



Rev. J.P. VanVliet is minister of the Maranatha Canadian Reformed Church at Surrey, British Columbia
jason.vanvliet@canrc.org

Calvin's Teaching on the Image of God

In 1517, when Martin Luther nailed up his ninety-five theses in Wittenberg, Germany, John Calvin was a young lad of eight years old, living in Noyon, France. He grew up in a Roman Catholic family. His father, Gerard Calvin, worked as a lawyer for the local priests and bishops. Later, when it was time for young John to begin his college education, his father sent him to Paris. There he began to hear about a new teaching that was coming out of Germany: the "Lutheran heresies," as the Catholic Church called them.

Yet over time and with careful study, Calvin became convinced that Luther's teachings were not heretical but rather the holy truth. In fact, he not only came to believe this truth; in due time, he became an ardent preacher of it. He also became one of the foremost leaders of the Reformation of the church in the sixteenth century. One of the doctrines which Calvin sought to bring in line with Scripture was the creation of man, both male and female, in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). Below is a short survey of what Geneva's preacher taught on this topic, followed by some implications for our lives today.

The *Institutes*

In 1536 Calvin published the first edition of his most well-known book, the *Institutes*. In that publication he writes about our creation in God's image as follows:

In order for us to come to a sure knowledge of ourselves, we must first grasp the fact that Adam, parent of us all, was created in the image and likeness of God [Gen. 1:26-27]. That is, he was endowed with wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and was so clinging by these gifts of grace to God that he could have lived forever in Him, if he had stood fast in the uprightness God had given him.¹

So, Calvin's basic line of teaching was this: God is infinite wisdom, righteousness, and holiness and at creation human beings reflected this same basic list of attributes. There were, of course, crucial differences. While God's attributes were infinite, the same attributes in humans were only finite, and while God possesses these things in and of himself, humans received them as a gift. At this point in his life, Calvin also taught that this most excellent image of God "was

cancelled and effaced"² by the fall into sin.

After more than two decades of refining, Geneva's reformer sent the final edition of his *Institutes* off to the press in 1559. Had his views changed in any way? Concerning the image of God at creation, the mature Calvin writes that human beings are "the noblest and most remarkable example of [God's] justice, wisdom, and goodness."³ Essentially that is same as what he wrote in 1536. Concerning the effect of the fall on the image of God, he explains: "Now God's image is the perfect excellence of human nature which shone in Adam before his defection, but was subsequently so vitiated and *almost* blotted out that nothing remains after the ruin except what is confused, mutilated, and disease-ridden."⁴

Obviously, Calvin's position in 1559 is more nuanced than it was in 1536. He still teaches total depravity. And yet, in some way, something of that original image of God lingers after the fall. It is "almost" – not utterly – blotted out. What does Calvin mean by this? To answer that, we must explore some of his other writings.

Preface in Olivétan's Bible

One year before the first edition of the *Institutes*, in 1535, Calvin, wrote a preface to a new French translation of the Bible, produced by his cousin, Pierre Robert Olivétan. He speaks about how sin had ruined God's image and then he continues:

And just as God had set and ordained him so that he might take delight and pleasure in him, as a father [takes delight] in his very dear child, so now, to the contrary. . . that which he had viewed with a benign and fatherly eye, he now detested and looked at with regret. In short, the whole, entire man, with his faculties, his deeds, his thoughts, his words, his life became totally displeasing to God, as if he had become his special enemy and adversary, to the point that it is said that God was sorry that he had made him.⁵

Thus, at an early stage in Calvin's development as a theologian, there was a connection between being created in the image of God and being children of God. Sadly, though, beloved posterity became a brash adversary; *that* is the horrible tragedy of the fall into sin.

Sermons on Genesis

In his preaching Calvin also emphasized this connection between being created in God's image and being created to be God's children. For example, when he turned to Genesis 1:26, Geneva's preacher began his sermon with the following words:

It is true that he [God] could have created him [Adam] first, but he kept this for the end. And why? Because before he was created, he wished to provide

him with what was required and necessary. Even an [earthly] father will not wait until his child comes into the world, but when the time draws near for his wife to give birth, he will provide what is necessary for the child. When a father has the means, he will buy swaddling clothes and all the rest. In a similar way, then, God did not wait until man was created to provide for his nourishment and clothing, but beforehand he filled the earth with good and rich things. . . .⁶

Then, a little further on in this sermon, Calvin comes straight to the point and explains to his congregation:

But when it is said here that "man must be created in the image of God and according to

Calvin emphasized the connection between being created in God's image and being created to be God's children

his likeness," it is for the purpose of declaring that he must have such virtues and gifts, which will serve as signs and marks, to demonstrate that the human race is as the lineage of God, just as St. Paul proves with the saying from the pagan poet in 17th chapter of Acts: "we are his descendants."⁷

At this point we can pull together the *Institutes*, the preface to Olivétan's New Testament, and the sermons on Genesis. When speaking with family or friends, we sometimes exclaim, "like father, like son!" These familial

similarities are not exclusively physical ("his face is a carbon copy of his Dad's") but can also be mental ("he thinks along the same lines as his father") or dispositional ("he's just as compassionate as his Dad was"). Since God is spirit there is no physical likeness between Himself and Adam and Eve. However, at creation, there was a strikingly splendid spiritual similarity: as the Father is righteous, holy, wise, and good, so He also gave those attributes to his created children (cf. LD 3). Like Father, like children: so it was in the original excellence of Eden!

Commentary on Psalm 8

However, that leaves one question yet. Why did Calvin modify his description of the effect of the fall, so that by 1559 he wrote that the image of God was "almost blotted out" by the sin of our first parents? The best answer to that question can be found in the reformer's comments on Psalm 8. He provides a list of things which can be found in unbelievers:

The reason with which they are endued, and by which they can distinguish between good and evil; the principle of religion which is planted in them; their intercourse [or: interaction jvv] with each other, which is preserved from being broken up by certain sacred bonds; the regard to what is becoming, and the sense of shame which guilt awakens in them, as well as their continuing to be governed by laws; all these things are clear indications of pre-eminent and celestial wisdom.⁸

For example, an unbeliever may have a strong conviction that a husband should remain loyal to his wife. Sometimes we say, "My

neighbour does not believe in Christ, but he is a very moral person." Well, that general sense of duty and morality, says Calvin, is a remnant of the image of God. It is *not* a springboard by which unbelievers can launch themselves into the blessing of eternal salvation. However, it is something which preserves civil order in society (cf. CD III/IV 4).

Implications for today

Through catechism preaching and catechism classes, we learn that because of Adam and Eve's sin we are "totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil" unless we are regenerated by the Spirit of God (LD 3). At the same time, in the daily course of life, we may meet some people who do not believe in Christ and yet they are such decent, honest, compassionate, and helpful people. How do we square this with the doctrine of total depravity? Here is where Calvin offers us practical help. As this reformer explains, the decent and compassionate unbeliever is not partially or semi-regenerate. Instead, what we notice in them is a remnant of the original image of God. However, that remnant serves as a testimony to the splendour with which our Creator made us in the beginning. It does not provide the unbeliever with some kind of preliminary credit of everlasting righteousness before the holy God. On the contrary, as the fathers of Dordt would say later, it only leaves him "without excuse before God" (CD III/IV 4).

At the same time, Calvin's teaching on the image of God

highlights the warm, paternal love of our Lord. As a wise Father preparing in advance for the creation of his children, the Lord Almighty took six days to make everything necessary for the well-being of Adam and Eve and their descendants. Instead of giving God their gratitude, though, our first parents tossed all the Father's good gifts aside. They treated God as their enemy, not their Abba.

That remnant of the original image of God serves as a testimony to the splendour with which our Creator made us in the beginning; it does not provide the unbeliever with some kind of preliminary credit of everlasting righteousness

By nature, we are no different and no better. Yet in his infinite mercy, the Father has adopted us, as his very dear children, for the sake of his only-begotten Son through the power of the Spirit of adoption. By grace, we are restored to that state in which we were originally made: children of God. Once again, through the eternal Son of God, it is like Father, like children. And this is but the beginning. "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness, with

Church News

Called by the church at Chatham, Ontario:

Rev. W. den Hollander

of Bethel church, Toronto, Ontario.

Examined by Classis Ontario West on June 17th, 2009 and declared eligible for call:

Candidate Rodney Vermeulen

Called by the church of Surrey, British Columbia:

Candidate R. Vermeulen

ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18).

¹ Calvin, J. *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536 Ed.*, trans. F. L. Battles. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 15

² *Ibid*, p. 16

³ Calvin, J. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.15.1

⁴ *Ibid*, 1.15.4.

⁵ Calvin, J. "Épître à tous amateurs de Jésus-Christ" in *La vraie piété: Divers traités de Jean Calvin et Confession de foi de Guillaume Farel*, eds. I. Backus, and C. Chimelli, (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1986), pp. 25-26; translation mine. Concerning the last phrase of this quotation see Gen 6:7.

⁶ Calvin, J. *Sermons Sur La Genèse Chapitres 1,1 - 11,4. Supplementa Calviniana*, ed. M. Engammare. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000), p. 54; translation mine.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 57; translation mine.

⁸ Calvin, J. *Calvin's Commentaries*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), Vol. 4, p. 102.