the first section of this essay, Calvin highly esteemed the human body as a work of wonder and earthly life was a blessing from the Lord to be received with gratitude and joy. Yet, in some sections of the *Institutes*, Calvin viewed the body as an impediment to spiritual progress and something that rendered Christians unable to fulfill the law of God. Here Calvin followed Plato in designating the body as a 'prison house,' from which escape was a welcome event.[66] In this way, Calvin's theology of the body falls slightly short of the

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[63] *Inst* 3.9.4, emphasis added.

[64] *Inst* 3.3.20, emphasis added

[65] Calvin's attitude here is further illustrated in a section from his sermon on Job 3. See Engel, *Perspectival Anthropology*, 171, taken originally from *Ionnis Calvini opera quae supersunt Omnia* (eds. Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Edward Reuss; Brunsvigae: C.A. Schwetscke, 1863-1900), 33:170.

[66] Charles Partee, in his article, 'The Soul in Plato, Platonism and Calvin,' admits that 'It might be argued that Calvin had a "spiritualizing tendency" and that Luther was more sensitive to the biblical antithesis of flesh and spirit as distinct from body and soul', yet Partee wants to see this as 'a criticism of emphasis rather than of ignorance'. Partee desires to protect Calvin from the charge that he endorsed the entire Platonic tradition by noting the areas in which Calvin differed strongly with Plato and even qualified his overall commendation of Plato. (See also David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, for another affirmation that Calvin did not endorse Platonism in its entirety.) While Partee is correct to argue that Calvin departed from Platonism in significant portions of his theology—not the least of which was his teaching on the resurrection of the body and his rejection of the notion that the soul was self-perpetuating—it must still be maintained that Calvin's continual reference to the body as a 'prison house' from which escape was welcome, reflects a failure to fully correct Plato's view of the body. Nevertheless, both Partee in the aforementioned article (292) and David Steinmetz in his article, 'Calvin as the Biblical Interpreter Among the Ancient Philosophers,' remind us that Calvin endured terrible physical suffering throughout his life. While we cannot approve of his repeated references to the human body as a 'prison house,' we can sympathize with his desire for relief from his many bodily ailments. See Charles Partee, 'The Soul in Plato, Platonism and Calvin,' *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 22 (1969), 291; David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 237; David Steinmetz, 'Calvin as the Biblical Interpreter Among the Ancient Philosophers,' *Interpretation* 63 (2009), 145. Bruce Gordon *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 144, also reminds us of Calvin's many health problems.

biblical witness by failing to synthesize his statements that speak of our inability to fulfill the law together with statements that emphasize the dignity of the human body and the hope of resurrection.[67]

Certainly, Calvin follows the biblical model as he groans for a change in our current fallen condition. Indeed, in light of Calvin's consistency with Scripture at this point, one might contend that I am making too fine a distinction—that Calvin was expressing a desire for departure from *this* body, not *the* body as such, or that he was simply using the phrase 'prison house of the body,' as a kind of theological shorthand to denote our fallen condition. Yet, assuming the validity of this objection, an important question remains: is this longing for deliverance from our fallen state best expressed by classifying the body as a prison, especially in light of countless passages in Scripture that ascribe to the body great honor and designate the body an object of final redemption?

On the whole, the New Testament rejects the idea that escape from the body is an appropriate desire. Second Corinthians 5.1-10, for example, demonstrates that the apostle Paul did not rejoice in the fact that he will be *without his body*, but in the reality that he would be *with the Lord* (2 Cor 5.6-10).[68] An unembodied state was not ideal, however—Paul longed for the resurrection so that he could be reunited with his body.[69] Paul considered the intermediate state, although better than his current condition (Phil 1.21), far from ultimate. The apostle recognized that we do groan in our current fallen state—our groaning, however, is not a longing for an eternal immaterial existence, but for an eternal embodied existence (see also Phil 3.1-21). Accordingly, Paul did not set his desires on an escape from the body in and of itself—he longed for the resurrection of his body.[70]

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[67] As the subject matter of the first section of this essay affirms what William Davis asserts in his article, 'Calvin's Legacy in Philosophy', Calvin should not be accused of 'passing along an uncritically platonic hatred of the physical body'. See *Calvin and Culture: Exploring a Worldview* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2010), 131n.53. It is true that Calvin *did* value the human body and did not imbibe the whole of Plato's teaching concerning the body as seen in Calvin's arguments for the resurrection and for the goodness of marriage and sex.

[68] See Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 255-67, esp. 262-63; Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 365-86.

[69] Calvin often appealed to this passage. We have already seen where Calvin refers to 2 Corinthians 5.1-10 in the *Institutes*, and he maintains a similar viewpoint in his commentaries when he says that there is 'nothing better than to quit the body that we may attain near intercourse with God, and may truly and openly enjoy his presence' (Calvin, *2 Corinthians*, 2 Cor 5.8).

[70] Calvin comes close to integrating his desire for release from his current fallen condition with the hope of the resurrection in his comments on Philippians 3.21. See John Calvin, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), Phil 3.21. In this passage, it appears to me that Calvin is more careful to tie the solution to our current troubles to the hope of the resurrection, not merely our departure from our bodies.

There is no doubt that in Romans 7.24 Paul saw our fallen condition as a hindrance to sanctification—this is affirmed not only in the immediate context (Rom 7.13-25),[71] but in other Pauline texts as well (e.g. Gal 5.16-26). Even so, the apostle does not advocate the mere sloughing off of the body in order to remedy his fallen condition and his struggle with sin.[72] Rather, he grounds his hope of deliverance in the redemption of his body. The apostle even links our current suffering and groaning to this final redemption (see Rom 8.18-23). Paul, then, is not looking for escape from the 'prison house of his body', but for the redemption of his body through the resurrection. Although Calvin adequately and helpfully describes the resurrection as the ultimate Christian hope, he fails to fully synthesize his belief in the resurrection with his statements about the dignity of the human body and the reality of our fallen condition. Rather than appealing to the Platonic notion of a 'prison house' in order to articulate the tension Christians feel in their current fallen state and the longing for heaven, Calvin would have been better served to place the resolution of this tension more squarely in the resurrection *of* the body, rather than in an escape *from* the body as such.[73] Calvin's misstep, here, mars slightly what is otherwise a robust and edifying theology of the human body. Although this oversight is far from rendering Calvin's theology of the body useless, it could serve to perpetuate an unhealthy disjunction between the body and the soul already apparent in some corners of evangelicalism.[74] Calvin must be commended for his efforts in cor-

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[71] I take Paul's description of his battle with sin in Romans 7.14-25 to be a description of his current experience as a believer, not an account of a religious Jew or of Paul's experience prior to his conversion to Christ. See C.E.B. Cranfield, *Romans 1-8* (New York: T & T Clark, 1975). One's decision on how to interpret Romans 7.14-25 in this regard, however, does not affect the overall argument that Paul, in Romans 7.24, is not condoning the idea that the body in and of itself is the source of our sanctification troubles. Tom Schreiner, in his commentary on Romans, helpfully observes that our understanding of the word 'body' used here should 'not be abstracted from the whole person, with the result that it is separated from it'. See *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), Rom 7.24. Thus, it is incorrect to lay blame on the body per se for one's sanctification troubles.

[72] Calvin seems to imply this in *Inst* 2.7.5 when he comments, 'I further say that there will be no one hereafter who will reach the goal of true perfection without sloughing off the weight of the body.'

[73] Dennis E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard* (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 14-16, insists that contra Plato, it was *sin* that Calvin hated, not the body as such. Certainly we can affirm Tamburello's contention that Calvin's theology allowed for a distinction between the physical body as such and the reality of indwelling sin. Nevertheless, Calvin's reliance on the phrase 'prison house', and his repeated assertion that release from this prison was a welcome event is, in my judgment, an example of a lack of precision at this very point.

[74] See, for example, Gregg Allison's trenchant comments in, 'Toward a Theology of Human Embodiment,' in *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 13.2 (2009), 4-17, and Roger E. Olson, *Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 204, when he describes the tendency among lay peo-

recting faulty philosophical and theological notions about the human body that were predominant during his time, but his example here also compels us to continue to reform our doctrine of the body according to Scripture and to weigh carefully our own presuppositions as we do so.

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ple to misunderstand the Scripture to teach that humans are 'godlike spirits imprisoned in physical bodies'. See. James K.A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 142-43, observes a kind of 'dominant dualism' in much of evangelicalism and uses Calvin's employment of the Platonic notion of 'prison house' as an example of such dualism. For a similar observation in a more popular work, see John M. Koessler, *True Discipleship: The Art of Following Jesus* (Chicago: Moody, 2003), 88-89. Koessler does, however, note later that Calvin and the other reformers were responsible for reclaiming a more biblical, holistic view toward physical life generally and the human body in particular (92-93).