

Calvin and the Holy Spirit as *fons vitae*

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Abstract

John Calvin described the Holy Spirit as *fons vitae*, the fountain of life. Moltmann and others deduce from this statement that, according to Calvin, every experience in life can be a discovery of the Spirit's power. This article explores Calvin's understanding of the notion of the Spirit as giver of life. A closer reading of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* reveals that, according to Calvin, the Spirit operates in three different ways to make God's gift of life a reality to humanity. These ways include the Spirit as the fountain of life in creation, in Scripture and in salvation. Only when human beings submit themselves to the Spirit's work in these areas will we know true life. This article argues that Calvin's pneumatology, unlike that of theologians such as Moltmann, does not follow a pantheistic approach.

Introduction

The German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, puts forward a pantheistic stance in his description of the activity of the Spirit in the created realm. According to Moltmann (1992:35), we are able to "... perceive [sic] God in all things, and all things in God ...". He further describes the relationship between God and creation as linked in the power and person of the Holy Spirit. It is through the power of the Spirit that all things came into being, which is why all things are close to the presence of God. In this argument, Moltmann (1992:35) cites as sources for his conviction Augustine's statement "*Interior intimo meo*" and Calvin's notion of the Spirit as "*fons vitae*". Associating Augustine and Calvin with this view is strange, given their well-known and identifiable view of a dualistic and, dare one say, neo-Platonic understanding of God and creation. The Spirit is irrefutably *fons vitae* in Calvin's theology. This article explores Calvin's description of the theme of the Spirit as the fountain of life, and seeks to clarify how Calvin understood this metaphor of the Spirit.

The Spirit as *fons vitae* in the created human being

To Calvin, human beings are clearly not merely an element of creation, another being amongst beings. The purpose of creation is to display the infinite power of God to human beings and to invite them into an allegiance with God so that God's life-giving power can be made known (Calvin 2008:101-102).ⁱ To speak of a human being is therefore to describe a being that has been placed in the context of the created realm in order to behold and come into a relationship with God the Creator. According to Calvin's understanding, creation does not seem to have a unique relationship with God or an autonomous purpose other than being an instrument of God's revelation to humankind. This view makes Calvin a classic child of his time, someone who subscribed to an anthropocentric view of the created order (Wogaman 1993:116-120). The differentiating factor, which separates human beings from the rest of creation, is found in human beings' possession of a soul (Calvin 2008:106).ⁱⁱ

Bouwsma (1988:79) describes Calvin's pneumatology as offering very little distinction between the terms "soul" and "spirit", except that "spirit" is commonly identified with intellect. It is the interaction between the human soul, or spirit, and the Divine Spirit, which makes human beings different from the rest of the created order. The human spirit reflects the Divine Spirit, but only to the extent that the Divine Spirit is associated with intelligence and reason (Bouwsma 1988:79). Human beings' ability to reason and engage with their environment from the perspective of intelligence, whether objective or subjective, sets them apart and therefore defines them as created beings with a special relationship with God. From this, one can deduce that all of creation plays a part, not only in God's self-revelation, but in humankind's ability to live and express the gift of life through reason and

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intelligence. Life in the created order should not be perceived as the true reality of human beings. Creation is the first place where the Spirit is at work in cultivating the gift of life in each person. It is when human beings display the ability, through the use of reason, to think about God, that the true dimension of life is revealed. "Then the mere knowledge of a God sufficiently proves that souls which rise higher than the world must be immortal, it being possible that any evanescent vigour could reach the very fountain of life" (Calvin 2008:105).ⁱⁱⁱ

Calvin celebrates the likeness of God in all people, but is acutely aware that sin has the power to distort the relationship between humanity and God (Bouwmsma 1988:142). Those who actively pursue sin, and choose a way of being unlike God, bring judgement on themselves. This is the way of foolishness. It is the way of death, and of non-being. It makes no logical sense and is intellectually incongruent with the human desire to experience life. From Calvin's perspective, one may even ask the question: if humanity experiences itself in creation, which is the instrument through which God reveals God's power and the avenue through which humanity can discover its relationship with God through logic and reason, then why choose the path that is contrary to all of this? To do so mean that one exists in a manner that does not reflect the intelligence, reason and justice of God. Calvin's view is not too far removed from Old Testament Zionist theology, through which life and abundance is only found when the individual immerses himself or herself in the Sophia, or Wisdom, of God.

Coffey's (1984:466) claim that Calvinist theology completely denies to every person any natural capacity for God may be true. It is nevertheless not a true reflection of Calvin's theology as a whole. The Calvinist tradition does not always correspond entirely with Calvin's theological points of view. One can concede that, in Catholic theology, to which Coffey belongs, there is a much stronger emphasis on the direct representation of God in the person, an *analogia entis*, which Barth (Von Balthasar 1992:161-167) questioned and countered with the argument for an *analogia fidei*. In Catholic theology, it is not enough for humanity simply to have a preferential place in the order of creation to express its Divine relationship through the means of intellect or reason. Although Calvin's theology does not resonate with the Thomist view of *capax Dei*, it still defines the human life as something that can only find true meaning and purpose if it is grounded in the Spirit of God, albeit in a different way. Not only does human life need to be grounded in God's Spirit, but it needs to display the fruit of the Spirit's presence in all its being.

To Thomists, like Rahner, this means that the Incarnation of Christ becomes a possible reality in the individual (Rahner 1966:110), which creates the potential for salvation and a positive relationship with God. It is important to note that Rahner did not subscribe to monophysitism. Instead, he described the Incarnation of Christ in terms of Christ's Divine nature not being given absolute perfect expression, but that, instead, Christ becomes the perfect expression "... relative to the capacity of human nature" (Coffey 1984:468). To Calvin, the Divine is not as closely integrated into the very nature of the human being. The sign of the Divine presence can only go as far as the human participation and expression of reasoned and intellectual behaviour. This is the gift of life offered by the Spirit of God. To Thomists, the spiritual integrity of the individual's relationship with God in relation to his or her world becomes the essence of being human. Calvin's human being is further removed from God in the understanding that life is, and can be described as, the constant struggle against sin (Bouwmsma 1988:183), using reason and intellect as gifts of the Spirit to discern between that which is of God and that which belongs to the domain of this world. Bouwmsma describes this struggle as "perpetual warfare" (Bouwmsma 1988:183), a warfare that takes place on two fronts. The first is the individual's battle against "Satan, hypocrites, evildoers and those who scorn the Gospel" (Bouwmsma 1988:183). The second, which is the individual person's main struggle, is against the self and one's own vices.

If the Spirit of God is the fountain of life, the source of reason and logic that empowers the individual to participate in the power of God by living in the context of creation, then how does the individual come to know the reason, logic and life offered by God?

The Spirit as *fons vitae* in proclamation

The proclamation of the Word was central to Calvin's understanding of the illumination of the human heart. But even here, the best human efforts to grapple with and understand the message of God incarnate cannot result in people experiencing liberation from merely "being" to active "living". The presence of the Spirit in the Scriptures, the proclamation and the receiving of the Word, was essential before any life could come to be. "To preach the gospel literally is to preach it in such a way that it only reaches the ears. The gospel is spirit when it serves as an instrument of Christ's grace through the power of the Holy Spirit to hammer an opening in the sealed walls of the human heart" (Steinmetz 1996:100). The first step in proclamation is for the bearers of the gospel to have themselves experienced the life-giving power of the Spirit. This may sound like the problem of which comes first,

the chicken or the egg? How did the first people who received the knowledge of salvation experience the proclamation of the gospel? The clearest answer we gain from Calvin is that the first heralds of the gospel were eye-witnesses to the actual gospel events to which they testified (Calvin 2008:654-656),^{iv} while the Old Testament prophets revealed only that which the Spirit imparted to them (Calvin 2008:654-657)^v, thus pointing to what was to come in the salvific work of God in Christ.

Calvin's own reading of the Scriptures reveals that he understood them to be the primary source of the gospel message, and they had to be considered as central to the proclamation of the Word. Here Calvin followed, in particular, the writings of Chrysostom and emphasised the authors' intended meaning when interpreting Scripture. In the text, Calvin's understanding was that Scripture formed part of the greater plan of God, making the Old Testament and New Testament equal in stature (Thompson 2004:68). Although Calvin obviously did not have access to the modern historical-critical method of exegesis, he was not going to entertain Scripture as merely an allegorical representation of the Divine story, but asked questions relating to the authors' context and intention (Steinmetz 1996:104). Standing alone, Scripture is a collection of people's encounters with God and to the modern reader it is, in a literal reading, a collection of documents containing these accounts. What brings Scripture to life? Furthermore, what enables Scripture to produce life in those who read and receive it? To Calvin, there was only one answer, namely, the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit inspired those who wrote down their accounts, it is also the Spirit who is needed to "... guide its reading, its interpretation, and its application" (Thompson 2004:71). The preachers are therefore compelled to be changed by the message of the gospel, but also to apply themselves diligently in their reading of Scripture so that the proclaimed message resonates with the age-old proclamation of God's salvific power. Scripture does not stand alone as a source, but preachers need to have a good knowledge of the proclaimed Word so that their testimony is consistent with that which God has offered through the centuries. "... [T]he writings of the church fathers are aids for the reading of Scripture, indeed, resources provided by the Lord to serve in tandem with the inward, illuminating work of the Holy Spirit" (Thompson 2004:63).

The proclamation of an inspired Word by inspired preachers is only two-thirds of the way to creating life in the hearer. The preaching of Scripture is meaningless unless the active working of the Spirit takes place both in the preaching and in the receiving of the Word. The Spirit and the Word of Scripture are knit together, so that "... we have no great certainty of the Word itself, until it be confirmed by the testimony of the Spirit" (Calvin 2008:45).^{vi} Here, Calvin reflects once again that which this article discussed in the first point. Every person has an innate "Divine connection" in that every person can reason and every person possesses intelligence. The Spirit speaks to the hearer's spirit. The Spirit of God reasons and appeals to the intellect of the human spirit, so that the words of the gospel are transformed from existing as letters on a page to the breath of life in each person. Without the Holy Spirit, this life is simply not possible. "He [Calvin] had in mind, of course, again like Erasmus, the kind of knowledge that engages the whole personality and expresses itself in life; in short, the knowledge of faith, which is perfected in love" (Bouwsmas 1988:187). The proclamation of the Word by human tongue is an act of grace whereby Calvin's distant God is able to converse with humanity in a way that promotes true life.

For, on the one hand, he by an admirable test proves our obedience when we listen to his ministers just as we would to himself; while, on the other hand, he consults our weakness in being pleased to address us after the manner of men [sic] by means of interpreters, that he may thus allure us to himself, instead of driving us away with his thunder. How well this familiar mode of teaching is suited to us all, the godly are aware, from the dread with which the divine majesty justly inspires them (Calvin 2008:675).^{vii}

Life comes through the inspiration of the Scriptures to the hearers of the proclaimed Word only inasmuch as the Spirit is present and at work through those whom God has called to bear testimony (Calvin 2008:701).^{viii} Through Spirit-filled preaching, people are renewed and the Body of Christ is made known. It is the inner working of the Spirit that transforms the words of the preacher into the Living Word for the individual (Beeke 2004:132). The Spirit therefore acts as *fons vitae* to awaken the divine reason in each person through the proclamation of the inspired Word. This is where we find the third level of the Spirit's life-giving work.

The Holy Spirit as *fons vitae* in the act of salvation

First, the Spirit is identified as the inspired reason and intellect linked to the human person. This is the most basic form of human living. Second, the Spirit inspires the Scriptures, its heralds and its hearers so that the Divine reason can appeal to human reason and so inspire life. But there seems to be a

missing element between these two points. What is it in the Word and in Scripture that appeals to human reason? How is the Spirit involved in the message of this Scripture that supposedly inspires life into its hearers?

The Spirit acts as the initiator of our faith response, for it is through the Spirit that humanity is made aware of God's acts of benevolence, especially as these are revealed in the person of Jesus Christ (Calvin 2008:359^{ix} and Hesselink 2004:86-87). Not only is the Spirit the initiator of life in the person, but the Spirit is the source of the truth in the Scriptures that brings life to all. It is the Spirit that "inspires" Mary to bear the Saviour, it is the Spirit that descends on Jesus at His baptism, but most of all, it is through the power of the Spirit that Christ is raised from the dead. The Spirit is life-giving. The Spirit is *auctor resurrectionis Christi*, and therefore the source of eternal life (Moltmann 1992:67). This is the message that is shared not only in the proclamation of the church, but also in its sacraments, more specifically baptism and Holy Communion.

Baptism is the celebration of the life-giving power of the Spirit, but also "... shows us our mortification in Christ and new life in him" (Calvin 2008:861).^x Communion is the celebration whereby the believer is united with the living Christ through the power of the Spirit (Calvin 2008:901).^{xi} Spiritual growth, and therefore life, takes place in the context of the church. "The church is mother, educator and nourisher of every believer, for the Holy Spirit acts in her" (Beeke 2004:131). It is in this message of the Spirit's life-giving power through the church's Saviour, Jesus Christ, that every person experiences not only reason or the appeal to their reason in the proclamation of the Word, but the Spirit, who brings about the process of dying to self and being raised to new life in Christ.

It does not mean that Calvin accepted the redeemed person as having gained perfection or complete life. "More truly we say, that the life of the Christian man [sic] is a constant study and exercise in mortifying the flesh, until it is certainly slain, and the Spirit of God obtains dominion in us" (Calvin 2008:399).^{xii} The difference between life and death is found in the person's response to the life-giving power of the Spirit in Jesus Christ. Jesus is God's instrument of life, inviting humanity to be grafted into life by the power of the Spirit (Calvin 2008:641).^{xiii}

This brings us back to viewing humanity as a recipient of God's revelation of redeeming power in the context of the created order. Humanity cannot claim that it is able to find meaning and purpose in the world if it does not surrender itself to the life-giving work of the Spirit. The Spirit is *fons vitae*. This means that the Spirit is, for humanity, the substance of life. It is the Spirit that separates humanity from all other creatures by giving humanity reason and intellect. It is the Spirit who inspires, leads to proclamation and assists in the receiving of the Word. The Word itself, Jesus Christ, depends on the life-giving power of the Spirit so that all can be drawn to him.

Conclusion

In the modern world, Calvin's message is difficult to understand. Our context cannot see creation as merely a place for the exploration of Divine reason in the human person. Climate change and the use of the world's resources demand that we interpret creation somewhat differently. Understandably, these were not issues in Calvin's day. Furthermore, it is difficult to think of God as so far removed that God cannot have a real "link" with the created realm, except through the incarnation. In this picture of God, God does not know or become real to creation's pain, suffering, or even justice. Christianity in today's world would tend to agree with Moltmann's pantheistic view of an experience of God in all things and an experience of all things in God. But this does not mean that Calvin's *fons vitae* subscribed either to our, or to Moltmann's definition, of the Spirit's life-giving power.

We may learn from Calvin that God's life-giving power is indeed a Divine act, a gift passed on to us in our very being. Furthermore, it is a power which sparks life through our communion with each other, sharing the proclamation of the Word in and through the reading of Scripture, the sacraments and fellowship. But most of all, it reminds us that we can never forget that the Christian life is ultimately linked to the life-experience of Jesus Christ. This is true life, life in all its fullness.

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Endnotes

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- 1 Inst. I, 14.21-22
 - 2 Inst. I.15.3
 - 3 Inst. I, 15.2
 - 4 Inst. III, 25.3-4
 - 5 Inst. III, 25.4
 - 6 Inst. I, 9.3
 - 7 Inst. IV, 1.5
 - 8 Inst. IV, 3.1
 - 9 Inst. III, 2.7
 - 10 Inst. IV, 15.5
 - 11 Inst. IV, 17.10
 - 12 Inst. III, 3.20
 - 13 Inst. III, 24.5