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# Conversion in the Thought and Experience of John Calvin

**Debates in the present about conversion usually polarise around those who emphasise 'decision' and those stressing 'gradual progress'. Pete Wilcox' study argues that Calvin's thought conceives of conversion within an eschatological framework that encompasses both. Calvin's understanding of God's 'double grace' in reconciliation and sanctification does not, Wilcox maintains, argue against his holding a view of 'sudden' conversion, but it puts such a change within a moral and theological context that expects gradual progress in holiness of life.**

THE DECADE OF EVANGELISM is an appropriate time to subject a term such as 'conversion' to fresh scrutiny. In the context of evangelisation, what does the word mean? What has it meant in the past? The purpose of this essay is to assess what the term meant for John Calvin.

'Conversion', for Calvin, was intimately associated with 'the progress of Christ's Kingdom', a phrase he used repeatedly in his expository writings. I have indicated elsewhere that he construed this progress chiefly in institutional terms, equating it directly with that of the Reformed Church.<sup>1</sup> Nothing in the present discussion is a qualification of this. Yet alongside the identification of Christ's kingdom with the structures of the true church must be set Calvin's equation of it with the experience of a true Christian. Insofar as it conforms to the Word of God, Calvin describes the life of an individual believer, as well as the polity of the Reformed Church, as a manifestation of Christ's kingdom. In his view, the kingdom of Christ is truly established only where individual human beings respond appropriately to the preaching of God's Word.

## The spiritual nature of the kingdom of Christ

Calvin persistently locates Christ's kingdom within time and space.<sup>2</sup> The identification he makes between the kingdom and the visible church is so complete that it is possible for him to say that where the true church is, Christ reigns. The true Church is the institutional form of Christ's kingdom. Nevertheless, Calvin is clear that the kingdom of Christ has this form accidentally, not essentially. Although the true church is the form taken by Christ's kingdom within time and space, the

1 P. J. Wilcox, 'Evangelisation in the Thought and Practice of John Calvin', *Anvil* 12 (1995), pp 201-217.

2 Wilcox, 'Evangelisation', pp 207-210.

kingdom itself is neither temporal nor spatial, since in essence it is 'eternal' (or 'perpetual') and 'spiritual' (or 'heavenly').<sup>3</sup>

Whether in the *Institutes* or in his biblical expositions, Calvin repeatedly returns to the assertion that 'the Kingdom of Christ is spiritual'.<sup>4</sup> 'Christ's Kingdom is spiritual', he says, 'and so is everything connected with it'.<sup>5</sup> T. F. Torrance suggests that this language is designed primarily to distinguish between the present condition of the church and its future glory.<sup>6</sup> Calvin is certainly aware that the appearance of Christ's kingdom, whether in the age of the prophets, the apostolic era, or the period of the Reformers, is 'contemptible'; and that its true glory will only be manifest in future,<sup>7</sup> and he underlines the contrast between the way Christ's kingdom appears at its beginnings or at present, and the way it will be manifest at its consummation at the last day. Yet beyond this Calvin makes a more fundamental contrast, between the essential character of the kingdom of Christ, and its present, accidental, form. His point is not that this kingdom will one day have a worldly splendour which it lacks at present, but that its splendour is by nature spiritual, and that its future glory will be a manifestation of this. In this connection, he quotes the Pauline saying that 'the Kingdom of God does not consist in food and drink, but in righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit'.<sup>8</sup> Torrance rightly stresses the eschatological tension characteristic of all Calvin's statements about the nature of the kingdom of Christ. However, the accent on the future in Torrance's interpretation of the Reformer is at times in danger of obscuring the fact that when Calvin states that 'Christ's Kingdom is spiritual', he only means that it is 'by nature spiritual'.<sup>9</sup> The splendour of this kingdom lies in the gift of the Holy Spirit to individual believers.<sup>10</sup>

3 The eternal kingdom of Christ: Comm. Ps. 45:7, CO 31.454.20, CTS II.183; Comm. Dan. 2:31, CO 40.596.2, CTS I.171. The perpetual kingdom of Christ: Comm. Ps. 21:4, CO 31.214.21, CTS I.346; Comm. Dan. 2:44, CO 40.603.17, CTS I.181. The spiritual kingdom of Christ: Comm. Ps. 8:7, CO 31.94.9, CTS I.106; Comm. Mic. 7:11, CO 3.419.4, CTS III.384; Comm. Dan. 7:27, CO 41.83.40, CTS II.74; etc. The heavenly kingdom of Christ: Comm. Isa. 6:7, CO 36.133.36, CTS I.211; Comm. Dan. Pref. CO 40.533.17, CTS I.82; Comm. Jer. 31:12, CO 38.660.21, CTS IV.85; etc. 'CO' references are to line, page and volume of the *Iohannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, eds. G. Baum, C. Cunitz & E. Reuss, Schwetschke & Sons, Brunswick 1870. Translations are my own. For Calvin's expositions of the Prophets, an additional reference is given to the somewhat unreliable Calvin Translation Society edition, CTS, Edinburgh 1845-1853.

4 *Inst.* II.xv (1559), *passim*, OS III.474-479. 'OS' references are to line, page and volume

of the *Iohannis Calvini Opera Selecta*, eds P. Barth and W. Niesel, Chr. Kaiser, München, 1957-1962. Page numbers are also provided to the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, tr. F. L. Battles, Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1960. cf. Comm. Ps. 2:4, CO 31.45.45, CTS I.16; Comm. Amos 9:15, CO 43.175.11, CTS II.413; Comm. Jer. 31:38-40, CO 38.704.29, CTS IV.152.

5 Comm. Jer. 23:5-6, CO 38.411.14, CTS III.143.

6 T. F. Torrance, 'The Eschatology of Hope' in *Kingdom and Church: A Study in the Theology of the Reformers*, Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh 1956, ch. IV, p.122.

7 Comm. Ps. 78:70, CO 31.745.54, CTS III.280.

8 Comm. Amos 2:9-12, CO 43.32.6, CTS II.193; Comm. Isa. 1:1, CO 36.38.49, CTS I.56; *Inst.* II.xv.4 (1559), p 499, OS III.476.19.

9 Comm. Ps. 72:17, CO 31.671.47, CTS III.118.

10 Comm. Isa. 11:2, CO 36.235.42, CTS I.374; cf. *Inst.* III.i.2, p 538 (1559), OS IV.2.15.

We must observe the analogy between the kingdom of Christ and its qualities; for being spiritual, it is established by the power of the Holy Spirit. In a word, [the qualities of Christ's kingdom] must be viewed as referring to the inner person, that is, when we are regenerated by God to true righteousness.<sup>11</sup>

Or again,

It is necessary for us to bear in mind the character of Christ's kingdom. We know it is spiritual, but it is set forth under the image or form of an earthly and civil government... As, then, it is spiritual, the justice and judgement of which the Prophet is speaking do not belong only to civil and external order, but rather to that rectitude by which it comes that men are reformed according to God's image, which is in righteousness and truth. Christ is said to reign over us in justice and judgement, then,... because he rules us by his Spirit.<sup>12</sup>

In these two quotations, in order to explain what he means by the 'spiritual' reign of Christ, Calvin contrasts external order with 'the inner person'. (Elsewhere he states that 'Christ's Kingdom is not external, but relates to the inner person'.<sup>13</sup>) The reign of Christ is exercised by the Spirit, who rules over 'the regenerate', who 'are reformed according to the image of God'. The adjective 'spiritual', then, conveys Calvin's conviction that the reign of Christ effects the regeneration of individual human beings, by the agency of the Holy Spirit. The significance of the eschatological tension in all his statements about the kingdom of Christ becomes clear in the light of this.

### The kingdom of Christ and regeneration<sup>14</sup>

Calvin's summary of the gospel clarifies the relationship between the kingdom of Christ and regeneration in his thought. Perhaps the clearest such summary is to be found in a passage in *Institutes* III.xi.1, where Calvin refers to 'the double grace' of Christ.<sup>15</sup>

By partaking of [Christ], we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being *reconciled* to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have a gracious Father in heaven, instead of a Judge; and secondly, that *sanctified* by Christ's Spirit, we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.<sup>16</sup>

In the following lines, Calvin goes on to refer to 'the second of these gifts' (sanctification) as 'regeneration', and, by implication, to the first (reconciliation) as 'justification'. This 'double grace' provides the structure of *Institutes* Book III.<sup>17</sup>

11 Comm. Isa. 9:7, CO 36.200.24-28, CTS I.315.

12 Comm. Jer. 33:15, CO 39.67, CTS IV.253.

13 Comm. Isa. 42:1, CO 37.60.6, CTS III.287.

14 For much of the material in this section I am indebted to a helpful discussion of 'The Kingdom of God and Sanctification' in T. Palmer, *John Calvin's View of the Kingdom of God*, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Aberdeen 1991, ch. 7.

15 On the *duplex gratia* in Calvin, see W. Niesel, *Die Theologie Calvins*, 2nd edn, Munich 1957, pp 127-138 (ET: *The Theology of Calvin*, tr. H. Knight, Lutterworth Press, London 1956, pp 126-139); W. Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1957, pp 275-281; R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh 1959, pp 23-27.

16 *Inst.* III.xi.1 (1539), p 725; OS IV.182.4-8 (*my emphasis*).

17 *Inst.* Book III, Title (1559), p 537; OS IV.1.

After an introduction on 'faith', Calvin devotes the remainder of the Book to an explanation first, of sanctification (chapters iii-x) and then, of justification (chapters xi-xix), before he turns to the subjects of prayer, election and final resurrection. This two-fold grace of Christ is a consistent feature of Calvin's soteriology, present in his biblical expositions as well as the *Institutes*. Even in the *Institutes*, however, he employs a variety of terms to distinguish between its two parts. In *Institutes* III.iii.1, for example, having stated in his usual way that 'the sum of the gospel is said to consist in repentance and the forgiveness of sins', he proceeds to explain these concepts with reference to 'newness of life and free reconciliation'.<sup>18</sup> There are, then, several pairs of words which Calvin uses to refer to this two-fold grace. 'Justification and sanctification', 'reconciliation and regeneration', and 'forgiveness of sins and repentance' are synonymous pairs for him; each serves to comprehend the grace of Christ and to summarise the message of the gospel. He warns that these two aspects of Christ's grace are not to be separated from one another.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, he insists that for the purposes of exposition, the two must be distinguished, precisely so that they are neither separated nor confused.<sup>20</sup>

It is particularly with regard to sanctification, regeneration and repentance that Calvin refers to the reign of Christ, and to the work of the Spirit in 'governing' and 'directing' the believer. The association in Calvin's mind between Christ's *duplex gratia* and his *munus duplex*<sup>21</sup> probably accounts for the correlation. As Palmer puts it, 'Christ's work as Priest is the cause of our justification; his work as King is responsible for our sanctification.'<sup>22</sup> The present discussion is therefore more concerned with sanctification, regeneration and repentance than with justification, reconciliation and forgiveness of sins. However, the intrinsic inseparability of these two aspects of Christ's grace in Calvin's theology means that, occasionally, the exploration of one inevitably spills over into the other.

The correlation between regeneration (or sanctification) and repentance is implicit in the title of *Institutes* III.iii, where Calvin introduces his discussion of the subject: 'Our regeneration by faith; a discourse on repentance.'<sup>23</sup> It is explicit in the explanation he offers of his general approach, in the phrase 'I interpret repentance as regeneration'.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, when he proceeds to define repentance in *Institutes* III.iii.5, it emerges that one further term, conversion, is related to these others.

The meaning of repentance was a matter of the utmost importance to Calvin. Like all the Reformers of the mid-sixteenth century, he arrived at his definition of the concept in reaction to the prevailing Roman Catholic practice of penance. In

18 *Inst.* III.iii.1 (1559), p 592; OS IV.55.5-10.

19 *Inst.* III.xi.6 (1559), p 732; OS IV.187.20-23.

20 *Comm.* Isa. 59:20, CO 37.351.7-13, CTS IV.269.

21 On the relationship between the *munus duplex* and the *munus triplex* in Calvin's thought, and the relationship between Christ's offices as priest and king on the one

hand, and his office as prophet on the other, see H. P. Jansma, *The Prophetic Office of Christ in John Calvin's Theology*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Durham, 1991.

22 Palmer, p 213, following Krusche, p 278.

23 *Inst.* III.iii, chapter heading (1559), p 592; OS IV.55.1.

24 *Inst.* III.iii.9 (1539), p 601; OS IV.63.11-12.

an annotated edition of the Greek New Testament published in 1516, Erasmus had questioned the translation of Matt. 4:17 (Mark 1:15) which had been adopted in the Vulgate. Where the Vulgate had 'Do penance (*poenitemini*) for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand', Erasmus proposed that the Greek be rendered 'repent (*resipiscimini*)'.<sup>25</sup> The issue was still a vexed one forty years later, and Calvin's treatment of repentance in the context of sanctification reflects this controversy. Thus *Institutes* III.iv-v, for instance, is expressly directed against 'what the Scholastic sophists have taught concerning repentance'.<sup>26</sup> In the previous chapter (III.iii), he outlines his own understanding of the biblical concept. Noting that 'the Hebrew word for "repentance" is derived from "conversion", or "return"; and the Greek word from change of mind or of intention', Calvin concludes that:

repentance can best be defined as follows: it is the true conversion of our life to God, a conversion that arises from a pure and earnest fear of him, and which consists in the mortification of our flesh and of the old man, and in the vivification of the Spirit.<sup>27</sup>

This final association (of repentance with conversion) is as significant for Calvin's theology as those which have been identified already.<sup>28</sup> According to Ganoczy,

All that Luther drew from Scripture, especially from the prophets and Acts, is condensed as accurately as possible in Calvin's text. We find a direct connection between, indeed, an identification of *epistrefein* (*convertere*) and *metanein* (*resipiscere*).<sup>29</sup>

As in the *Institutes*, so in Calvin's expositions of the Prophets, the concept of conversion stands alongside the themes of repentance, sanctification and regeneration, except that there it is more usual to find him introducing repentance, regeneration and sanctification, having taken 'conversion' as his starting point.<sup>30</sup> It is more common in these expositions to find Calvin defining conversion in terms of repentance and regeneration than the other way around,<sup>31</sup> and in passages in which he feels that conversion is not to be understood in this way, he is at pains to point it out.<sup>32</sup> When he does equate conversion with 'the inner change, when God regenerates us by his Spirit',<sup>33</sup> Calvin is alert to the polemical significance of the step. 'It is worth noting', he suggests, that conversion refers to the renovation of the mind and heart, 'because when repentance is under discussion, many have their eyes fixed on the outward fruits of penitence alone.'<sup>34</sup>

25 *Novum Instrumentum omne ab Erasmo Roterodamo recognitum*, Basiliae MDXVI, pp 7, 241.26 *Inst.* III.iv.1 (1536), p 622; OS IV.84.37-38.

26 *Inst.* III.iv.1 (1536), p 622; O. S. IV.84.37-38.

27 *Inst.* III.iii.5 (1539/1536), p 597; OS IV.59.28-30, 60.1-5.

28 *Inst.* III.iii.21 (1559), p 615; OS 78.30-79.6.

The equivalence of these terms is noted by Niesel, *Theologie*, p 128 (ET p 127).

29 A. Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1987, pp 245-246. In fact Ganoczy was commenting on the 1536 *Institutes*; but the passage in question was retained in the 1559 edition.

30 e. g., Comm. Ezek. 18:24, CO 40.446.15-20, CTS II.248.

31 Comm. Dan. 2:47, CO 40.613.13, CTS I.195; Comm. Ezek. 7:13, CO 40.163.14, CTS I.256; Comm. Ezek. 18:24, CO 446.15, CTS II.248. But cf. also Comm. Dan. 4:27, CO 40.673.48, CTS I.279; Comm. Hos. 2:7, CO 42.233.56, CTS I.89.

32 e. g., Comm. Ps. 7:13, CO 31.86.1, CTS I.88; Comm. Mal. 3:18, CO 44.486.42, CTS V.612.

33 Comm. Lam. 5:21, CO 39.644.49, CTS V.515.

34 Comm. Ezek. 18:30, CO 40.454.24, CTS II.259.

## Regeneration, repentance and conversion as a process

With rigorous consistency, Calvin treats conversion and repentance, regeneration and sanctification, as a process. Thus when Calvin declares, in the quotation cited previously, 'I interpret repentance as regeneration', he goes on to define 'the sole end' of regeneration as being 'to reform in us the image of God, which was sullied and almost obliterated through the transgression of Adam.' 'This restoration', he adds,

does not take place in one moment or one day or one year; but through continual and sometimes even slow advances God wipes out in his elect the corruptions of the flesh, cleanses them of guilt, consecrates them to himself as temples, renewing their minds to true purity that they might practise repentance throughout their lives and know that this warfare will end only at death.<sup>35</sup>

According to Calvin, the regeneration of a human being does not take place in an instant. On the contrary, regeneration is a process in which it is necessary to make progress.

People never repent in such a way that they do not constantly need God's help. For we have to be renewed every day, and by degrees renounce the lusts of our flesh; nor do we put off the old humanity in a single day... We are converted to God little by little, and in various stages; for repentance has its progress.<sup>36</sup>

Or again,

No-one is so converted to God that... he is renewed in the image of God in a single day. This kind of conversion is never to be found in a human being.<sup>37</sup>

Were we fully under Christ's authority, we would be happy in every respect; but because we are far from yielding that obedience, we experience the blessings of Christ's kingdom only as far as we have made progress in newness of life.<sup>38</sup> Christians 'are still far short of the consummation of [Christ's] reign', and the complete fulfilment of prophecies about Christ's kingdom in individual experience 'is not to be expected on earth'. Believers must 'always think of making progress'.<sup>39</sup>

In the secondary literature, much has been made of this feature of Calvin's theology, especially where he refers explicitly to repentance or conversion. In part this reflects the attempt which has been made by specialists in reformation history to counter the tendency they observe in some schools of modern Protestantism, to regard conversion as a sudden and isolated crisis. According to Lane, there is an important contrast to be made between the 'instantaneous conversion' characteristic of modern 'Evangelicals generally' and 'Calvin's concept of conversion as a process'.<sup>40</sup> Alluding to *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Steinmetz suggests

35 *Inst.* III.iii.9 (1559), p 601; OS IV.63.25-65.2.

36 *Comm. Jer.* 31:18, CO 38.671.25, CTS IV.99.

37 *Comm. Jer.* 24:7, CO 38.465.34, CTS III.232.

38 *Comm. Isa.* 30:25, CO 36.525.29-32, CTS II.376.

39 *Comm. Isa.* 2:4, CO 36.66.33, CTS I.102.

40 A. N. S. Lane, 'Conversion: A Comparison of Calvin and Spenser', *Themelios* 18 (1987), p 20. However, Lane seems to understand Calvin's concept of conversion as a process which leads to regeneration, rather than one which is identical to it.

that to Calvin and his fellow Reformers (if not to 'the American evangelical experience of the last two centuries'), conversion 'is not the little wicket gate through which John Bunyan's pilgrim passes... as he abandons the City of Destruction; it is the entire pilgrimage to the Celestial City'.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, this feature of Calvin's theology is also prominent in the secondary literature simply because it is prominent in his writings. Yet, although the feature is noted often enough, few attempts have been made to explain it, despite the fact that, as Niesel and Torrance have shown, an explanation is not difficult to find.<sup>42</sup>

From the context of the discussion in the *Institutes*, it is clear that this emphasis on the life-long necessity for progress is intended to counter what Calvin considers the 'mad excess', which 'certain Anabaptists' substitute for spiritual regeneration.<sup>43</sup> Whereas, at least in Calvin's estimation of them, the Anabaptists claimed that moral perfection was to be experienced in the present, Calvin believed the consummation of salvation to lie in the future.

We are purged by the Spirit's sanctification in such a way that we are besieged by many vices and much weakness so long as we are encumbered with our body. Far removed from perfection, we must advance steadily forward.<sup>44</sup>

On the other hand, Calvin was also aware that an emphasis on the doctrine of justification by grace through faith left Luther, in particular, vulnerable to the charge that he had made sanctification a matter of little consequence for the Christian life. Calvin's soteriology is intended to leave no doubt that actual righteousness is (albiet gradually) granted to, and expected of, those who are justified by God's grace. The polemical context reinforces the eschatological tension so characteristic of his thought.

Elsewhere I have suggested that, at an institutional level, Calvin's view is that the kingdom of Christ is only established gradually, and in stages, although its progress towards its final consummation is inexorable.<sup>45</sup> The same pattern may be discerned in his treatment of Christ's kingdom in connection with the regeneration of individuals. Calvin views each individual, like the whole church, as caught between the inauguration of Christ's kingdom and its completion, and he sees the Christian life of repentance and renewed forgiveness in the light of the tension between the present age and the next. Insofar as Christians are new creatures, they experience the fullness of salvation; insofar as they are still subject to sin, they live in constant need of repentance and faith. Insofar as Christians are 'in

41 D. C. Steinmetz, 'Reformation and Conversion', *Theology Today* 35 (1978-79), p 30.

42 The feature is noted, but not explained, by Wallace, *Christian Life*, pp 24-25; F. Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, Collins, London 1963, p 243; W. Kolffhaus, *Vom Christlichen Leben nach Johannes Calvin*, Neukirchen Kreis Moers 1949, pp 170-173; and B. C. Milner, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church*, E. J. Brill, Leiden 1970, pp 166-167, among others.

The all-important connection between the process of regeneration and Calvin's eschatology is made by Niesel, *Theologie*, p 129 (ET, p 128); K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1958, pp 503-507; and Torrance, *Eschatology*, pp 148-149.

43 *Inst.* III.iii.14 (1539), p 606; OS IV.69.19-21. cf. Comm. Ps. 143:2, CO 32.401.10, CTS V.250.

44 *Inst.* III.iii.14 (1539), p 607; OS IV.70.29-32.

45 See Wilcox, 'Evangelisation', pp 205-207.

Christ', their salvation is complete. Insofar as they are still in the world, they experience a constant progress of regeneration towards its final consummation.

The parallel which exists here between the experience of the church on the one hand, and the individual believer on the other, is intrinsic for Calvin, because of the intrinsic relation between Christ's body and its members. It is, in other words, directly related to the three-fold pattern of interpretation which he brings to bear on the prophetic oracles of the OT (and to which I have drawn attention elsewhere<sup>46</sup>). For Calvin, the solidarity between Christ and the members of his body is such that the experience of the whole church is, broadly speaking, the experience of each individual Christian. With regard to Christ's kingdom, the same inexorable progress is to be discerned in both.

### Regeneration, repentance and conversion as an event

Nevertheless, just as at an institutional level Calvin can identify an *initium* of the kingdom of Christ, so, when he is referring to Christ's reign over individual human beings, he identifies its beginning, and can speak of regeneration, repentance and conversion as an event, through which one is initiated into the Christian life. Just as his comments at times create the impression that at an institutional level the kingdom of Christ is set up instantly, he can also say, as if it were an event accomplished once and for all in a moment, that '[the Kingdom of Christ] is established by the power of the Holy Spirit... when we are regenerated by God'.<sup>47</sup> Again, I have suggested elsewhere that it is a concern to do justice to the decisive significance for salvation history of the coming of Christ which leads Calvin to describe the kingdom as something which is already complete.<sup>48</sup> In the same way, it is a concern to do justice to the significance of regeneration for personal identity which leads Calvin to place the emphasis he does on the beginning of Christ's kingdom in individual experience, and which occasionally prompts him to speak of regeneration as an event rather than a process. Christians are not only described as those who 'are being converted', they are also those who are already 'converted to Christ'.<sup>49</sup>

It is not universally agreed that Calvin did view conversion as an event in this way. According to Bouwsma, for example,

Calvin attached little or no significance to 'conversion' as a precise event in his many discussions of the Christian life and the way of salvation... [He] always emphasized the gradualness rather than the suddenness of conversion and the difficulty of making progress in the Christian life.<sup>50</sup>

Lane makes a very similar point: 'Calvin has little to say about a conversion experience'; while he 'could speak of his own "sudden conversion" to the Protestant cause... he does not seem to have regarded it as the norm'.<sup>51</sup>

46 See Wilcox, 'Evangelisation', pp 203-207.

47 Comm. Isa. 9:7, CO 36.200.25-29, CTS I.316.

48 See Wilcox, 'Evangelisation', p 270f.

49 Comm. Ps. 110:3, CO 32.163.27-28, CTS

IV.303; cf. Comm. Zech. 10:9, CO 44.296.29, CTS V.297.

50 W. J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait*, OUP, Oxford 1988, p 11.

51 Lane, 'Conversion', p 20.



In fact, although the evidence for this is not incontrovertible, there are grounds to suppose that Calvin did regard a sudden 'conversion experience' as the norm. He never explicitly distinguishes 'initiatory' conversion experiences from conversion experiences more generally; but there is an accent in his writings on the need for an initial 'taming', or 'subjection' to take place, at the beginning of the Christian life: 'Even the best of us would never offer himself to God without first being subdued... by God's powerful correction'. 'This', he explains, 'is the beginning of Christ's Kingdom'.<sup>52</sup>

Here too Calvin's theology is shaped by polemical considerations. In the tradition, the relationship between the will of God and the human will in conversion was a matter of controversy. As Calvin saw it, the establishment of Christ's reign over an individual human being was no less God's proper prerogative than the establishment of the kingdom of Christ by the restoration of the church.<sup>53</sup> He saw no room for a human contribution to conversion: 'people never turn to God voluntarily.'<sup>54</sup> 'People cannot convert to God by their own free-will, unless he first changes their stony hearts into hearts of flesh. Indeed, this renovation... is a work surpassing that of creation itself.'<sup>55</sup> Human beings can no more convert themselves than create themselves; regeneration, no less than creation, is God's own work. From Calvin's point of view, this is true at every stage of the Christian life. The conversion and repentance required of the believer are always the work of God, and God alone. However, Calvin considers this point to be especially critical where the repentance of the ungodly was concerned. In that context, the question is specifically whether it lay within the power of the unregenerate will to turn to God. Since Calvin is convinced that even the regenerate will only has this power by the continually mediated grace of God, his answer to this prior question is a resounding 'No'. He maintains that the unregenerate will must be forcibly subdued by God.

Calvin's position is defined over against scholastic theories of 'the preparation for grace'. Much of *Institutes* II.i-v is concerned with this debate. He rejects utterly the notion that the unconverted can prepare in some way for their own conversion. 'Away with all that preparation that many babble about.'<sup>56</sup> The only 'preparation' he recognises occurs not when a sinner acts in some way, but when the sinner is acted upon by God. 'This is the true preparation for conversion, when the sinner is slain.'<sup>57</sup> In Calvin's opinion, if people are to be prepared for receiving doctrine and rendering true obedience, their 'fierceness' must first be subdued.<sup>58</sup> For 'before the Lord converts them', people 'are cruel and untamed beasts'; they 'only begin to abstain from doing injury when the Lord subdues their wicked inclination'.<sup>59</sup>

Contrary to Bouwsma's assertion, then, Calvin did not *always* stress 'the gradualness of conversion'. He also referred in his writings to 'sudden conversion'.

52 Comm. Mic. 4:3, CO 43.345.34-38, CTS III.261.

53 Comm. Mal. 4:6, CO 44.497.3, CTS V.629; cf. 'the peculiar gift of God', Comm. Jer. 24:7, CO 38.463.4-5, CTS III.229.

54 Comm. Hos. 5:15, CO 42.316.50, CTS I.212; cf. Comm. Mal. 3:7-8, CO 44.470.13, CTS V.583: 'This kind of expression has often been discussed before.'

55 Comm. Ps. 81:14, CO 31.766.25, CTS III.324.

56 *Inst.* II.ii.27 (1559), p 288; OS III.271.13-14.

57 Comm. Ezek. 13:22-23, CO 40.299.11-12, CTS II.43; cf. Comm. Isa. 19:22, CO 6.347.4, CTS II.79.

58 Comm. Isa. 25:3, CO 36.416.1-3, CTS II.193.

59 Comm. Isa. 65:25, CO 37.434.24-26, CTS IV.358.

Most notoriously, he did so in the autobiographical passage of the Preface to his *Psalms Commentary*, where, significantly (as often elsewhere), the concept is combined with the metaphor of a wild beast being tamed. Relating how he became a minister of the gospel, Calvin writes that:

At first, in fact, as I was so stubbornly devoted to the superstitions of the Papacy that I could not be extracted from such a deep mire, [God] tamed to teachableness a mind too stubborn for its years, by a sudden conversion. This mere taste of true godliness which I received, set me on fire with... a desire to progress.<sup>60</sup>

This passage has been the subject of intense scholarly interest.<sup>61</sup> It was suggested by Parker (followed in this respect by Bouwsma<sup>62</sup>) that the *subita conversio* to which Calvin refers is not so much a 'sudden' as an 'unexpected' conversion. However, Höpfl rightly points out that there are no grounds to suppose that 'Calvin should here have been using the term in its unusual rather than its usual meaning'.<sup>63</sup> This is not to say that Calvin himself really did undergo a 'sudden conversion'. Scholars commonly note that he wrote this passage fully twenty-five years after the events he is relating, and that the account appears calculated to make his own experience conform to a model exemplified by Paul, Augustine and Luther. It may be that, as Ganoczy puts it, 'the adjective *subita* was not introduced by a chronicler's concern for precision, but by a theologian's desire to emphasise the divine origin of the event.'<sup>64</sup> Yet it is itself remarkable that Calvin felt constrained to depict his own experience in these terms in the late 1550s, when the evangelisation of France was under way. It suggests that at least by 1557 he had come to see a 'sudden conversion', which subdues the rebellion of the unregenerate will and tames its ferocity, as an ordinary element in Christian initiation. For him, it was a general rule that those who are converted to Christ are 'suddenly' converted from wolves into lambs.<sup>65</sup>

This emphasis on 'sudden conversion' and the forcible subjection of the will is not apparent in the first edition of the *Institutes*. Some development apparently took place in Calvin's thought in the course of the 1550s. Ganoczy has argued

60 Comm. Ps. Pref., CO 31.21.32, CTS I.xi.

61 On the implications of this passage for Calvin's conversion, see Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, pp.10-11; J. Cadier, 'La Conversion de Calvin', *Bulletin de l'Histoire de la Société du Protestantisme Français* 116 (1970), pp 142-157; Ganoczy, *Young Calvin*, ch. 25; H. Höpfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin*, CUP, Cambridge 1982, Appendix I; A. E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture*, Blackwell, Oxford 1990, ch. 4; W. Neuser, 'Calvin's Conversion to Teachableness', in P. de Klerk, ed., *Calvin and Christian Ethics*, Calvin Studies Society, Grand Rapids MI 1987, pp 57-77; T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin*, Lion Publishing, Tring 1975, Appendix 2;

P. Sprenger, *Das Rätsel um die Bekehrung Calvins; Beiträge zur Geschichte und Lehre der Reformierten Kirche, Band XI*, Neukirchen Kreis Moers 1960.

62 Bouwsma, *Calvin*, p 10.

63 Höpfl, *Christian Polity*, p 222.

64 Ganoczy, *Young Calvin*, p 265.

65 Comm. Ps. 87 *Argumentum*, CO 31.799.49, CTS III.395; cf. Comm. Ps. 106:46, CO 32.134.18, CTS IV.243; Comm. Acts 9:1 (1552), CO 48.199.27-29, CNTC I.256; Ep. 3139 (1559), CO 17.684, Bonnet IV.87. 'CNTC' references are to page and volume of Calvin's New Testament Commentaries published by The Saint Andrew's Press, Edinburgh 1972.

that in addition to the concept of 'conversion as repentance' which is to be found in his writings from the first edition of the *Institutes* onwards, a somewhat different concept emerges in Calvin's later works. This second concept, which Ganoczy dubs 'conversion as miracle', first appears in the exposition of Paul's conversion in the *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*.<sup>66</sup> His examination of the relevant passages of the *Acts Commentary* leads Ganoczy to conclude that several different elements are combined in this later concept.

First there is the dialectical opposition between the human will which is rebellious but powerless and the divine will which is sovereign and compelling. Next there is the sudden nature of God's triumphant and transforming intervention. Then there is the affirmation that the convert begins an entirely new existence, which is marked by docility to teachableness. Finally conversion develops into a pastoral calling.<sup>67</sup>

Other scholars, notably Sprenger and Neuser, have drawn attention to the extensive terminological and theological parallels which exist between the expositions Calvin gives of the conversions of Paul and of other figures in the NT, and his description of his own conversion experience in the 'Psalms Preface'.<sup>68</sup> Ganoczy notes that in the *Acts Commentary* Calvin states expressly that Paul's conversion is to be understood as a type of Christian conversion in general.<sup>69</sup> It is likely, then, that this development in Calvin's thought was triggered primarily by the exegetical work he undertook on the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles between 1552 and 1555. But the possibility ought also to be considered that he was led to reflect on the relationship between conversion and Christian initiation by the emergence from 1555 onwards of unprecedented evangelistic opportunities in France.

Although, as Ganoczy states, 'the reformer never refers to a sudden or miraculous element in spiritual transformation' in the remainder of the text of the *Psalms Commentary* itself, 'several important elements in the idea of "conversion as miracle" ... are integrated harmoniously into the reformer's later thoughts on repentance'.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, the notion of 'a sudden and unexpected conversion' is incorporated into the 1559 *Institutes*,<sup>71</sup> as well as into the *Lectures on the Minor Prophets*.<sup>72</sup>

## Regeneration, repentance and conversion as event and process

However, scholars have not always been sufficiently careful to set this 'sudden' event within the context of Calvin's overall concept of conversion. At the end of his attempt to unravel *Das Rätsel um die Bekehrung Calvins*, for example, Sprenger has arrived at a more precise, and rather misleading, conclusion about the nature of Calvin's *subita conversio*.<sup>73</sup>

66 Ganoczy, *Young Calvin*, p 247.

67 Ganoczy, *Young Calvin*, p 248.

68 Sprenger, *Rätsel*; Neuser, *Conversion*.

69 Ganoczy, *Young Calvin*, p 248-49.

70 Ganoczy, *Young Calvin*, p 249.

71 Ganoczy, *Young Calvin*, p 251.

72 Comm. Jonah 3:6-8, CO 43.253.38, CTS III.103; Comm. Hag. 2:7-10, CO 44.105.47, CTS IV.360.

73 Sprenger, *Rätsel*, pp 73ff.

The objective of Sprenger's study is to shed light on the passage in the Preface to the *Psalms Commentary*, through an analysis of its key terms. Having isolated the words *superstitio*, *conversio*, *docilitas* and *pietas*, and having examined their meaning as these terms occur in the 1559 *Institutes* and the *Commentaries on the Acts of the Apostles* and the *Gospel of John*, Sprenger contends that 'there can be no doubt that in the Psalms passage, the phrase *subita conversio ad docilitatem* signifies only the very first beginning of Calvin's new direction in life'. By 'the very first beginning', Sprenger means more than just 'the beginning'. He argues that, by virtue of the association of *conversio* with *docilitas*, 'it is impossible to interpret Calvin's words in such a way that by 'conversion' they mean the final outcome of a long struggle with the inner life'.<sup>74</sup> He interprets his 'conversion to docility' as Calvin's readiness to embrace the gospel.

Sprenger's conclusions have been endorsed and amplified by W. H. Neuser. In an attempt to clarify the character of 'Calvin's conversion to teachableness', Neuser explores fourteen 'conversion stories' taken from the Reformer's NT commentaries (such as the Gospel accounts of the call of the disciples, and the encounter recorded in the Acts of the Apostles between Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch). Noting the recurrence in these stories of the same language as Calvin employs in the 'Psalms Preface', Neuser declares that 'Sprenger's discovery is confirmed'. Where Sprenger argued that *docilitas* 'did not refer to belief itself, but to an initial stage on the road to belief',<sup>75</sup> Neuser asserts that in Calvin's view, teachableness 'is an introductory, positive attitude to Christian teaching. It signifies a weak and insufficient preliminary stage to faith... [It] is a preliminary step to faith.'<sup>76</sup>

The two studies have genuine strengths. The parallels which exist between Calvin's account of his own conversion and his treatment of NT 'conversion stories' are real and important. By drawing attention to them, Sprenger and Neuser have placed other scholars in their debt. However, both authors have perhaps been more successful in the identification of these parallels than in the interpretation of them.

There are several reasons for this. First, both Sprenger and Neuser attribute greater historical significance to the Preface to Calvin's *Psalms Commentary* than the evidence allows. (Both attempt to relate the results of their terminological analyses to events in Calvin's life in the 1530s, whereas their researches actually offer insight into what the concept of conversion meant to him in the 1550s.) Secondly, both Neuser and Sprenger sever the vital and consistent connection which Calvin maintains between conversion (even 'conversion to docility') and regeneration. While they are right to note the particular connotations of a *conversio ad docilitatem* within the context of Christian initiation, they are wrong to interpret it as an event which *precedes* regeneration.<sup>77</sup> 'The conversion to teachableness' is the work of the Spirit, and as such is to be understood as the first part of regeneration itself.<sup>78</sup> Thirdly, by the way in which they frame their conclusion that

74 Sprenger, *Rätsel*, pp 73-74.

75 Neuser, *Conversion*, p 58.

76 Neuser, *Conversion*, p 63.

77 Sprenger, *Rätsel*, p 73; Neuser, *Conversion*, p 73.

78 As it was noted above (p 117), Calvin identifies three parts to repentance, or conversion: a transformation, the fear of God, and mortification/vivification. The conversion in question here corresponds to the first of these.

Calvin considered 'docility' to be only 'a preliminary step to faith',<sup>79</sup> Neuser (in particular) and Sprenger are in danger of suggesting that it is something for which those who have come to faith have no further use. For Calvin, however, docility is as permanent a prerequisite of the Christian life as conversion and repentance.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, progress in repentance is possible only where there is a spirit of docility. Sprenger is right that docility is the attitude of 'a student or hearer who has more to learn',<sup>81</sup> but this is not to be regarded as the attitude only of one on the way to faith. For Calvin, the one who enrolls in the school of Christ always has more to learn. The disposition of the true disciple is always one of docility.<sup>82</sup>

By severing the connection between conversion and regeneration which Calvin consistently maintains, both Neuser and Sprenger effectively reduce the 'conversion to docility' to an event, and rob it of its connotations of progress. For Calvin, the nature of the kingdom of Christ is such that its blessings may presently be enjoyed in part but not in full. In the experience of an individual Christian, the inauguration of Christ's kingdom must lie in the past, and its consummation in the future. The tension which exists between the two as a result is such that 'conversion' will invariably be experienced as both event and process.

### The kingdom of Christ, conversion and ecclesiastical allegiance

The accent in Calvin's concept of repentance falls on inward change. True conversion does not affect merely 'the hands and feet and tongue', but, 'starts in the mind and then in the heart, and only then passes on to outward works'.<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, a sincere inward change must bear fruit in outward acts. 'In the same way that inward conversion comes first in order,... so the fruit or proof of repentance ought to follow'.<sup>84</sup> The question arises, therefore, what these outward works might be.

In this connection, Calvin was constrained by the texts which he was expounding to comment primarily on ritual acts of penance. He accepts that there is a place for these, but is quick to widen the discussion beyond them.

Although we are not commanded to wear sackcloth or pull out our hair, we must earnestly and whole-heartedly lay hold of the substance of these signs: a dissatisfaction with, and confession of, our guilt, a heartfelt sorrow and the amendment of our life.<sup>85</sup>

This sentence is typical of Calvin's reflections on the subject. He conceives of conversion in both positive and negative terms.<sup>86</sup> Positively, conversion is a turning towards God and his service; negatively, it is a turning away from a former pattern

79 Neuser, *Conversion*, p 63. 'This teachableness is found at the beginning of faith', p.64

80 Comm. Dan. 8:18, CO 41.112.52-113.1, CTS II.116.

81 Sprenger, *Rätsel*, p 56.

82 Comm. Dan. 9:1-3, CO 41.128.47-48, CTS II.139.

83 Comm. Dan. 4:27, CO 40.673.50-51, CTS I.279; cf. Comm. Isa. 22:12, CO 36.374.7-8, CTS II.123.

84 Comm. Ezek. 18:30, CO 40.454.36-39, CTS II.259.

85 Comm. Isa. 22:13, CO 36.374.28-32, CTS II.124. cf. Comm. Jonah 3:6-8, CO 43.253.49-254.39, CTS III.103-105.

86 Comm. Ezek. 18:22, CO 40.444.38-41, CTS II.246.

of life, from sin and wickedness.<sup>87</sup> It is a turning away from false religion, towards true piety.

Since statues and images are the apparatus of idolatry and superstition, those who are truly converted to God loathe and detest them, and desecrate them as far as they can, as we read that Jehu did... His and other similar examples should be followed by godly princes and magistrates, if they wish to give a genuine proof of their repentance. It is true that the seat of repentance is in the heart... but it is demonstrated by its fruits.<sup>88</sup>

'If you are truly converted', Calvin paraphrases, 'demonstrate it practically, by throwing away idols and saying farewell to superstitions; for this is the true fruit of conversion.'<sup>89</sup>

This emphasis in turn raises the question whether, in Calvin's view, conversion necessarily entailed a break with the Church of Rome. Ganoczy has insisted that it did not. In his view,

Many historians have incorrectly emphasized the negative aspect of Calvin's conversion, seeing it as a break with the 'superstitions of the papacy' and the 'Roman Church', rather than as a response to a call to reform the Church.<sup>90</sup>

According to Ganoczy, 'Calvin's notion of repentance has nothing to do with confessional change'.<sup>91</sup> This may possibly be true as far as the writings of 'the young Calvin' are concerned. There is, however, little room to doubt that, by the mid-1550s, it had come to mean exactly this for him. At the end of a survey of some of Calvin's expository works, Ganoczy maintains that he has not found

one reference that clearly shows that conversion, this experience of repentance, ever necessitates a break of an ecclesiastical or 'confessional' nature.<sup>92</sup>

But such references abound in Calvin's Lectures. In a Lecture on Amos 5, for example, in a passage worth quoting in full, he asserts that:

It is indeed a proof of true conversion, when a sinner is dissatisfied with himself over his sins, and hates the things which pleased him before, and with a changed mind dedicates himself to God... It is as though the Prophet said, 'If you intend to return to God, cast away all your superstitions'. For these two things, true religion and idolatry, cannot be joined together. As long as you remain stuck in that false form of worship to which you have grown accustomed, you will continue to be alienated from God. This reconciliation demands, therefore, that you bid farewell to your corruptions.<sup>93</sup>

87 Conversion to God/to a better way of life: Comm. Jonah 3:6-8, CO 43.257.9, CTS III.109; Comm. Jonah 3:6-8, CO 43.257.18-19, CTS III.109. Conversion from a wicked way of life/from wickedness: Comm. Jonah 3:6-8, CO 43.257.4, CTS III.108; Comm. Jer. 18:11-12, CO 38.300.41, CTS II.402.

88 Comm. Isa. 30:22, CO 36.523.12-22, CTS II.372; cf. Comm. Isa. 31:7, CO 36.538.40-56, CTS II.399.

89 Comm. Isa. 31:7, CO 36.539.48-52, CTS II.400.

90 Ganoczy, *Young Calvin*, p 265. It is true that Ganoczy speaks of 'Calvin's conversion' there, whereas the concern here is with 'Calvin's concept of conversion'; but the context reveals that Ganoczy is conflating the two at this point.

91 Ganoczy, *Young Calvin*, p 266.

92 Ganoczy, *Young Calvin*, p 252.

93 Comm. Amos 5:4-6, CO 43.73.3-13, CTS II.254.

At the time that Calvin delivered these words, in 1557 or 1558, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of refugees from France were swarming into Geneva, precisely in order to escape what they regarded as the 'false worship' of the Church of Rome, to enjoy the 'true religion' of the reformation in the safety of a new home. When Calvin lectured on the OT prophets, many of the refugees were in attendance.<sup>94</sup> In view of this, it is hard to see how this passage can mean anything but that he understood conversion to necessitate a change of ecclesiastical allegiance.

The point is beyond dispute later in the same lecture, when Calvin maintains that it was the prophet's intention to show that the conversion of the people would be a pretence unless they turned away from all 'their superstitions and corrupt forms of worship'. He then goes on to argue that:

The same thing may be said today to those who wish to mix the dregs of the Papacy with the pure and holy worship of God. For there are many waverers (*mediatores*) today, who... wish to reconcile Popery with the doctrine of the gospel. But the Prophet shows that such a mixture cannot be endured by God... because light cannot be reconciled with darkness.<sup>95</sup>

Calvin would of course have agreed with Ganoczy that although the convert breaks with sin in general and papal superstitions in particular, 'he does not break with the Church'.<sup>96</sup> However, for Ganoczy 'the Church' means 'the Church of Rome', whereas for Calvin it is *contrasted* with 'the Church of Rome'. Ganoczy alleges that if Calvin had understood conversion to meant a break with the Church of Rome, 'he would have had to accept the idea of schism.' But this misses Calvin's point: he did not regard a break with the Papacy as a schismatic act, because he did not regard it as the true church.

## Conclusion

If the contemporary church is inclined to be uneasy about the concept of conversion, this is perhaps because the concept is frequently divested of the eschatological tension so characteristic of Calvin's discourse on the subject. The result is that when, in the current debate about Christian initiation, 'sudden event' is polarised with 'gradual process', the word 'conversion' is generally understood to denote only the former. But according to Calvin, Christian 'conversion' is both an event and a process. It may be at this point that his concept proves relevant to the church during the decade of evangelism. For by virtue of its connection with the kingdom of Christ, which is both a present reality and a future vision, it offers a means of holding event and process together.

94 On the nature of Calvin's audience, see De Beaulieu à Farel, Ep. 3545, CO 19.10.

95 Comm. Amos 5:4-6, CO 43.73.34-46, CTS II.255; cf. Comm. Acts 2:40, CO 48.56.15-36, CNTC 1.83-84. Note that the thrust of the original passage, which was composed in 1552, was reinforced by the revisions Calvin made in 1560.

96 Ganoczy, *Young Calvin*, p 252.

At *Institutes* III.xiv, Calvin gives the new chapter a title which betrays that tension he consistently discerns between the inauguration of Christ's work and its consummation: 'The Beginning of Justification and its Continual Progress'.<sup>97</sup> It has been argued in this essay that what Calvin makes explicit with regard to Christ's work as priest is implicit in his treatment of Christ's kingship. In view of the contents of the following ten chapters, it would have been entirely appropriate for Calvin to have given his account of repentance and conversion in *Institutes* III.iii the title 'The Beginning of Regeneration and its Continual Progress', or even, 'The Beginning and the Continual Progress of the Kingdom of Christ'.

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<sup>97</sup> *Inst.* III.xiv, chapter heading (1559), p 768;  
OS IV.220.27.