

Appendix 3

Calvin on the Resurrection

Because of its valuable contribution to what I have tried to say in this work, I have selected the following from Calvin's *Institutes*.

Calvin was clear that, while the death of Christ was vital in accomplishing the salvation of the elect, this must not be allowed to cloud any emphasis upon his resurrection. He was right.¹

Calvin:

Although in [Christ's] death we have an effectual completion of salvation – because by it we are reconciled to God, satisfaction is given to his justice, the curse is removed, and the penalty paid – still it is not by his death, but by his resurrection, that we are said to be begotten [or born] again to a living hope (1 Pet. 1:3); because, as he, by rising again, became victorious over death, so the victory of our faith consists only in his resurrection. The nature of it is better expressed in the words of Paul: 'Who (Christ) was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification' (Rom. 4:25); as if he had said [that] by his death sin was taken away, by his resurrection righteousness was renewed and restored. For how could he, by dying, have freed us from death, if he had yielded to its power? How could he have obtained the victory for us, if he had fallen in the contest? Our salvation may be thus divided between the death and the resurrection of Christ: by the former, sin was abolished and death annihilated; by the latter righteousness was restored and life revived, the power and efficacy of the former being still bestowed upon us by means of the latter. Paul accordingly affirms that he [that is, Christ] was declared to be the Son of God by his resurrection (Rom. 1:4), because he then

¹ Read the apostolic sermons in Acts to compare the weight given to Christ's death and his resurrection. I am not trying to play one against the other, but trying to redress my chosen title.

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fully displayed that heavenly power which is both a bright mirror of his divinity, and a sure support of our faith; as he also elsewhere teaches, that ‘though he was crucified through weakness, yet he lives by the power of God’ (2 Cor. 13:4). In the same sense, in another passage [Phil. 3:10], treating of perfection [that is, progressive sanctification – DG], he says: ‘That I may know him and the power of his resurrection’. Immediately after he adds, ‘being made conformable unto his death’. In perfect accordance with this is the passage in Peter, that God ‘raised [Christ] up from the dead, and gave him glory, that your faith and hope might be in God’ (1 Pet. 1:21). Not that faith founded merely on his death is vacillating, but that the divine power by which he maintains our faith is most conspicuous in his resurrection.

That, it seems to me, needs emphasis today, certainly more than it gets. I have to plead guilty to being remiss in this aspect of my gospel preaching.

Calvin went on to make a very important point:

Let us remember, therefore, that when [the] death [of Christ] only is mentioned, everything peculiar to the resurrection [of Christ] is at the same time included, and that there is a like *synecdoche* [that is, a part for the whole]² in the term ‘resurrection’, as often as it is used apart from death, everything peculiar to death being included. But as, by rising again, [Christ] obtained the victory, and became the resurrection and the life, Paul justly argues: ‘If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; you are yet in your sins’ (1 Cor. 15:17). Accordingly, in another passage, after exulting in the death of Christ in opposition to the terrors of condemnation, he thus enlarges: ‘Christ that died, indeed rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us’ (Rom. 8:34).

So much for the importance of the resurrection. Calvin moved on to expand on a vital aspect of all this. As we have just seen, he was clear that the believer’s progressive sanctification depends on both the death *and* the resurrection of Christ. He explained further:

² As an example, take the order: ‘All hands on deck!’

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Then, as... the mortification of our flesh depends on communion with the cross, so we must also understand that a corresponding benefit is derived from his resurrection. For as the apostle says: 'Like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life' (Rom. 6:4). Accordingly, as in another passage, from our being dead with Christ, he inculcates: 'Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth' (Col. 3:5); so from our being risen with Christ he infers: 'Seek those things which are above, where Christ sits at the right hand of God' (Col. 3:1). In these words we are not only urged by the example of a risen Saviour to follow newness of life, but are taught that by his power we are renewed unto righteousness.

Let me stress this because it needs stressing today: Christ's death and resurrection are set before believers, not merely as his saving work, redeeming his people from their sin (which it is, of course), but as empowering them, enabling them not only to know what they should do, but meriting and accomplishing the bestowal of the necessary grace and power for them to do it in Christ (Phil. 4:13), and so 'walk by the Spirit', keeping 'in step with the Spirit' (Gal. 5:16-24).

Calvin continued:

[Another] benefit derived from [Christ's resurrection] is that, like an earnest [that is, a deposit, a pledge, a guarantee], it assures us of our own resurrection, of which it is certain that his is the surest representation. This subject is discussed at length (1 Cor. 15). But it is to be observed, in passing, that when [Christ] is said to have 'risen from the dead', these terms express the reality both of his death and resurrection, as if it had been said that he died the same death as other men naturally die, and received immortality in the same mortal flesh which he had assumed.

I break in once again to stress the point Calvin is making here. The proper rendering of Christ 'having been crucified' (1 Cor. 1:23) is: 'Having been crucified (but he is, of course, now risen)'. The same applies to 'having been crucified' (1 Cor. 2:2). The context is clear: Christ was crucified, yes, certainly, but he is now alive (1 Cor. 1:2,7-9,13,24,30-31); if Christ were still

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dead, statements affirming that Christ died would be practically meaningless, virtual tautologies, certainly trite. The point is that the emphasis on the death of Christ – proper though that is – must not cloud the fact that he was raised, even when this is not explicitly stated; it is implied. Of course, Scripture does clearly declare it: ‘Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised’ (Rom. 8:34) and: ‘God... raised [Christ] from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God’ (1 Pet. 1:21). But even when the resurrection is not explicitly mentioned, it is never far beneath the surface. That is Calvin’s point. And it is a big one.

Calvin went on, taking the link between Christ’s death and resurrection even further to include what, judging by the small amount of weight given to it in many circles today, might be seen as the poor relation; namely, Christ’s ascension:

The resurrection [of Christ] is naturally followed by [his] ascension into heaven. For although Christ, by rising again, began fully to display his glory and virtue, having laid aside the abject and ignoble condition of a mortal life and the ignominy of the cross, yet it was only by his ascension to heaven that his reign truly commenced. This the apostle shows when he says he ascended ‘that he might fill all things’ (Eph. 4:10)... Christ, in whom the Father is pleased to be exalted, and by whose hand he is pleased to reign, is said to have been received up, and seated on his right hand (Mark 16:19); as if it had been said, that he was installed in the government of heaven and earth, and formally admitted to possession of the administration committed to him, and not only admitted [as a one-off reception], but to continue until he descends to judgment. For so the apostle interprets [that is, means – DG], when he says that the Father ‘set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named not only in this world, but also in that which is to come; and has put all things under his feet, and given him to be the head over all things to the church’ [Eph. 1:20-23]. You see to what end he is so seated; namely, that all creatures both in heaven and earth should reverence his majesty, be ruled by his hand, do him implicit homage, and submit to his power. All that the apostles intend, when they so often mention his seat at the Father’s

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hand, is to teach that everything is placed at his disposal. Those, therefore, are in error who suppose that his blessedness merely is indicated [by these words].

That is to say, when we read that Christ is seated in heaven, we are not merely to think of his personal blessedness, but that he has this glorious position of power in order to exercise that power on behalf of his people.³ As the writer to the Hebrews argued:

The former [Mosaic, old-covenant] priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he [Jesus] holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost [that is, at all times] those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them...

Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf (Heb. 7:23-25; 9:24).

As Paul assured the Romans:

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us (Rom. 8:33-34).

Calvin continued to expand on the theme:

From this doctrine faith derives manifold advantages. *First*, it perceives that the Lord, by his ascension to heaven, has opened up the access to the heavenly kingdom, which Adam had shut. For having entered it in our flesh, as it were in our name, it follows, as the apostle says, that we are in a manner now seated in heavenly places, not entertaining a mere hope of heaven, but possessing it in our Head [Eph. 2:6].

In his ministry, the old-covenant priest had the names of the tribes of Israel inscribed on the garment covering his heart (Ex. 28:29). The new covenant takes this much further. Christ died

³ And more. See, for instance, Matt. 28:18-20.

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for, rose for, ascended for, intercedes for his elect by name. As Paul Baynes, preaching on Ephesians, put it, Christ pitches on persons. Christ died for the church, the elect, yes (Eph. 5:25-27), but as Paul put it: ‘The Son of God... loved me and gave himself for me’ (Gal. 2:20). Similarly, he intercedes for each believer, and will return and raise each believer. Calvin referred to Ephesians 2:6. This verse is part of a massive statement about the believer’s present standing and its connection with his eternal hope:

God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:4-7).

All this carries enormous consequences, some of which Calvin set out. Opening with a glorious understatement, he went on:

Secondly, faith perceives that [Christ’s] seat beside the Father is not without great advantage to us. Having entered the temple not made with hands, he constantly appears as our advocate and intercessor in the presence of the Father; directs attention to his own righteousness, so as to turn it away from our sins; so reconciles him to us, as by his intercession to pave for us a way of access to his throne, presenting it to miserable sinners, to whom it would otherwise be an object of dread, as replete with grace and mercy. *Thirdly*, it discerns [that is, displays] his power, on which depend our strength, might, resources, and triumph over hell: ‘When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive’ (Eph. 4:8). Spoiling his foes, he gave gifts to his people, and daily loads them with spiritual riches. He thus occupies his exalted seat, that thence transferring his virtue unto us, he may quicken us to spiritual life, sanctify us by his Spirit, and adorn his church with various graces, by his protection preserve it safe from all harm, and by the strength of his hand curb the enemies raging against his cross and our salvation; *in fine*, that he may possess all power in heaven and earth, until he have utterly routed all his foes, who are also ours, and completed the structure of his church. Such is the true nature of the kingdom, such the power which the Father has

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conferred upon him, until he arrive to complete the last act by judging the living and the dead.

Of course, the kingdom is not here on earth in its fullness at present. Indeed, ‘the whole world lies in the power of the evil one’ (1 John 5:19). Nevertheless, much as it may not seem like it at present, believers see – by faith – that Christ truly is King. They know that ‘the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil’ (1 John 3:8). Moreover, as he said at the return of the seventy-two: ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven’ (Luke 10:18). Believers are convinced of the truth of Christ’s assertions just before his death: ‘Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out’ (John 12:31) and ‘the ruler of this world is judged’ (John 16:11). They know that Christ has ‘all power’ (Matt. 28:18-20).

Calvin:

Christ, indeed, gives his followers no dubious proofs of present power, but, as his kingdom in the world is in a manner veiled by the humiliation of a carnal condition, faith is most properly invited to meditate on the visible presence which he will exhibit on the last day. For he will descend from heaven in visible form, in like manner as he was seen to ascend, and appear to all, with the ineffable majesty of his kingdom, the splendour of immortality, the boundless power of divinity, and an attending company of angels. Hence we are told to wait for the Redeemer against that day on which he will separate the sheep from the goats, and the elect from the reprobate, and when not one individual either of the living or the dead shall escape his judgment. From the extremities of the universe shall be heard the clang [better – the blast – DG] of the trumpet summoning all to his tribunal; both those whom that day shall find alive, and those whom death shall previously have removed from the society of the living... Though no one can deny that that destruction of the flesh will be death, it still remains true that the living and the dead shall be summoned to judgment (1 Thess. 4:16); for ‘the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air’... (Acts 10:42)... (2 Tim. 4:1).

It is most consolatory to think, that judgment is vested in him who has already destined us to share with him in the honour of

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judgment (Matt. 19:28); so far is it from being true, that he will ascend the judgment seat for our condemnation. How could a most merciful Prince destroy his own people? How could the Head disperse its own members? How could the advocate condemn his clients? For if the apostle, when contemplating the interposition of Christ, is bold to exclaim: 'Who is he that condemns?' (Rom. 8:33), much more certain is it that Christ, the intercessor, will not condemn those whom he has admitted to his protection. ['Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us' (Rom. 8:33-34).]... *In fine*, since in him all kinds of blessings are treasured up, let us draw a full supply from him, and none from any other quarter. Those who, not satisfied with him alone, entertain various hopes from others, though they may continue to look to him chiefly, deviate from the right path by the simple fact that some portion of their thought takes a different direction. No distrust of this description can arise when once the abundance of his blessings is properly known.

Again:

None participate in the benefits of Christ save those who raise their minds to the resurrection... In order that he may stimulate us the more powerfully, [the writer to the Hebrews speaks of] the final advent of Christ our redemption. It is true, indeed, that all the parts of our redemption are already accomplished; but as Christ was once offered for sins (Heb. 9:28), so he shall again appear without sin unto salvation. Whatever, then, be the afflictions by which we are pressed, let this redemption sustain us until its final accomplishment. The very importance of the subject ought to increase our ardour. Paul justly contends, that if Christ rise not the whole gospel is delusive and vain (1 Cor. 15:13-17); for our condition would be more miserable than that of other mortals, because we are exposed to much hatred and insult, and incur danger every hour – indeed, [we] are like sheep destined for slaughter – and hence the authority of the gospel would fail, not in one part merely, but in its very essence, including both our adoption and the accomplishment of our salvation. Let us, therefore, give heed to a matter of all others the most serious, so that no length of time may produce weariness.

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Of course, it is all a question of faith, and – as we all have to confess – our faith is not always strong. Calvin acknowledged this:

It is difficult to believe that after our bodies have been consumed with rottenness, they will rise again at their appointed time... To enable faith to surmount the great difficulty, Scripture furnishes two auxiliary proofs, the one the likeness of Christ's resurrection, and the other the omnipotence of God. Therefore, whenever the subject of the resurrection is considered, let us think of the case of our Saviour, who, having completed his mortal course in our nature which he had assumed, obtained immortality, and is now the pledge of our future resurrection... Hence Paul's argument: 'If there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen' (1 Cor. 15:13); for he assumes it as an acknowledged principle that when Christ was subjected to death, and by rising gained a victory over death, it was not on his own account, but in the Head was begun what must necessarily be fulfilled in all the members.

Let me close this Appendix by repeating this invaluable caution for believers from Calvin:

To pry curiously into their intermediate state is neither lawful nor expedient... It is foolish and rash to inquire into hidden things, farther than God permits us to know... What teacher or doctor will reveal to us what God has concealed?... Since Scripture uniformly enjoins us to look with expectation to the [second] advent of Christ, and delays the crown of glory till that period, let us be contented with the limits divinely prescribed to us – that is, that the souls of the righteous, after their warfare is ended, obtain blessed rest where in joy they wait for the fruition of promised glory, and that thus the final result is suspended till Christ the Redeemer appears.

Wise words.