



A GUIDE TO CHRISTIAN LIVING

John Calvin

Being part of Book 3 of
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
translated from the French edition of 1560
by
Robert White



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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The words 'You were running well' [Gal. 5:7] contain certain comfort. For with these words Paul pays attention to the trial by which the devout are disciplined. To themselves their life seems dreary, closer to crawling than to running; but when there is sound teaching—which cannot be without results, since it brings the Holy Spirit and his gifts—the life of the devout is strenuous running, even though it may seem to be crawling. To us, of course, it seems that everything is moving ahead slowly and with great difficulty; but what seems slow to us is rapid in the sight of God, and what hardly crawls for us runs swiftly for him. Likewise, what is sorrow, sin and death in our eyes is joy, righteousness and life in the eyes of God, for the sake of Christ through whom we are made perfect.

MARTIN LUTHER,
Lectures on Galatians (1535),
in *Luther's Works*
(St Louis: Concordia, 1955-75), vol. 27, p. 32.

I am not unaware of the frailty of human nature. I ask only that, while we may at times limp and stumble along—as happens even to the most mature, more often than anyone would wish—we should nevertheless continue to judge and value each other as Christians. But on one condition: that those who stumble and trip up should not depart from the way of the Lord, and that no amount of stumbling should bring them to a complete halt. They should always struggle to their feet and try consciously to overcome whatever hinders their advance; although they may totter and tremble, they should never lose heart. Supposing they fall they should pick themselves up, so that, at the end, nothing may stop them pressing forward, or looking toward the kingdom of God, which is their proper goal.

JOHN CALVIN,
Traité des benefices (1554),
in *Recueil des opuscules*
(Geneva: Baptiste Pinereul, 1566), p. 130.

C Of the life

of conversation of a Christian

man, a right godly treatise, written in the
latin tongue, by maister John Caluine,

a man of right excellent learninge

and of no lesse godly conversati-

on. Translated into English

by Thomas Broke Es-

quire Paymaster of

Warre, Esq. D.

Printed the first

day of Fe-

bruary.

27- Matth. 5. Let your light so shine
before men, that they may se your
good works, and maye
praise your father
which is in
heaven.

27- Luke. 12. We doinge thy will come.

27- Eph. 5. breathe as children of
lighte, for the fruits of the spirit
consisteth in all goodnes righte-
ousnes and truth

In. 12. sheweth thy
light, by thy
works.

Title page of the first English translation, by
Thomas Broke (1549), of Calvin's *De vita hominis
christiani*, extracted from the 1539 edition of the
Institutes of the Christian Religion.

INTRODUCTION

When John Calvin first began writing his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he had in mind a short doctrinal work—a handbook or manual—which would set out, in straightforward fashion, the essentials of the Christian faith. Although the sustained persecution of Protestants in France led him in time to accentuate the apologetic nature of the book, the *Institutes*, as first published in 1536, remained a work of Christian instruction, intended, as Calvin says in his prefatory letter, for those who

were ‘touched with some zeal for religion’, and principally for those among his French compatriots who ‘were hungering and thirsting for Christ’, and who ‘might be shaped to true godliness’.¹

A second edition of the *Institutes* followed in 1539. More elaborate and comprehensive than the first, over twice as long, it was, like the first, written in Latin, and thus accessible only to a limited readership. The need for a French version, already apparent to Calvin in 1536, was overwhelming. Accordingly the Reformer, on his return to Geneva in 1541 after a three-year absence in Strasbourg, entrusted his French text to Genevan printer Michel du Bois, who placed it in circulation that same year. Like the second Latin edition on which it was based, the first French edition

comprised seventeen chapters, the last being entitled 'On the Christian Life'.

No chapter better corresponds to the author's original intention than this. It offered a clear, balanced set of directions and encouragements to all who desired to live according to the gospel. Strong in its theological affirmation of God's righteousness and providential care, of the reconciliation won for us by Christ and of the Holy Spirit's work of sanctification, it was equally strong in its pastoral concern for believers who were beset by their own weakness and sin, who daily endured trial and temptation and who nevertheless, united to Christ by faith, shared in his life and tasted his power.

The Christian life, as Calvin describes it, is lived simultaneously in the shadow

of the cross and in the bright light of the resurrection. That the writer himself knew something of the cost of discipleship is clear from a consideration of his own experience. The distress of exile, the burden of poverty, the hurt of slander and misrepresentation, the threat of physical harm, were all things he knew at first hand. Farel, Calvin's colleague, rightly calls him 'my good, true brother, who is a partner in the cross of Jesus, . . . a man active and upright in the work of the gospel.'² The author who speaks in the *Institutes* about the pressures of Christian living is no armchair moralist, nor is he an unyielding Stoic for whom overt displays of emotion are a grave weakness. For Calvin tears as well as joy have a valid and necessary place: to be devoid of feeling is to be no better than a stone or

block of wood. The essential thing is that, in good times and in bad, we continue to trust God who through grace has adopted us as his children, who quickens and comforts us by his Spirit, and who bids us persevere in well-doing until our life's end.

Remarkably, despite the extensive revisions which the *Institutes* underwent up to the last editions of 1559 (Latin) and 1560 (French), Calvin's text on the Christian life remained largely unchanged. No less remarkably, its value was readily appreciated by Calvin's readers. Its appearance as a separate publication, extracted from the rest of the book, was only a matter of time. The first to realize its potential was a younger contemporary of the Reformer, Pierre de La Place, who between 1539 and 1541 turned Calvin's Latin into French, without,

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SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING¹

1. Introduction: Calvin's Aim and Method

The object of God's work of regeneration is, as we have seen,² that our lives might demonstrate to others a harmony and accord between God's righteousness and our obedience, and that we might thus confirm that he has made us his children by adoption. Now although God's law contains within itself newness of life sufficient to restore his image in us, our natural sluggishness needs many goads and helps. It will therefore be

Scriptural Foundations for Christian Living 1

useful to see what pattern the various parts of Scripture suggest for a well-ordered life. That way none who truly desire to turn to God need trust their own uncertain instinct, and so go astray.

Now in seeking to present an outline of the Christian life, I am conscious that this is a large and varied subject which, if treated in detail, could fill a very big book. We know how wordy the teachers of earlier times were in the advice they gave, even when discussing a single virtue! It is not because they loved to chatter: whatever the virtue we mean to praise or commend, so ample is the subject matter that any argument which uses too few words seems quite inadequate.

I do not intend my teaching on the Christian life to explain each and every

virtue, or to offer lengthy advice. Such things can be readily found in the books of other men, and chiefly in the homilies of the early Fathers—in, that is, their public sermons. It will be enough if I describe a model which will direct Christians toward the goal of a well-ordered life. I will thus be content to outline briefly a general rule to which Christians may refer all their actions. We may sometimes perhaps take the opportunity to stress the same points as the Fathers do in their sermons; but the present work requires our teaching to be simple and direct, and as brief as possible.

Just as the philosophers have among their goals integrity and probity, from which they derive specific duties and the many overt acts of virtue, so Scripture has its own methods which are much better

and sounder than those of the philosophers. The essential difference is that the philosophers, who were full of ambition, adopted as lofty a pose as possible, in order to add lustre to their method and procedure, and thus to show how clever they were. By contrast the Holy Spirit, who taught in a plain, unadorned way, did not always follow the neatest schemes and strictest plans. Sometimes, however, he has done just that, and thus warns us not to despise such a method.

*2. Learning to Love Righteousness:
God's Holiness*

The method we refer to is employed by Scripture in two ways. The first is to impress on our hearts the love of righteousness, which is quite foreign to our nature.

The second is to provide us with a safe rule which, as we seek to order our lives, keeps us from straying or losing our way.

As to the first point,³ Scripture supplies many sound reasons for inclining our hearts to love what is good. We have already noted many of them in various places, and we will mention others here. What better foundations could Scripture lay, as a first step, than the command that we should be holy, even as our God is holy (*Lev. 19:1-2; 1 Pet. 1:16*)? It goes on to justify the command on the grounds that when we were as sheep lost and scattered in the labyrinth of this world, God gathered us to himself. The news that God is now joined to us should remind us that holiness is the bond which unites us. Not that it is our own holiness which brings us into fellowship with God,

since to be holy we must first cling to him, that he might pour his holiness upon us and enable us to follow his call. God's glory is such that he can have no dealings with iniquity and uncleanness: that is why we must be like him, for we are his.

Accordingly, Scripture teaches that holiness is the purpose of our calling, which we must constantly keep in view if we would truly respond to God. For what good would it do to be delivered from the filth and corruption where we once lay, if for ever after we meant to wallow in them? Furthermore, Scripture urges us, if we wish to be part of God's people, to dwell in Jerusalem, his holy city (*Psa.* 24:3). Since he has consecrated it to his honour, it is not right for it to be corrupted and polluted by any within it who are impure or ungodly.

Hence we read that the person who walks without blemish and who strives to do well will live in the Lord's tabernacle, because the sanctuary where God dwells should never be defiled by filth, as in some stable (*Psa.* 15:1-2; *Isa.* 35:8, etc.).

*3. Learning to Love Righteousness:
Christ's Saving Work*

Scripture seeks to motivate us still more by reminding us that, as God has been reconciled to us in Christ, so also he has made him our example and model to which we should conform (*Rom.* 6:17-18). Let those who think that none but the philosophers have made a proper study of morality, show me in their books a better principle than the one I have just described! For when they do their best to exhort us to

virtue, they give no other reason than that we should live according to nature.⁴ The instruction which Scripture gives, however, comes from a much better source: not only does it bid us refer our whole life to God as its author, it tells us that we have fallen from our original creation, and that Christ, in reconciling us to God his Father, is given to us as a model of innocence whose image is to be reflected in our lives.

Could anything be said more forcefully or to better effect? What more could we possibly ask for? For if God adopts us as his children on the understanding that our lives should reflect Christ's image, and if we refuse to follow righteousness and holiness, not only do we basely and faithlessly abandon our Creator, we also disown him as our Saviour.

That is why Scripture makes a point of urging us to remember all of God's benefits and the many aspects of our salvation. Thus it says that, since God has shown himself to be our Father, we are guilty of gross ingratitude if we do not behave as his children (*Mal.* 1:6; *Eph.* 5:1; *1 John* 3:1). Since Christ has cleansed us by the washing of his blood, and has granted us his cleansing through baptism, we would be wrong to sully ourselves again with filth (*Eph.* 5:26; *Heb.* 10:10; *1 Cor.* 6:11, 15; *1 Pet.* 1:15, 19). Since he has joined us to himself and grafted us into his body, we must beware of polluting ourselves in any way, seeing that we are his members (*1 Cor.* 6:15; *John* 15:3; *Eph.* 5:23). Since he who is our Head has ascended into heaven, we must free ourselves of all earthly desires, and yearn with

all our heart for the life above (*Col.* 3:1-2). Since the Holy Spirit has consecrated us as God's temples, we must strive to see God glorified in us, and to keep ourselves from uncleanness (*1 Cor.* 3:16; 6:19; *2 Cor.* 6:16). Since our soul and body are destined for immortality in the kingdom of God, and for the incorruptible crown of his glory, we must endeavour to preserve soul and body spotless until the day of the Lord (*1 Thess.* 5:23).

These are sound and proper foundations on which we may safely build our lives.

Nothing like them will be found in any of the philosophers, who never rise higher than the natural dignity of man whenever their theme is human duty.

4. Life Is More than Lip-Service

Something should be said at this point to those who, having only the name of Christ, wish nevertheless to be known as Christians. How bold they are to glory in his holy name, seeing that none enjoy his friendship save those who rightly know him through the gospel! Paul, for his part, declares that a right knowledge of Christ is given only to those who have learned to put off the old man, consumed as he is by unruly appetites, and who have instead put on Christ (*Eph. 4:20-24*). Clearly, when such people claim to know Christ, their claim is false. In the process they do him much wrong, however persuasively they prattle on about him.

The gospel is teaching intended not for the tongue, but for life. Unlike other

disciplines it involves more than just the mind and memory: it must take full possession of the soul and must have its seat and home deep in the heart. Otherwise it is not really taken in. So let these people cease to shame God by boasting of what they are not, or else let them prove themselves to be disciples of Christ.

In the matter of religion, we have so far given priority to what is taught, since that is the beginning of our salvation. But to bear fruit and to be profitable, what is taught must lodge in the heart and demonstrate its power in our lives. More than that, it must transform us so that its nature becomes ours. If the philosophers are right to rail against those who claim to practise their art—called ‘the mistress of life’—and who nevertheless turn it into specious

twaddle,⁵ how much more should we detest those babblers whose mouth is full of gospel talk, but who spurn it in their lives! For its influence ought to penetrate our inmost heart and take root in our soul a million times more powerfully than all the philosophers' admonitions, which in comparison are so very weak.

5. God's Perfection Should Be Our Aim

I do not require the Christian's conduct to match the gospel standard of purity and perfection, although that is something we should desire and should try hard to achieve. In any case, I do not insist that evangelical perfection be attained before anyone can be regarded as a Christian. That would be too strict and severe a test. On that basis every living soul would be excluded from

the church, for there is no one, whatever progress he has made, who does not come well short of the mark. Most people indeed have hardly advanced one step, yet they are not to be rejected on that account.

What then? Our sights should naturally be set on the perfection which God commands. That should be the yardstick by which we measure all our actions, and that should be the goal for which we strive. It is quite wrong of us to pick and choose where God is concerned, accepting part of what his word commands and omitting all the rest just as we please. What he invariably commends as of first importance is integrity, by which he means absolute simplicity of heart, freedom from pretence, the very opposite of double-mindedness. In other words the essence of right living is spiritual, when the soul is