

RECOVERING THE REFORMATION'S ECUMENICAL VISION OF REDEMPTION AS DEIFICATION AND BEATIFIC VISION

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ABSTRACT. The beatific vision is widely perceived as a Roman Catholic doctrine. Many continue to view deification as a distinctively Eastern Orthodox doctrine incompatible with the Western theological tradition, especially its Protestant expressions. This essay will demonstrate that several Reformers of the first and second generation promoted a vision of redemption that culminates with deification and beatific vision. They affirmed these concepts without apology in confessional statements, dogmatic works, biblical commentaries, and polemical treatises. Attention will focus on figures in the Reformed tradition though one could produce similar surveys for the Lutheran and Anglican branches of the Reformation as well. John Calvin will receive extended treatment because some scholars dispute whether he affirmed deification. This essay presents important evidence thus far overlooked which should settle the question.

KEY WORDS: Beatific Vision, Deification, Zwingli, Bucer, Calvin

Introduction

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the beatific vision was widely perceived as a Roman Catholic doctrine despite a rich history of Protestant reflection on it. Around the same time, Albrecht Ritschl and his students began to depict deification as a distinctively Eastern Orthodox doctrine. Their histories of dogma sought to purge from Protestantism any mystical or Hellenistic elements deemed incompatible with modern sensibilities or the simple message of Jesus. These histories were designed to remove vestigial dogmas and superstitions the Reformers inherited from their medieval and patristic predecessors. Ritschl and his students were aware that the Reformers affirmed the beatific vision and deification but downplayed this fact, es-

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pecially with regard to deification (e.g., Ritschl 1872: 232-33; Ritschl 1902: 389-90). Scholars in subsequent generations were often ignorant of it altogether. However, as with the dogmas of Trinity and Incarnation, the hope of deifying union with God was not a vestige ancillary to the Reformers' theology. It was, rather, constitutive of an ecumenical vision of redemption which they sought to uphold and defend and which some in our day seek to recover for Protestant theology. The Orthodox theologian Paul Gavrilyuk predicts that 'deification, provided that its full implications are realized, will work like a time-bomb in due course producing "creative destruction" of the soteriological visions developed by the Churches of the Reformation' (Gavrilyuk 2009: 657). Some Protestant theologians see things similarly. They express alarm about increasing Protestant appreciation for deification and the beatific vision because they think it represents theological compromise that will lead away from the Reformers' insights, particularly in relation to justification by faith alone (e.g., McCormack 2004). These predictions and worries are premised on the misguided assumption that deification and the beatific vision are alien to the Reformation traditions. In reality, the Reformers' doctrine of justification was embedded within a soteriological structure that culminates in sharing the divine life and seeing God. Fidelity with the Reformers on justification is enhanced when we retrieve the teleological goal of salvation which informed their understanding of its mechanics.

This essay will demonstrate that several Reformers of the first and second generation affirmed the deification of the faithful and beatific vision without apology in their confessional statements, dogmatic works, biblical commentaries, and polemical treatises. Attention will focus on figures in the Reformed tradition though one could produce similar surveys for the Lutheran and Anglican branches of the Reformation as well. John Calvin will receive most attention because some scholars contest whether he affirmed deification. The discussion will highlight important evidence that has been overlooked thus far. The concluding section will briefly offer reasons why Protestants should recover the Reformers' ecumenical vision of redemption.

Huldrych Zwingli

In July 1531, a few months before his death, Huldrych Zwingli prepared *A Short and Clear Exposition of the Christian Faith* for King Francis I of France which Heinrich Bullinger published as a booklet in 1536. In it the Swiss Reformer describes the beatific vision as the hope of seeing 'God Himself in His very substance, in His nature and with all His endowments and powers, and to enjoy all these, not sparingly but in full measure, not with the cloying effect that generally accompanies satiety, but with that agreeable completeness which involves no surfeiting'. Zwingli describes the experience of

beatific vision like an appetite that is completely filled, but not to the unpleasant excess of gluttony. It is like perpetually feeling 'just right' after a scrumptious meal served in the right proportions but this meal never ends. Why? Because, Zwingli tells us, 'The good which we shall enjoy is infinite and the infinite cannot be exhausted; therefore no one can become surfeited with it, for it is ever new and yet the same' (Zwingli 1922: 271).

On Zwingli's account of the beatific vision, one is perpetually being filled but never comes to a point of complete satiety; one is content by being perpetually contented afresh with new delights. God is infinite and unchanging, hence the vision of God is ever new and yet the same. There are obvious similarities between Zwingli's account and the perpetual progress Gregory of Nyssa describes in his *Life of Moses* or John Climacus in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. While Zwingli does not elaborate on the theme the way these ancient writers did, Hans Boersma's description of Gregory's understanding aptly describes Zwingli's as well: he 'recognized the correspondence between divine infinity and the insatiability of human desire, so that a proper Christian spirituality holds out the hope of a vision that does not culminate in a static point but ever continues and increases in relation to the ultimate object of this vision' (Boersma 2018: 94).

Zwingli sparked the Swiss Reformation in 1523 when he published the Sixty-Seven Articles, the first confession of the Reformed tradition. Unlike Luther's more famous Ninety-Five Theses, Zwingli's Articles are already fully Protestant. They also affirm the deification of believers. Article XIII states: 'Where this (the head) is hearkened to one learns clearly and plainly the will of God, and man is attracted by his spirit to him and changed into him' (Zwingli 1901: 112). Some translations mute the force of the last phrase by rendering it 'drawn to him by his Spirit and transformed into his likeness' or, worse, 'converted to him'. Zwingli's exposition of the Articles published six months later clarifies his intent. Commenting on the second part of Article XIII, he states: 'that a person is drawn to God by God's Spirit and deified, becomes quite clear from scripture'. The phrase in Zwingli's Swiss German is *in got verwandelt*, more literally rendered 'transformed into God'. The contemporaneous Latin translation by Zwingli's close associate Leo Jud confirms this: *Deinde per spiritu dei in deum trahitur & veluti transformant*. Zwingli explains further:

For absolutely everything, even sin, helps the Christian to achieve the good. Thus one must be drawn to God and deified (*in inn verwandelt*) so that we might be fully emptied, cleaned and able to deny ourselves, no longer trusting in our own mind, heart and works but putting all our confidence in God our sole hope to which we cling. For thus we are being transformed into God (*in gott verwandelt*). This is not the work of the flesh but of the Spirit of God (Zwingli 1984: 57).

Deification appears again in Zwingli's 1525 *Commentary on True and False Religion*. This work has been described as the 'earliest truly comprehensive treatise on Protestant theology' (Rockwell 1929: iii). Earlier works like Melancthon's *Loci Communes* focused on points of dispute. Zwingli presents 'an original and far more comprehensive plan of arrangement' that 'justifies the claim that among Protestant system-builders he is the pioneer' (Rockwell 1929: iii). In it Zwingli elaborates on the idea that the apex of human perfection is transformative union with the Spirit of God.

The Spirit of God... deigns to draw the wretched spirit of man to itself, to unite and to bind it to itself, and wholly to transform it into itself (*ac prorsus in se transformare*). This thing feeds and rejoices the heart and assures it of salvation. What else is this than the food of the soul? By what comparison can it be more fitly expressed than by that of food? For as the starving stomach rejoices when food comes into it, wherewith the used-up breath and heat and strength are replenished, so the starving soul, when God discloses Himself to it, leaps for joy, and daily grows and increases in strength more and more, being transformed into the likeness of God (*formam Dei transformatur*) until it develops into the perfect man (Zwingli 1929: 208).

Zwingli inscribed a soteriology of transformation into the Reformed tradition's first confession and Protestantism's first systematic work of dogmatics. Echoing late medieval mystical themes, for the Swiss Reformer, deification is a work of the Spirit whereby believers are drawn to him, united to God, and transformed. Deification begins with the self-disclosure of God to the soul and involves self-emptying, self-denial, daily growth, and sanctification on the path to perfection. That path culminates in an infinitely joyous, continually filling, and ever new vision of the inexhaustible God. At the fountain-head of Reformed theology we find a soteriology that culminates with the beatific vision and deification.

Martin Bucer

In 1530 Martin Bucer wrote the Tetrapolitan Confession with the assistance of Wolfgang Capito and Caspar Hedio for the Diet of Augsburg (full text in Cochrane 2003: 51-88). Article III states a Reformed doctrine of justification but is immediately followed in Article IV with the statement, 'we are sure that no man can be justified or saved except he supremely love and most earnestly imitate God'. Drawing on Augustine, the faith by which we are justified is described as one that is 'efficacious through love'. 'By this only', the Confession continues, 'are we regenerated and the image of God is restored in us'. The believer is not passive in this but actively cultivates the virtues and exercises them through good works for the benefit of others. The biblical theme of *imitatio Dei* (Eph 5:1) and the active cultivation of

virtue are both important themes in patristic theology integrally associated with the concept of deification. Pointing back to Article III, Bucer and his associates tie these themes to justification as well as to Article IV's emphasis on the restoration of the *imago Dei*.

The Confession lays down the dictum 'as in the glory of a blessed life, so in the cultivation of innocence and perfect righteousness' because those foreknown by God are predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son (Rom 8:29). The reason is simple, we were created for good works (Eph 2:10). However, 'no one can love God above all things, and worthily imitate him, but he who indeed knows him and expects all good things from him'. The imitation of God is visible through the justified sinner's good works. The Confession then brings together what Norman Russell distinguishes as the nominal, realist and ethical senses of deification (Russell 2004: 1-15) when it explicitly refers to believers as 'gods':

By this, although we are born corrupt, our thoughts even from our childhood being altogether prone to evil, we become good and upright. For from this we, being fully satisfied with one God, the perennial fountain of blessings that is copiously effluent, show ourselves to others as gods—i.e. true children of God—by love striving for their advantage so far as we are able... For whatever the law of God teaches has this end and requires this one thing, that at length we may be reformed to the perfect image of God, being good in all things, and ready and willing to serve the advantage of men; which we cannot do unless furnished with virtues of every kind (Article IV).

Read by itself, Article IV might be taken to call believers gods in a merely nominal or metaphorical sense. After all, the Tetrapolitan Confession later employs that sense when it refers to magistrates as 'gods' because their office is a most sacred function (Article XXIII). However, a merely nominal or metaphorical use is unlikely in Article IV given Bucer's explicit affirmation of deification elsewhere.

In his commentary on John, Bucer discusses the purpose of the incarnation in relation to John 1:14. The Word, he says, became the Mediator who perfects and elevates the elect through his incarnation. What kind of elevation and perfection does he have in view? Bucer could not be more explicit when he says 'the Father wanted to make gods out of men' (*voluit nanque Pater ex hominibus deos facere*). The Word became flesh to bring about nothing less than the 'deification of the elect' (*deificationem electorum*) (Bucer 1988: 44). Bucer's interpretation of John 1:14 straightforwardly embraces the common patristic understanding of the incarnation's purpose: the Word became man that men may become gods. The three editions of Bucer's commentary were influential among the early Reformed, not least because of the attentive reading they received from Calvin in preparing the 1536,

1539, and 1541 editions of the *Institutes* and again in 1553 when he wrote his own commentary on the fourth gospel (Wendel 1997: 139-40).

Martin Bucer promoted a vision of redemption which culminates in the believer's deification even when he does not speak in such explicit terms. In his commentary on Ephesians, for example, Bucer identifies satisfaction, justification, and reconciliation as vital to a proper soteriology but none of these in themselves constitute salvation's ultimate goal. According to Bucer, redeemed humanity will be restored to a much more elevated position than that from which it fell, one in which we are endowed with divine glory and immortality (Bucer 1527: 28v; 42r; cf. van't Spijker 1996: 39-40). For Bucer, redemption is ultimately an eschatological elevation of human nature that has already happened in principle as a consequence of the incarnation. The Father desired to make 'gods' of men, therefore Christians should act as gods now by imitating the Father's philanthropy. A forensic doctrine of justification, deification, and the role of good works in restoring the image of God coalesce in Bucer's thought to form a clearly Reformed yet catholic soteriology.

Heinrich Bullinger and Others

In 1536, Heinrich Bullinger, Simon Grynaeus, Oswald Myconius, Kaspar Megander and Leo Jud were commissioned by the magistrates of several cities to compose a common confession for the Swiss Reformed churches that came to be known as the First Helvetic Confession (full text in Chochrane 2003: 100-11). This was the same year Bullinger published Zwingli's *Short and Clear Exposition*. Though not official members of the committee, Martin Bucer and Wolfgang Capito had considerable influence on its drafting (Chochrane 2003: 97). The Confession expresses a very deferential attitude toward the teaching of the church fathers: 'we want to recognize and consider them not only as expositors of Scripture, but as elect instruments through whom God has spoken and operated' (Article III). Consonant with that deference, and possibly reflecting the direct influence of Bucer and indirect influence of Zwingli, the Confession appears to affirm deification as the *telos* of salvation when it echoes the language of 2 Peter 1:4:

This Lord Christ, Who has overcome and conquered death, sin and the whole power of hell, is our Forerunner, our Leader, and our Head. He is the true High Priest Who sits at God's right hand and always defends and promotes our cause, until He brings us back and restores us to the image in which we were created, *and leads us into the fellowship of His divine nature* (Article XI, emphasis added).

John Calvin

The first edition of Calvin's *Institutes* was published the same year as the First Helvetic Confession. In it we find several variations on the patristic exchange formula. According to Norman Russell, the 'fundamental tenet' of the Christian understanding of deification is the Irenaean principle that the Son of God became as we are that we might become as he is (Russell 2004: 321). Gerald Bonner correctly observes that the exchange formula 'teaches deification without actually employing the word' (Bonner 1986: 369). Calvin's use of the formula in the 1536 *Institutes* shows that deification was found at the heart of his soteriology and sacramentology from the beginning. Consider the following examples:

No common thing it was that the Mediator was to accomplish: to make children of God out of children of men; out of heirs of Gehenna to make heirs of the heavenly kingdom. Who could have done this had not the Son of God become the Son of man, and had not taken what was ours as to impart what was his to us, and to make what was his by nature ours by grace? (Calvin 1986: 51; expanded in 2.12.2 of the 1559 edition)

If we had not been adopted to Christ as children of grace, with what assurance would anyone have addressed God as Father? Who would have broken forth into such rashness as to appropriate for himself the honor of a child of God? Christ, the true son, has been given to us as our brother by Him in order that what belongs to him by nature may become ours by benefit of adoption, provided we embrace with sure faith this great blessing (Calvin 1986: 76; retained in 3.20.36 of the 1559 edition).

This is the exchange which out of his measureless goodness he has made with us: that, receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that taking our weakness upon himself he has strengthened us by his power; that having received our mortality he has given us his immortality; that, descending to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him... (Calvin 1986: 103; significantly expanded in 4.17.2 of the 1559 edition).

... being made a sharer in our human mortality, he made us partakers in his divine immortality; when, offering himself as a sacrifice, he bore our curse in himself to imbue us with his blessing; when by his death, he swallowed up and annihilated death; and when, in his resurrection, he raised up this corruptible flesh of ours, which he had put on, to glory and incorruption (Calvin 1986: 104; retained in 4.17.4 of the 1559 edition).

It has been alleged that Calvin thought 'the very notion of the deification of man was blasphemous' (Bainton 1985: 125). Calvin's use of the patristic exchange formula and high estimation of Bucer's commentary on John sug-

gest otherwise. The allegation is also contradicted by more direct evidence. In 1539 Calvin showed that he considered it orthodox to speak of the redeemed ‘becoming God’ or ‘gods’ in the sense many church fathers did. In March of that year Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto sent a letter to the citizens of Geneva attempting to win them back to the papacy. Sadoletto prefaced his main discussion with an oration on the nature and importance of salvation which concludes: ‘God descended to the earth, that he might become man, and man was raised to heaven, that he might be a God (*ut esset Deus*)’ (in Calvin 1844a: 1.8). In August, Calvin wrote a response over the course of six days. In it he questions the Cardinal’s motives for spending nearly a third of his letter rehearsing something that is simply not in dispute. The topic of Sadoletto’s preface, Calvin says, ‘deserves to be sounded in our ears by day and by night, to be constantly kept in remembrance, and made the subject of ceaseless meditation’ (Calvin 1844a: 1.33). In direct reference to the Cardinal’s deification formula, Calvin says, ‘I readily agree with you that, after this sanctification, we ought not to propose to ourselves any other object in life than to hasten towards that high calling; for God has set it before us as the constant aim of all our thoughts, and words, and actions’ (Calvin 1844a: 1.34). Calvin does not merely acquiesce to a traditional formula; he embraces deification as the overarching *telos* of salvation that should govern our thoughts, words, and deeds during this earthly sojourn.

The fact that Calvin espoused the deification of believers is confirmed by his commentary on Romans published a few months later in March 1540. The dedication acknowledges Calvin’s use of ancient commentators ‘whose godliness, learning, sanctity and age have secured them such great authority that we should not despise anything which they have produced’ (Calvin 1960a: 2). It also expresses special indebtedness to three contemporary commentators, Melancthon, Bullinger, and Bucer. Commenting on Romans 5:2, Calvin says, ‘The hope of the glory of God has shone upon us by the Gospel, which testifies that we shall be partakers of the divine nature, for when we shall see God face to face, we shall be like him (II Pet. 1.4; I John 3.2)’ (Calvin 1960a: 105). The exchange formula appears in discussion of Romans 8:3 when it says, ‘Christ took to Himself what was ours in order that He might transfer what was His to us, for He took upon Himself our curse, and has given us His blessing’ (Calvin 1960a: 160). In good patristic fashion, Calvin identifies the final end of redemption as glorification, partaking of the divine nature, beatific vision, and conformity to God while also employing the Irenaean principle of exchange. This is precisely what the church fathers call deification. Of course, throughout he also affirms justification by faith alone. Calvin’s Romans commentary synthesizes the hallmark themes of patristic and early Protestant soteriology without any sense of

tension. Like Bucer, Calvin affirmed a clearly Reformed yet catholic vision of redemption.

Calvin continued to utilize variations on the exchange formula in subsequent writings. Possibly the most notable example is found in the 1549 *Consensus Tigurinus* (Calvin 2016: 35-41). Calvin's most successful ecumenical endeavor, it is the fruit of meetings and correspondence between Calvin, Heinrich Bullinger, William Farel, and other ministers. It was approved by the churches of Zurich, Geneva, and Neuchâtel as demonstration of their unity about the Lord's Supper. Article III describes the shared soteriological framework within which these Reformers and churches understood the sacraments. Justification by faith alone and the patristic pattern of saving exchange are juxtaposed when the *Consensus* states:

Thus it is consequently held that Christ, being the eternal Son of God and of the same essence and glory as the Father, clothed himself with our flesh in order to communicate to us by right of adoption that which belonged to him by nature, that we might truly be sons of God. This is accomplished when, by faith, we are grafted into the body of Christ, and when, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are first reckoned as righteous by a free imputation of righteousness. Then we are regenerated into new life and, being restored in the image of our heavenly Father, we reject the old man.

Furthermore, Article IV affirms Christ 'has rendered us blessed sons of God' and the Spirit reforms whatever is vicious in us 'that God himself may dwell in us'. Indwelling is again mentioned along with ascent when the *Consensus* says Christ raises us to himself and the Father 'until that is brought to fulfillment which is finally to take place, when God is truly all in all'. This last statement quotes from 1 Corinthians 15:28, a popular proof-text for deification (as are Psalm 82:6, 2 Peter 1:4, and 1 John 3:2).

Despite the foregoing evidence, it is sometimes claimed Calvin's polemics against heterodox notions in Servetus, Osiander, the Libertines, and ancient Manicheans somehow indicate opposition to the deification of humanity in general (Bainton 1960: 195-96; de Kroon 2001: 20) and to the patristic doctrine in particular (Van Vliet 2009: 127, 251, 268). Calvin's disagreement with Lutheran teaching about the ubiquity of Christ's ascended humanity has been cited as evidence of alleged opposition to the deification of humanity even in the person of Christ (Wendel 1997: 224, 235, 259). It is, however, a simple non-sequitur to infer opposition to the traditional Christian doctrine of deification from Calvin's opposition to these ideas. In point of fact, the mature Calvin expressly taught the doctrine in his 1551 commentary on 2 Peter, distinguishing it from the heterodox notions he opposed.

Second Peter 1:4 famously speaks of believers becoming ‘partakers of the divine nature’. Calvin unambiguously affirmed deification as the goal of Christian redemption when he wrote: ‘We should notice that it is the purpose of the Gospel to make us sooner or later like God; indeed it is, so to speak, a kind of deification (*quasi deificari*)’ (Calvin 1963: 330). The older translation conveys the thought more adequately: ‘Let us then mark, that the end of the gospel is, to render us eventually conformable to God, and, if we may so speak, to deify us’ (Calvin 1855: 371). Calvin could not be more perspicuous: the *telos* of the gospel is to make us like God, even to deify us. Calvin’s qualifier (*quasi*) distances his position from competing notions which simply obliterate the divide between creator and creature, but it is deification nonetheless.

Calvin’s comments in the surrounding context suggest deification is shorthand for the faithful being clothed with God’s glory, endowed with his power, restored in his glorious image, and God himself being possessed by the faithful in such a way that what is his becomes theirs by grace. Ever mindful of the fundamental difference between Creator and creature, Calvin is vigilant to insist the word ‘nature’ does not denote God’s essence but kind. Therefore, this verse does not mean ‘that we cross over into God’s nature so that His nature absorbs ours’ as some fanatics assert. What the apostles were concerned to teach here and elsewhere is that ‘when we have put off all the vices of the flesh we shall be partakers of divine immortality and the glory of blessedness, and thus we shall be in a way one with God so far as our capacity allows’ (Calvin 1963: 330). This statement simultaneously emphasizes union with God and creaturely limitation much as Pseudo-Dionysius does in his famous definition: ‘theosis is likeness to God and union with him so far as possible’ (Pseudo-Dionysius 1857: 1.3). As do many patristic writers, Calvin also mentions the similarity between Christian deification and Plato’s teaching that the highest human good is conformity to God. However, he observes, Plato was ‘wrapped up in the fog of errors, and afterwards he slipped away into his own invented ideas’ (Calvin 1963: 331; cf. *Inst.* 3.25.2).

Calvin’s commentary on 2 Peter recapitulates the main themes of the patristic deification tradition. The Greek and Latin fathers described the ultimate purpose of the gospel as deification. Calvin signaled agreement with this catholic vision of salvation when he said the end of the gospel is to deify us. The clear statements in this passage have been assiduously evaded by scholars who insist on *a priori* grounds that deification could not have been a constituent element of Calvin’s soteriology (e.g., Slater 2005; Partee 2008: 167-79; McCormack 2010: 527-28). Others intimate deification could not have been very important to Calvin since only once does he use the word in reference to Christian salvation. It is true that Calvin did not normally

speak in terms of deification, but that tells us very little about the importance the idea had for him. There is ample patristic precedent for holding a robust understanding of deification while rarely, if ever, using the word.

Irenaeus is generally regarded as the first Christian theologian to formulate a doctrine of deification but he employed no special terminology for the concept. In early works Cyril of Alexandria used traditional Greek terms for the idea but largely stopped when controversy with Nestorius problematized such language. Yet, scholars note that Cyril's later works bring the patristic doctrine to full maturity. 'It is indeed ironic', Daniel Keating observes, 'that Cyril, who refrained in large part from employing this vocabulary to describe our share in the divine life, is often hailed as the theologian of divinization *par excellence*' (Keating 2005: 11). Irenaeus and Cyril both exercised significant influence on Calvin's theology—much more than might be presumed by the number of times Calvin cites them by name (see Backus 2000). So, it is hardly surprising that Calvin followed their example. Like Irenaeus, he makes use of various permutations of the exchange formula. Like Cyril, he employs 2 Peter's language of partaking of the divine nature along with synonymous phrases like partaking of divine immortality or heavenly glory. He also adopts Cyril's concept of Christ's 'life-giving flesh' by which divine life is communicated to believers when they partake of the Eucharist (e.g., *Inst.* 4.17.8-9; *Comm John* 6:51; *Comm 1 Cor* 11:24; *Calvin* 1844b: 3.437). Calvin simply did not need to use the word 'deification' to convey the concept.

Another way Calvin affirmed deification without using the word was by talking about the beatific vision and union with God. These themes are prominent already in the *Psychopannychia*, an important early work scholars often overlook. The first draft was written in 1534 but Calvin did not publish it then on the advice of the older Wolfgang Capito and Martin Bucer. It was revised and eventually published in 1542 and again in 1545 with minor alterations, additions, and the title by which it is now known. The *Psychopannychia* critiques the idea that the soul is dormant between death and resurrection and the idea that the soul is not a substance distinct from the body. In contrast to soul sleep and materialism, and in distinction from medieval Latin innovations, Calvin recovers an eschatological anthropology with a decidedly Greek patristic bent.

Medieval scholastic theologians debated the nature of the beatific vision (see, e.g., Cross 2019). Pope John XXII caused controversy for teaching that the departed faithful will not see God until the Last Judgment and was forced to recant his position. In 1336 Pope Benedict XII issued the apostolic constitution *Benedictus Deus* to provide an authoritative definition. Siding with Aristotelians like Thomas Aquinas, Benedict said that immediately up-

on death or release from purgatory, the saints intuitively see the divine essence without any mediation. Even prior to the last judgment and resurrection, ‘the divine essence immediately manifests itself to them, plainly, clearly and openly’ (Benedict XII 1336). The resurrection of the body is not denied, but it seems superfluous since the fullness of beatific vision can be experienced without embodiment. *Benedictus Deus* largely settled debate in the West. Calvin, however, was convinced on scriptural grounds that the Greek fathers and medieval writers like Bernard of Clairvaux (whom Calvin admired) were correct that the beatific vision could not be fully enjoyed prior to resurrection. Steven Tyra observes, ‘Far from following the celestial itinerary drawn up by Thomas and other Roman authorities, the reformer had boldly charted his own path, and it was one that ran east’ (Tyra 2018: 12). Later Cardinal Robert Bellarmine would heavily criticize Calvin for embracing ‘the error of the Greeks’ (see further Tyra 2018).

According to Calvin, upon death the souls of the righteous are led into the place of peace where they are wholly intent on beholding God. They are not impatient, but their desire is incomplete because their final good is to see ‘the supreme glory of God’. Their desire ‘is always moving onward till the glory of God is complete, and this completion awaits the judgment day’ (Calvin 1844b: 3.435-36). The departed faithful enjoy the presence of God yet hope for bodily resurrection (Calvin 1844b: 3.449). The resurrection bestows even richer blessings because ‘participation in the glory of God’ will exalt the bodies of departed saints ‘above nature’ (Calvin 1844b: 3.452)—*participation gloriae Dei id supra naturam evehet*. The elect will not be as Adam was before sin but will be ‘renewed by Christ to a better nature’ in which they experience ‘the highest degree of immortality’ (Calvin 1844b: 3.457). They will not merely experience the created immortality natural to the soul but will be, body and soul, ‘partakers of the Divine glory’ and ‘partakers of a Divine immortality’ (Calvin 1844b: 3.465, 466). This can occur only in perfect union with God.

Bruce McCormack refers to the ‘moves’ scholars make in the ‘attempt to find a union with God in Calvin’s thinking’. He then states, ‘one has to ask whether it is still Calvin’s theology that is being set forth once these moves have been made’ (McCormack 2010: 518, n. 33). No subtle moves are necessary to see that Calvin set forth his own theology in terms of union with God. In a passage reminiscent of his response to Sadoletto’s deification formula, Calvin emphasizes union with God as the proper object of our longing and hope because it is the reward to which all the divine promises point.

For it is admitted by all, that perfection of blessedness or glory nowhere exists except in perfect union with God. Hither we all tend, hither we hasten, hither all the Scriptures and the divine promises send us. For that which was once said to Abraham applies to us also, (Gen. xv. 1) ‘Abraham, I am thy exceeding great re-

ward'. Seeing, then, that the reward appointed for all who have part with Abraham is to possess God and enjoy him, and that, besides and beyond it, it is not lawful to long for any other, thither must our eyes be turned when the subject of our expectation is considered (Calvin 1844b: 3.463).

Calvin believes his opponents agree on this point, but he wants to persuade them to make a further concession.

I hope they will concede that that kingdom, to the possession of which we are called, and which is elsewhere denominated 'salvation', and 'reward', and 'glory', is nothing else than that union with God by which they are fully in God, are filled by God, in their turn cleave to God, completely possess God—in short, are 'one with God'. For thus, while they are in the fountain of all fulness, they reach the ultimate goal of righteousness, wisdom, and glory, these being the blessings in which the kingdom of glory consists. For Paul intimates that the kingdom of God is in its highest perfection when 'God is all in all' (1 Cor. xv. 28.) (Calvin 1844b: 3.463-64).

The *Psychopannychia* describes humanity's final good and the eschatological fulfillment of our deepest desires in terms of the beatific vision and union with God. Paul Helm is correct when he says Calvin's talk of union with God does not intend 'anything which implies a loss of identity or individuality, a merging of the human with the divine'. Calvin does not posit an undifferentiated union as some medieval mystics did, but a differentiated union (Billings 2005: 316-17). But Helm is incorrect when he says, 'Calvin does not intend a kind of divinisation of the human person' (Helm 2008: 96). That is precisely what Calvin intends. This fact may not be obvious from Calvin's brief references to union with God in the 1559 *Institutes* (e.g., 2.15.5; 3.25.2), but the *Psychopannychia* leaves little room to doubt that Calvin intends much more than a union of will, affection, and goals. As Hans Boersma recently concluded, reversing his previous skepticism, 'Since he believed that in the eschaton we will see the essence of God—without the mediation of Christ—the conclusion seems inevitable that Calvin also anticipated a deifying union with God (or the Father) himself' (Boersma 2018: 274; cf. Boersma 2011: 94). The elect will be partakers of God's very glory and immortality; in the resurrection they will be renewed and transfigured 'above nature'. They will be 'fully in God' and 'filled by God'. We are dealing with full-bodied deification, even a doctrine of theosis consistent with Pseudo-Dionysius' early Byzantine definition.

The *Psychopannychia* should not be interpreted as if it represents an early stage in Calvin's development before his thought was fully Protestant (contra Tavard 2000). While a draft was written in 1534, we cannot reconstruct its contents. But Calvin clearly considered it a Protestant work; that is why he sent it to Martin Bucer and Wolfgang Capito for approval. Moreover,

Calvin published the *Psychopannychia* only after the *Institutes* (1536), a substantial revision of the *Institutes* (1539), the Romans commentary (1540), and a significant series of shorter works that includes Calvin's response to Sadoletto. More importantly, he had spent three years in Strasbourg in the company of Bucer and Capito (Muller 2001: 334-35). What we possess is a work composed over several years that reflects the constructive influence of the first-generation Reformers and which synthesizes insights Calvin gained in the course of writing two of his most influential books. The beatific vision and transforming union with God are central to Calvin's eschatological anthropology as a Protestant. And it was as a Protestant—perhaps even *because* he was a Protestant—that 'Calvin returned at least partially to earlier patristic (and Eastern) views' (Boersma 2018: 277).

The *Psychopannychia* places union with God at the apex of Calvin's redemptive vision. It is not peripheral to Calvin's theology as some intimate (e.g., Partee 2008: 174). Dozens of passages written over the course of his career confirm that union with God held a central place in Calvin's eschatological anthropology. In addition to the 2 Peter commentary discussed above, other notable examples include the following:

Treatise Against the Anabaptists (1544):

There is no one who does not concur that the perfection of our beatitude consists in our being perfectly united with God. It is the goal toward which all the promises of God point us. For what was formerly said to Abraham is equally addressed to us: that God is our highest reward (Gen. 15:1). Hence the end of our beatitude, of our glory and salvation, is to be belong wholly to God, to possess Him, and for Him to be wholly in us (Calvin 1982: 146-47).

Treatise Against the Libertines (1545):

Then, at that time [when Jesus returns], the children of God will receive the reward of their hope, and the beatitude which they presently await will be revealed to them. They will see it fully, I say, face to face; whereas it is currently hidden to the human senses.... Then we shall be with God and we shall see God such as He is, whereas we currently know Him only by faith. Then our bodies, which are presently subject to corruption and putrefaction, will be transfigured into the glory of our Lord Jesus (Calvin 1982: 297).

Commentary on Hebrews (1549):

[T]he true rest of the faithful which lasts to all eternity is to conform to that of God. As it is the highest human blessedness to be united with God, so that ought also to be man's ultimate purpose, to which all his plans and actions should be directed (Comm Heb 4:3; Calvin 1963: 47).

The highest human good is therefore simply union with God. We attain it when we are brought into conformity with His likeness (Comm Heb 4:10; Calvin 1963: 48).

The highest human good is to be united with God who is the fountain of life and of all good things. It is their own unworthiness that keeps everyone from approaching Him, and it is therefore the proper office of the Mediator to help us here, and to stretch out His hand to lead us to heaven (Comm Heb 7:25; Calvin 1963: 101).

Commentary on 1 John (1551):

Like Him. He does not mean that we shall be equal to Him. For there must be a difference between the Head and the members. But we shall be like Him in that He will conform our lowly body to His glorious body, as Paul also teaches us in Phil. 3.21. For the apostle wanted to show us briefly that the ultimate aim of our adoption is that what has, in order, come first in Christ, shall at last be completed in us... But inasmuch as the image of God is renewed in us, we have our eyes prepared for the sight of God. And now, indeed, God begins to restore His image in us; but in what a small measure! Therefore, unless we are stripped of all the corruption of the flesh, we shall not be able to behold God face to face (Comm 1 John 3:2; Calvin 1959: 267).

We must also notice that the manner which the apostle mentions is taken from the effect, not the cause. For he does not tell us that we shall be like Him because we shall enjoy the sight of Him, but proves that we shall be partakers of the divine glory because, unless our nature were spiritual and endued with a heavenly and blessed immortality, it could never come so near to God. Yet the perfection of glory will not be so great in us that our seeing will comprehend God totally, for the diversity of proportion (*longa distantia proportionis*) between us and Him will even then be very great. But when the apostle says that we shall see Him as He is, he refers to a new and ineffable mode of vision, which we have not now (Comm 1 John 3:2; Calvin 1959: 267-68).

Commentary on the Gospel of John (1553):

In these words He shows, not in what respect He differs in Himself from the Father, but why He descended to us; which was, to unite us to God. For, until we have reached that point, we stand so to say in mid-course. We also imagine only a semi-Christ and a mutilated Christ unless He leads us to God (Comm John 14:28; Calvin 1959: 89).

Let us therefore learn to view Christ humbled in the flesh, that He may lead us to the fount of blessed immortality. For He was not appointed our leader just to draw us to the sphere of the moon or the sun, but to make us one with God the Father (Comm John 14:28; Calvin 1959: 90).

Institutes (1559):

We know that ‘we are God’s children’, says John, but ‘it does not yet appear.... But when we shall be like him... We shall see him as he is’ [I John 3:2].... If God contains the fullness of all good things in himself like an inexhaustible fountain, nothing beyond him is to be sought by those who strive after the highest good and all the elements of happiness, as we are taught in many passages.... Indeed, Peter declares that believers are called in this to become partakers of the divine nature [II Peter 1:4]. How is this? Because ‘he will be... glorified in all his saints, and will be marveled at in all who have believed’ [II Thess. 1:10]. If the Lord will share his glory, power, and righteousness with the elect—nay, will give himself to be enjoyed by them and, what is more excellent, will somehow make them to become one with himself, let us remember that every sort of happiness is included under this benefit (3.25.10; Calvin 1960b: 1005).

Second Reply to Stancaro (1561):

It is the proper function of the mediator to unite us to God (Calvin 1973: 148).

What is the goal of our adoption which we attain through him, if it is not, as Peter declares, finally to be partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4)?... The grace of adoption depends on this, that he transfers to us what he naturally possesses (Calvin 1973: 149).

Calvin’s soteriology is predicated on the Irenaean principle of saving exchange. At each stage of his career Calvin identified the goal of salvation with beatific vision, union with God, glorious transfiguration, sharing in divine life, conformity to God, participation in the divine nature, and related themes. For Calvin, humanity’s highest good and the final end of redemption is to be fully in God and filled by God so that God is all in all—to be one with God so far as our capacity allows. In short, the *telos* of the gospel is a kind of deification. Calvin is explicit about all this; there should be no debate.

Recovering the Patristic and Reformational Consensus

In the nineteenth century Albrecht Ritschl and his students invented the notion that deification is a distinctively Eastern idea incompatible with the Western theological tradition, especially the forensic doctrines of salvation championed by the Reformers. This supposed historical insight served as the linchpin in their attempt to dispense with the dogmas of Trinity and Incarnation as the offspring of an illicit affair between Christianity and Hellenism (see further Mosser 2014: 40-44). They saw themselves as Martin Luther’s heirs, completing his work through the creation of a Germanic

Christianity freed from the superstition and pagan accretions of its Latin and Greek precursors. Theirs would be a Christianity for the modern world in which soteriology consists of little more than justification by faith alone. There would be no need for the crude 'physical theory' of the church fathers or medieval speculation about seeing God's essence. Examination of the earliest discussions of deification by modern Orthodox scholars show that their characterization of deification as the distinctive patrimony of the Eastern Churches was appropriated directly from Ritschlians like Adolf von Harnack.

Ritschlian and Neopatristic histories of dogma habituated scholars over several generations to view participation in divine life and the vision of God as alien to Protestant soteriology. For reasons that were never clearly explained, the forensic emphasis of justification by faith alone was alleged to rule out the possibility of deification. From the beginning this was a simple category error. Justification pertains to the mechanics of obtaining right standing before God, deification concerns the reception of divine life as the goal or *telos* of redemption. These concepts simply do different work within a full-orbed soteriology. That is why the Reformers did not hesitate to affirm both notions without the least bit of tension. That is also why contemporary theologians who are convinced on scriptural or confessional grounds that deification and the beatific vision are true do not need to abandon the soteriological insights for which the Reformers sacrificed so much. The Reformers we have surveyed show that one can affirm a full-orbed soteriology that is both forensic and transformational, Reformational and catholic.

The fact that Protestant theologians today increasingly affirm deification will not lead to the 'creative destruction' of Protestant soteriology as Gavriluk predicts. The only thing that will be destroyed is a bit of propaganda devised to distance the churches of the Reformation from the Reformers' catholic understanding of God and redemption. Nor does it represent a flight to Constantinople or Rome. Rather, it is a return to the places in which Reformational theology was birthed. In this article we visited Zurich, Strasbourg and Geneva; the road also leads to Wittenberg and Canterbury. Deification and the beatific vision are not exotic Orthodox and Catholic flowers; they are ecumenical doctrines of the church native to the soil of the Reformation. We should remember that the Reformation was not an attempt to take Christianity back to some mythical golden age before confessional dogma corrupted it. It was a reform movement *within* catholic Christianity committed to the dogmatic conclusions of the undivided church (Zachman 2018; Billings 2014). Therefore, like the canon of the New Testament, the doctrine of the Trinity, and *creatio ex nihilo*, nobody needs to baptize the patristic consensus about salvation's ultimate ends before affirming and utilizing them in constructive Protestant theology.

An important question remains: *Should* we speak of salvation in terms of beatific vision, union with God, and (especially) deification? The Reformers knew it is perfectly orthodox to speak of salvation in these terms but they were also aware that heterodox notions propounded by the Libertines, Servetus, Osiander, Schwenkfeld and others rendered such talk susceptible to misunderstanding. Protestant theologians in seventeenth-century England faced a similar situation. Most acknowledged the orthodoxy of patristic and medieval accounts of salvation in terms of deification and beatific vision, but the divinization teachings of certain Cambridge Platonists and various anti-Trinitarian movements made them hesitant to speak in such terms (see Lim 2012: 79-82, 95-115, 175, 205-14). Nonetheless, Paul Lim observes, ‘the so-called Eastern theology of the Cappadocians had become the staple diet of Puritan divinity by the mid-seventeenth century’ (Lim 2012: 295). In our own day the divinizing notions of the Word of Faith movement, Armstrongism, Mormonism, and other movements create similar potential for confusion. Some of these groups even cite deification in the church fathers, Eastern Orthodoxy, C. S. Lewis, etc. as precedent for their distinctive teachings (e.g., Givens 2015: 260-64; Robinson 1991: 65-70).

Protestants cannot condemn deification as such without sawing off the patristic and Reformational branches on which they sit. The Ritschlian school eagerly sawed through one of those branches but in the process unwittingly cut though the other as well. It would be imprudent to retain their prejudice against deification or ignore the doctrine because we have been habituated to associate it with either Orthodoxy and Catholicism or heterodox movements like Mormonism. Today mainline and evangelical Protestants alike tend to proclaim truncated, uninspiring, humdrum messages of salvation. The retrieval of deification and the beatific vision is an opportunity to renew the message of God’s lavish, whelming grace proclaimed by the church fathers and Reformers. As we engage the primary sources, we will find our own understanding of salvation deepened and enriched as a result. Utilizing the traditional language of deification also helps us maintain faith with our forbearers while tethering us to their catholic vision of redemption. As Charles Hodge said with respect to another aspect of soteriology, ‘It is important to adhere to old words if we would adhere to old doctrine’ (Hodge 1872: 470). In this case, we are talking about one of the oldest words in Christianity’s theological lexicon (Russell 2004: 338-39).

Some people may still worry that any talk of deification somehow endangers the Creator/creature distinction. Whether ancient or modern, theologians who discuss the doctrine usually make necessary qualifications to ensure that does not happen. Moreover, any fulsome exposition of the doctrine will actually disallow any violation of that distinction. Rowan Williams’s astute observation about Calvin makes the point nicely:

That we are 'deified' by our communion with Christ in the Spirit is, by a nice theological irony, the one sure way of avoiding the illusion that we are or can become gods. Calvin, with his clear insistence on both the deifying effect of the Incarnation and the total dependence of the redeemed on an act and initiative that is not theirs and not guaranteed by anything other than the loving will of the Trinity, would have understood and relished such irony (Williams 2018: 167).

Recovering the Reformation's ecumenical vision of redemption is worthwhile because paying greater attention to the *telos* of salvation helps orient the spiritual life, provides insight into God's redemptive purposes for humanity, and supplies resources for the contemporary theological task. Contemplation of God's promise to renovate our corrupt natures, give himself to be seen by us, and draw us into the divine life and love of the Trinity—to be by grace what Christ is by nature—renews hope and arouses praise.

Finally, in the realm of discussion between traditional Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Christians, deification and the beatific vision do not represent boundaries to be overcome through negotiated compromise or walls to be raised against improved relations. Rather, the patristic and Reformational consensus about ultimate salvation should serve as a common starting point from which we address our deep similarities as well as historic differences.

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