

DEPARTING FROM—AND RECOVERING—TRADITION: JOHN CALVIN AND THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

JIMMY AGAN*

With respect to the imitation of Christ, E. J. Tinsley had the following to say in a 1972 article: “In Protestantism there is a perceptible nervousness about using the term at all. This has been particularly the case since the time of Luther. His final antipathy to the ideal became the orthodox protestant [sic] tradition on the matter.”¹ The present article hopes to demonstrate two things: first, that evangelical scholarship continues to maintain this “orthodox Protestant tradition” through appeals to John Calvin and his perceived hostility toward the imitation of Christ; second, that such appeals to Calvin are misleading, since the Reformer himself displayed far less nervousness regarding the *imitatio Christi* than many of his theological heirs. As we shall see, while Calvin could speak strongly against the abuse of the imitation of Christ when necessary, the concept ultimately played a positive and prominent role in Calvin’s understanding of the Christian life. In other words, whereas Calvin speaks of imitation in terms of both abuse and proper use, many in the Protestant and Reformed heritage have heard only the former. As a result, many who believe they are maintaining Protestant tradition by downplaying the imitation of Christ are actually departing from that tradition, at least as it is represented by Calvin.² The ultimate aim of this article, then, is to let the Reformer himself reform our views so that we might recover a neglected part of our tradition—namely, a proper emphasis on the imitation of Christ.³

I. “MAINTAINING” THE TRADITION: CALVIN AND IMITATION AS COMMONLY PERCEIVED

Before examining Calvin’s thought, we need to demonstrate that a common perception—or, as we will later argue, a common misperception—persists among some Protestant and Reformed scholars. While many Calvin specialists

* Jimmy Agan is professor of New Testament and director of homiletics at Covenant Theological Seminary, 12330 Conway Road, St. Louis, MO 63141.

¹ E. J. Tinsley, “Some Principles for Reconstructing a Doctrine of the Imitation of Christ,” *SJT* 25 (1972) 45.

² For a similar argument with respect to Luther, see Dietmar Lage, *Martin Luther’s Christology and Ethics* (Texts and Studies in Religion; Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1990).

³ We define the imitation of Christ as follows: the Christian’s sustained effort to pattern his or her life in accordance with the character and conduct of Jesus Christ as he is portrayed in Scripture. We presuppose that such effort is rooted in (1) profound, thoughtful reflection on the NT’s portrayal of Christ; (2) the conviction that likeness to Christ is a central feature of Christian maturity; and (3) dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit for progress in sanctification. For further development see the author’s forthcoming work, *The Imitation of Christ in the Gospel of Luke: Growing in Christlike Love for God and Others* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013).

acknowledge the key place the imitation of Christ has in the Reformer's thought,⁴ evangelical scholarship frequently paints a different picture. By leveling serious criticisms against imitation, appealing to Calvin in support of these criticisms, and neglecting to present more positive evidence from Calvin, such scholarship points to three conclusions:

- 1) Calvin preferred to speak of conformity to Christ or union with Christ and pitted these concepts over against imitation. Thus Protestant suspicion of the imitation of Christ may be traced, at least in part, to Calvin himself.
- 2) Like his Reformation contemporaries and his present-day theological heirs, Calvin associated imitation with a range of deficient theological perspectives, including antipathy to grace, works-righteousness, and reliance on self rather than on Christ and his Spirit in sanctification.
- 3) Calvin issued strong cautions with regard to imitation, and had much to say about more helpful themes—suggesting that Calvin had little to say on the subject of imitating Christ, and what he did say was by way of warning or criticism.

Lest these tendencies be interpreted as caricatures, they will be illustrated through interaction with three representative scholars.⁵

1. *Alister McGrath*. In a 1991 journal article, Alister McGrath asks "In What Way Can Jesus be a Moral Example for Christians?" McGrath suggests that the key to this question is found in "Martin Luther's idea of 'being conformed to Christ' or John Calvin's notion of 'being incorporated into Christ'...."⁶ According to McGrath, the Reformers' concepts remind us that "[s]anctification ... is about becoming Christlike, not by imitating Christ but by being changed by the grace of God. And sanctification, I should stress, is not a human activity, a human work. Rather, it is God's work within us as he seeks to conform us to the person of Christ."⁷ Anticipating objections, McGrath asks, "So is this just splitting hairs? ... Are not the ideas of 'imitation' and 'being conformed' virtually indistinguishable? I think not. Imitation brings in its wake a whole range of ideas and attitudes that are profoundly hostile to the gospel of grace."⁸ On the whole, McGrath's article suggests that the idea of imitating the example of Jesus is an anthropocentric form of works-righteousness. Meanwhile, Calvin is held up (alongside Luther) as a propo-

⁴ See the literature cited in the notes below.

⁵ Also representing hostility toward the concept of imitation, but interacting with Luther rather than Calvin, is Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, vol. 1: *Foundations* (ed. William H. Lazareth; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 185–94.

⁶ Alister E. McGrath, "In What Way Can Jesus be a Moral Example for Christians?," *JETS* 34 (1991) 296.

⁷ *Ibid.* 297.

⁸ *Ibid.* Compare the observation of E. J. Tinsley that "there are those, chiefly of the Reformed traditions, who have felt that the idea of the imitation of Christ matches ill with the Christian doctrine of grace and conceals a moral endeavour of a Pelagian kind" ("Imitation of Christ," in *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* [ed. Gordon S. Wakefield; London: SCM, 1988] 208).

ment of a grace-focused, theocentric corrective. Significantly, the article neither cites from Calvin's works nor interacts with any of Calvin's comments on the topic.

2. *F. Scott Spencer.* More recent is F. Scott Spencer's article on "Imitation of Jesus" in Baker's *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*.⁹ Operating within the space constraints of such a reference work, Spencer gives a four-paragraph summary of how Christian tradition has appropriated this theme. In a paragraph intended to demonstrate that "by and large the imitation of Christ did not become a major tenet in the mainstream of Christian thought," Spencer cites the Reformers:

Luther and other Protestants worried that *imitatio Christi* promoted a "works righteousness" path to salvation inimical to *sola fide* (faith alone). Calvin noted that "the Lord did many things which he did not intend as examples for us" (*Institutes* 4.19.29), and that "it is not right to take all his actions indiscriminately as objects of imitation" (commentary on John 13:14)—in particular, Jesus' one-time, forty-day fast in the wilderness, his healing the paralyzed and raising the dead, his imparting the Spirit to his followers, and his sacrificial death on the cross.¹⁰

A reader of Spencer's article learns that Thomas à Kempis's classic work *The Imitation of Christ* emphasized "emulation of Christ's humility, simplicity, self-denial, and cross-bearing"¹¹—but not that Calvin's writings share these emphases. Instead, the article gives the impression that Calvin's outlook on imitation was primarily, if not entirely, negative.

3. *Michael Scott Horton.* In his recently published systematic theology, Michael Scott Horton includes a chapter on union with Christ, which he contrasts with imitation: "This organic union with Christ is far richer than any notion of the Christian life as an imitation of Christ (*imitatio Christi*) . . . [B]elievers bear fruit that is not the result of their imitation of Christ's life but of their being incorporated into Christ."¹² As the chapter proceeds, Horton repeatedly cites Calvin, whose writings lay great stress on union with Christ. Eventually, Horton appeals to the Reformer to underscore warnings about imitation: "Christ is not simply a moral example to imitate, says Calvin. 'As if we ought to think of Christ, standing afar off and not rather dwelling in us!' We are not merely admirers or even followers of Christ, but members of his body."¹³ Two extended citations from the same passage of Calvin's *Institutes* follow, along with a concluding comment by Horton: "Although Christ's example remains instructive, sanctification is not a life of striving to imitate Christ,

⁹ F. Scott Spencer, "Imitation of Jesus," in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (ed. Joel B. Green; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011) 397–99.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 397–398.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 398.

¹² Michael Scott Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011) 591. See also *idem*, "Calvin's Theology of Union with Christ and the Double Grace: Modern Reception and Contemporary Possibilities," in *Calvin's Theology and Its Reception: Disputes, Developments, and New Possibilities* (ed. J. Todd Billings and I. John Hesselink; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012) 72–96.

¹³ Horton, *Christian Faith* 597, citing Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.2.24. It should be noted that in this passage, Calvin is not commenting on, let alone criticizing, imitation.

but of seeking all of our blessings—including our conformity to his image—in Christ and not in ourselves.”¹⁴ After noting that “[u]nion with Christ became the chief image for the whole sweep of salvation in Reformed theology,”¹⁵ Horton does not mention imitation again. Thus readers are presented (1) with a choice between union with Christ and imitation of Christ; and (2) with the impression that Calvin had much to say about the former, and little to say about the latter.

In an earlier magazine article, Horton puts the issue more starkly: “... imitation has its place, but not under the category of ‘gospel’ The ‘imitation-of-Christ’ paradigm of spirituality makes Christ’s self-sacrifice and humility an analogy for our discipleship. The ‘union-with-Christ’ paradigm makes our love and service an analogy of Christ’s inimitable accomplishment.”¹⁶ For support, Horton appeals to Calvin’s comments on John 17. As Horton indicates, Calvin here stresses the fact that Christ is the source of our sanctification; yet this is hardly proof that Calvin sees union and imitation as mutually exclusive, or that Calvin associates imitation *by definition* with failure to appreciate Christ’s accomplishment. Still, Horton goes on to conclude that “[t]he imitation paradigm easily slips into ‘the righteousness that is by works,’” a characteristic mark not of Calvinist and Reformed theology but of “medieval mysticism, the Anabaptist tradition, Quakers, Pietism, and Protestant liberalism.”¹⁷ The absence of any further citations from Calvin underscores the overall impression that imitation had little place in the Reformer’s thought. Though Horton’s title refers to “What’s Wrong and Right About the Imitation of Christ,” he emphasizes the “wrong”—and suggests that he represents Calvin in doing so. Like McGrath and Spencer, Horton is a thoughtful scholar who has many helpful things to say. But by presenting only a partial picture of Calvin’s views related to imitation, he maintains a truncated version of Reformed tradition.

II. ESTABLISHING THE TRADITION? CALVIN ON THE ABUSE OF THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

If, as illustrated above, received Protestant and Reformed tradition involves skepticism regarding the imitation of Christ, there are statements in Calvin that would seem to justify the tradition.¹⁸ Thus, before surveying Calvin’s positive treatment of the theme, we must acknowledge his vigorous objections to the imitation of Christ *wrongly conceived*. For instance, Calvin’s comments on Rom 6:4 sound very similar to the warnings of contemporary evangelicals: Paul “does not simply exhort us here to imitate Christ, as though he had said that the death of Christ is an

¹⁴ Horton, *Christian Faith* 598.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Michael Scott Horton, “Following Jesus: What’s Wrong and Right about the Imitation of Christ,” *Modern Reformation* 18 (March/April 2009) 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 17.

¹⁸ Ronald S. Wallace, while affirming the centrality of imitation in Calvin’s thought, notes, “Calvin fully realises the dangers of this doctrine ... and is constantly trying to guard against them” (*Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959] 42). Given that Calvin frequently speaks of imitation in exclusively positive terms, I would replace Wallace’s term “constantly” with “consistently.”

example which it is appropriate for all Christians to follow. Without doubt he has something higher in mind.¹⁹ Elsewhere Calvin, rejecting Pelagian understandings of imitation, asks, “What nonsense will the Pelagians chatter ...? That Adam’s sin was propagated by imitation? Then does Christ’s righteousness benefit us only as an example [*exemplum*] set before us to imitate [*ad imitationem*]? Who can bear such sacrifice?”²⁰ Similarly, as noted by Spencer above, Calvin warns that we undermine Christ’s unique, divine authority when we imitate the “many things which he did not intend as examples for us.”²¹ Thus Calvin scathes those who appeal to Jesus’ forty-day wilderness fast as grounds for the observance of Lent, calling such imitation “sheer hallucination,” a form of “wrongheaded zeal” that undermines “admiration of [Christ].”²² Various ecclesiastical ceremonies for which Christ’s example is claimed as precedent arouse Calvin’s ire as well, evoking a litany of strong language: “wicked,” “aping,” “theatrical,” “empty and bare,” “comedy,” “shameful mockery,” “inept,” and “preposterously counterfeit.”²³ Clearly, Calvin agrees that the imitation of Christ is a concept open to serious abuse, and that these abuses call for vigorous refutation.²⁴ But for Calvin, abuse does not negate proper use. Thus the negative remarks cited here tell only one half of the story; as we shall now see, Calvin speaks frequently in positive terms about the believer’s duty to imitate the Savior.

¹⁹ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians* (Calvin’s Commentaries 8; 1960; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 123. Latin terms and phrases from the commentaries follow the text of *Joannis Calvinii opera quae supersunt omnia* (Corpus reformatorum; 58 vols.; Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke, 1863–1900), online at <http://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:650> (accessed March 11, 2013).

²⁰ *Institutes* 2.1.6; cf. 2.1.5. All citations of the *Institutes* are from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; 2 vols.; The Library of Christian Classics XX; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1960). Latin terms and phrases are those of the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*, as found in *Joannis Calvinii opera selecta* (ed. Petrus Barth and Guillelmus Neisel; 5 vols., 3d ed.; Monachii: C. Kaiser, 1926–1959).

²¹ *Institutes* 4.19.29. Calvin’s comments on 1 Peter 2 urge the imitation of Christ, but they also list features of Christ’s life which it would be “absurd” for us to imitate (*The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter* [Calvin’s Commentaries 12; 1963; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989] 275). Compare Calvin’s discussion of which aspects of the institution of the Lord’s Supper should be imitated (*The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* [Calvin’s Commentaries 9; 1960; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989] 243), and his warning against using imitation as a “pretext” for “license” (*A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke: Volume III, and the Epistles of James and Jude* [Calvin’s Commentaries 3; 1972; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989] 4).

²² *Institutes* 4.12.20; cf. the fuller discussion at 3.12.20.

²³ Citations from John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John 11–21 and the First Epistle of John* (Calvin’s Commentaries 5; 1959; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 60; and *Institutes* 4.19.7, 29. Cf. John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke: Volume II* (Calvin’s Commentaries 2; 1972; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 173.

²⁴ Calvin also had critical things to say about the imitation of God (cf. *Institutes* 1.8.2; 1.11.9) and of human examples (3.20.25; 4.12.22; 4.13.16), and he could describe the Mass as “a false and preposterous imitation” of the Lord’s Supper (4.18.8).

III. RECOVERING THE TRADITION: CALVIN ON THE PROPER USE OF THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

Earlier, we asserted that by downplaying the imitation of Christ, many in the Protestant and Reformed tradition are departing from the very tradition they desire to maintain. To support this claim, we will now survey Calvin's teaching on the *imitatio Christi*,²⁵ using four headings that highlight the tension between Calvin and received tradition. At each step we will see that Calvin's own views of imitation are far more positive than what has become typical in the Reformed tradition.

1. *The imitation of Christ does not contradict, but flows from, the gospel of grace.* In several comments on Scripture, Calvin makes it clear that he sees no contradiction between imitating Christ's example and resting in the salvation Christ provides by grace through faith. Perhaps most striking is Calvin's comment on John 15:13:

Christ sometimes commends the greatness of His love to us the better to establish assurance of our salvation. But now He goes further, to inflame us by His example to love the brethren. Yet He joins the two together. For He wants us to perceive by faith the infinite sweetness of His goodness; and then He persuades us for this reason to strive after love.²⁶

Here, following Christ's example is not an expression of works-righteousness, but the fruit of the gospel, in which faith tastes the Savior's "infinite sweetness." In comments on Matt 18:11,²⁷ Calvin similarly portrays imitation as both responsive to and patterned after grace: "By His own example Christ now exhorts us to honour the weak and lowly brethren; for He descended from heaven to be the Redeemer, to save not only them, but even the dead, those who were lost And whoever does not conform to the pattern of [Christ's] grace [*Christi gratia, ad cuius exemplum qui se non conformat*] is altogether too critical and proud."²⁸ In his comments on 1 Pet 2:24–25, Calvin once again makes it clear that redemption and imitation are inseparably bound, with the former serving as the basis and motive for the latter: "... by [Christ's] death He has redeemed and restored us to life, from which it follows that we are so bound to Him, that we ought gladly to follow His example."²⁹ It seems, then, that Calvin would agree with Tinsley when the latter writes,

²⁵ The present article draws primarily on Calvin's *Institutes* and his NT commentaries. The most complete coverage of imitation in Calvin's works, including his sermons, is found in Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* 41–77.

²⁶ Calvin, *Gospel According to St. John 11–21, and the First Epistle of John 99–100*.

²⁷ "The Son of Man came to save what was lost." Though the verse does not have strong manuscript support, its parallel at Luke 19:10 allows us to accept Calvin's comment as applying to biblical truth, even if not to Matthew's text.

²⁸ Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke: Volume II* 219.

²⁹ Calvin, *Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter* 278. Cf. similar comments on 2 Cor 1:4 and 8:9 in John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Calvin's Commentaries 10; 1964; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 8 and 110–11; along with the exposition of Eph 4:32–5:1 in John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973) 486–87.

“the imitation of Christ is not only compatible with the essential Christian atonement doctrine but is an indispensable consequence to it.”³⁰

Even more telling is the agreement we see between imitation and the gospel of grace as Calvin begins his discussion of the Christian life in the *Institutes*. Having said that believers are motivated to pursue holiness because God is holy, Calvin writes:

And to wake us more effectively, Scripture shows that God the Father, as he has reconciled us to himself in his Christ, has in him stamped for us the likeness [*imaginem*] to which he would have us conform Christ, through whom we return into favor with God, has been set before us as an example [*exemplar*], whose pattern [*formam*] we ought to express [*exprimamus*] in our life. What more effective thing can you require than this one thing? Nay, what can you require beyond this one thing? For we have been adopted as sons by the Lord with this one condition: that our life express [*repraesentet*] Christ, the bond of our adoption.³¹

The indicative of adoption implies the imperative of likeness to the Son; divine reconciliation prompts the response of human effort to “conform” to the pattern and example seen in Christ. At this point, Calvin rehearses a litany of six indicative-imperative pairs, making it clear that human moral effort finds both its motive and enablement in the gracious provision of God.³² While no student of Reformed theology would be surprised to find such a litany in Calvin, many might be surprised to know that the source from which this litany flows is a call to conform *oneself* to Christ’s example. Rather than seeing grace and imitation as incompatible, Calvin maintains that the redeeming love by which Christ becomes both our Savior *and our example* is “more effective” than all other motives for holiness.

2. *The imitation of Christ represents dependence on, rather than independence from, Christ.* Imitation is often associated with works-righteousness, as though human effort to be like Christ necessarily entails an attempt to secure the blessings of justification or sanctification apart from dependence on divine provision. However, in Calvin’s thought scriptural appeals to Jesus’ example actually serve as a source of divine enablement, not only urging us to imitation but strengthening us for it. Put another way, the example of Christ is not only an imperative but an indicative.³³ Thus Cal-

³⁰ Tinsley, *Imitation of God in Christ* 178.

³¹ *Institutes* 3.6.3. Cf. 4.16.18 (“we have in Christ the most perfect example [*exemplar*] of all the graces which God bestows on his children”). Calvin’s 1541 French edition makes the point even more forcefully: “When [pagan philosophers] want to exhort someone to virtue, they adduce nothing else but that we should live as is appropriate for our nature. Scripture leads us to a much better fountain of exhortation when it not only commands us to relate all our life to God ... but ... adds that Christ ... is given to us as an example of innocence; His image ought to be represented in our life. Could anything more emphatic or efficacious be said?” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French Edition* [tr. Elsie Anne McKee; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009] 682–83).

³² Cf. Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* 488–89, where a litany of indicatives supports the call to imitate Christ’s forgiveness.

³³ Cf. Paul van Buren, *Christ in our Place: The Substitutionary Character of Calvin’s Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 111: “Sanctification places an imperative upon the Christian: he is

vin can point out that appeal to Jesus' example actually makes difficult exhortations easier to bear, as in the following passages:

- 1) Commenting on Matt 11:29, where Jesus calls us to take on his yoke and learn from him: here Christ "form[s] us to the imitation of Him [*nos ad imitationem sui format*], since we ... fly from his yoke as something harsh and difficult He means that the yoke will not be troublesome to [believers] when they have become used to meekness and humility by His example."³⁴
- 2) Commenting on Col 3:13, where Paul urges believers to bear with one another patiently: "As, however, this is hard and difficult, he [Paul] confirms his teaching by the example of Christ, and says that the same thing is required of us; that as we, who have so frequently and grievously offended, have nevertheless been received into favor by Christ, we should manifest the same kindness to our neighbours by forgiving whatever injuries they have done to us."³⁵
- 3) Commenting on 2 Cor 8:9: "Having mentioned love he [Paul] now refers to Christ as the perfect and unique pattern of it for it must be clear to everyone that by Christ's example we are incited to beneficence so that we should not spare ourselves when our brethren require our help [B]y His poverty [Christ] has enriched us so that we should not find it hard to take from our abundance what we may expend on behalf of our brethren."³⁶

In Christ's gentleness and love, we find not only the ground of our salvation but a powerful incitement to humble ourselves and to love others, even in costly ways. Thus, rather than equating imitation with self-reliance, Calvin presents reflection on Jesus' example as a proper means of finding strength to willingly undertake what is "hard and difficult."³⁷

This theme also appears in Calvin's treatment of the Lord's Supper, as he asks, "what sharper goad [*stimulus*] could there be to arouse mutual love among us than when Christ, giving himself to us, not only invites us by his own example [*suo ... exemplo*] to pledge and give ourselves to one another, but inasmuch as he makes

called to conform his life to that of Christ. But this imperative is based on the indicative: the event of God's mercy in Jesus Christ If Christ is our pattern, it is only because He is first of all our Saviour."

³⁴ Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke: Volume II* 26; cf. *Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke: Volume III, and the Epistles of James and Jude* 109.

³⁵ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians* (Calvin's Commentaries 11; 1965; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 351.

³⁶ Calvin, *Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* 110–11.

³⁷ See also *ibid.* 172 (conformity to, and identification with, Christ helps Paul to endure the disgrace of weakness); *Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter* 189 (our fellowship with Christ, and the encouragement of his example, enable us to conquer temptation "when otherwise we would ... dissolve into despair"); *Institutes* 3.8.1 (likeness to, and fellowship with, Christ in cross-bearing "soften[s] all the bitterness of the cross"); and *Institutes* 3.16.2 (Christ's appeal to his own example is among the means by which we are "forcefully summoned to holiness").

himself common to all, also makes all of us one in himself?”³⁸ Christ’s saving work is certainly part of the “stimulus” Calvin describes here—but so is the Savior’s example, which has power to arouse us to love. Here we may recall Calvin’s comment on John 15:13, cited above: just as the “infinite sweetness of [Christ’s] goodness” secures our salvation, his example “inflame[s] us . . . to love the brethren.” Applying similar logic to marriage, Calvin observes in a sermon on Eph 5:25–33, “[I am] to behave myself towards my wife as Jesus Christ has behaved himself towards me. Is not this enough to break hearts that were as hard as stone, yea, as steel?”³⁹ For Calvin, then, the dependence of faith and the striving of imitation are complementary, rather than competing, realities. Imitation is not a declaration of independence from Christ’s redeeming work, but cooperation with the sanctifying power of that work.

3. *The imitation of Christ does not undermine, but expresses, conformity to/union with Christ.* As we saw earlier, it is common to speak of Calvin’s preference for “conformity” or “union” over imitation, as though the options were mutually exclusive. Calvin himself, however, speaks of these concepts as interrelated. His comments on John 15:10, for example, seamlessly interweave the three:

As we have been elected in Christ, so in Him the living image [*effigies*] of our calling is exhibited to us. And so He justly puts Himself forward here as a pattern [*exemplar*], to the imitation [*imitationem*] of which all the godly may be conformed [*se . . . conforment*] . . . We must always keep this conformity between the head and the members before our eyes, not only that believers may endeavour to form themselves to the pattern of Christ [*se ad Christi exemplum formare student*], but that they may trust to be reformed [*reformatum iri*] daily for the better by His Spirit so that they may walk unto the end in newness of life.⁴⁰

Union between head and members implies both the need to trust the Spirit’s work in shaping us, and the need to shape ourselves by imitating Christ as pattern. We hear similar logic when Calvin expounds Rom 6:5, writing, “our ingrafting [into Christ] signifies not only our conformity to the example of Christ, but also the secret union by which we grow together with Him, in such a way that He revives us by His Spirit . . .”⁴¹ Even when commenting on Rom 8:29, from which the language of conformity to Christ derives, Calvin is happy to speak of human efforts at imitation: “[Paul] did not simply say that [those adopted by God] should be conformed to Christ [*ut conformes sint Christo*], but to the image of Christ, in order to teach us that in Christ there is a living and conspicuous example which is set before all the sons of God for their imitation [*ad imitationem*].”⁴²

³⁸ *Institutes* 4.17.38. Calvin employs almost identical language in his 1537 Instruction in Faith and in section 29 of his 1538 Catechism.

³⁹ Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* 573.

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Gospel According to St. John 11–21 and the First Epistle of John* 98.

⁴¹ Calvin, *Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians* 124; cf. 126 and 171.

⁴² *Ibid.* 181. Cf. Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke: Volume II* 26; *Gospel According to St. John 11–21 and the First Epistle of John* 98; *Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians* 250; and *Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter* 276–77.

Perhaps the clearest statement of the relationship between imitation and union with Christ is found in Calvin's comment on 1 John 2:6: "Earlier he [John] had set the light of God before us as an example. Now he calls us also to Christ, to imitate Him [*ut eius simus imitatores*]. Yet he does not simply exhort us to the imitation of Christ, but, from the union we have with Him, proves we should be like Him. He says that a likeness [*similitudo*] in life and actions will prove that we abide in Christ."⁴³ Reformed tradition has been right to insist that imitation should not replace union with Christ; Calvin was more careful, however, adding to this concern an insistence that the believer's effort to follow Christ's example is a necessary outworking of that union. As Gene Haas summarizes Calvin's ethics, "Union with Christ is primary, but our imitation of him manifests the reality of our union with him."⁴⁴

4. *The imitation of Christ is not a threat to, but a central emphasis in, the Christian life.* One of Calvin's strongest assertions regarding the place of imitation in the Christian life occurs in his comments on Phil 2:5–11: "[The text contains] two clauses, in the first of which [Paul] persuades us to imitate Christ, because this is the rule of life [*ad Christi imitationem, quia sit vitae regula*]: in the second, he invites us to it, as being the road by which we attain true glory."⁴⁵ Calvin goes on to acknowledge that there is an infinite distance between Christ's work and our imitation, but in his view the greater-to-lesser logic strengthens, rather than diminishes, our call to follow Christ's example.⁴⁶ Calvin's comments on Hebrews 5 carry similar force. He asks at verse 7, "What better rule for prayer can we have than the example of Christ?"⁴⁷ Expanding on verse 8, he acknowledges that Christ's death is both a "pattern [*specimen*] of ... submission even to death" and the act of "obedience [by which he] has blotted out our transgressions." Yet Calvin goes on to insist, "If we want the obedience of Christ to be of advantage to us, we must copy it [*nos eam imitemur*]."⁴⁸ In contrast to modern liberal theologians, Calvin emphasizes the fact that Jesus is more than an example; yet in contrast to many Protestant and Reformed writers, he nonetheless emphasizes the necessity of imitating Christ for the Christian. Indeed, for Calvin, failure to imitate Christ suggests that we do not truly know him: "For

⁴³ Calvin, *Gospel According to St. John 11–21 and the First Epistle of John* 247.

⁴⁴ Gene Haas, "Calvin, the Church and Ethics," in *The Church and Ethics* (ed. David Foxgrover; Calvin Studies Society Papers 2001; Grand Rapids: CRC Product Services, 2002) 80. See also Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* 47.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians* 246. Cf. *Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke: Volume II* 276, where Calvin, paraphrasing the Ransom Saying of Matt 20:28, puts the following phrase on Jesus' lips: "But you should frame your life by my example."

⁴⁶ Thus Calvin answers Thielicke's concern that "the piety of imitation has a tendency either to reduce Christ to the human level or to exalt man in his capacity for Christ-likeness" (*Theological Ethics. Volume 1: Foundations* 186).

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter* 64; on Christ's example and prayer, see also *Institutes* 3.20.29; and *Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke: Volume III, and the Epistles of James and Jude* 152 and 154.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter* 66–67.

knowledge does not deserve to be called true unless it leads believers to conform themselves to their Head.”⁴⁹

Calvin’s discussion of the Lord’s Supper suggests that he could use the concept of imitating Christ as a summary for the entirety of the Christian life. Before the Supper a communicant should ponder

whether he rests with inward assurance of heart upon the salvation purchased by Christ; whether he acknowledges it by confession of mouth; then, whether he aspires to the imitation of Christ [*ad Christi imitationem*] with the zeal [*studio*] of innocence and holiness; whether, after Christ’s example, he is prepared to give himself for his brethren and to communicate himself to those with whom he shares Christ in common; whether, as he is counted a member by Christ, he in turn so holds all his brethren as members of his body; whether he desires to cherish, protect, and help them as his own members.⁵⁰

Not only are faith in Christ, union with Christ, and imitation with Christ compatible, but together they constitute standards for measuring our spiritual health. While Calvin would surely deny that one can properly imitate Christ without first embracing the salvation he has purchased, the Reformer also insists that anyone who has truly embraced that salvation will “aspir[e] to the imitation of Christ with ... zeal.”⁵¹ To those who object that such a standard is impossible to attain, Calvin replies with a combination of exhortation and comfort: “[Christ] is our true model Christ spared not His own life, that He might redeem us from death. If we wish to be partakers of this benefit, we must be moved similarly towards our neighbours. Not that any of us has reached such perfection; but we must aim and strive according to our measure.”⁵²

The importance of imitation for Calvin’s conception of the Christian life is especially evident in his discussion of self-denial and cross-bearing. That Calvin sees these twin themes as expressions of *imitatio Christi* is clear in his comments on Matt 16:24:

[Christ] invites each member of His body to imitate Him [*ad imitationem*]. The words should be resolved like this: ‘If one wishes to be mine, when he has

⁴⁹ Calvin, *Gospel According to St. John 11–21 and the First Epistle of John* 61. Cf. *Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter* 136: “Christ is the example of perfect obedience in order that those who are His should eagerly endeavour to imitate Him”

⁵⁰ *Institutes* 4.17.40. Cf. John Calvin, “Short Treatise on the Lord’s Supper,” in *Tracts and Treatises on the Doctrine and Worship of the Church* (ed. Henry Beveridge; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) 2:176: “If we would come then to true repentance, we must endeavour to make our whole life conformable to the example of Jesus Christ.”

⁵¹ Cf. Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* 533: “Now seeing that our Lord Jesus sets himself forth as an example and pattern, we must surely be too barbarous and savage if we are not touched by it.”

⁵² Calvin, *Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians* 196. Cf. *Gospel According to St. John 11–21 and the First Epistle of John* 277 (“Of course, it is certain that we are far from equality with Christ. But the apostle commends us to the imitation of Him; for although we do not overtake Him, we must yet follow His steps, even if at a distance.”); and *Institutes* 4.12.25 (while sinners “cannot in every respect express the pattern [*exhibere ... typum*] of [Christ’s] holiness” they may “at least make a sketch of it”).

denied himself and taken up his cross, let him follow me,' or, 'let him conform [*se conformet*] to my example'—meaning that none can be considered Christ's disciple who is not a true imitator of Him and prepared to run the same course. Moreover, He lays down a short rule of imitation to teach us in what particularly He wishes us to be like Him. And this consists in two aspects: denial of ourselves and the voluntary bearing of the cross.⁵³

In the *Institutes*, these twin themes provide the structure for much of Calvin's discussion of Christian living: chapter 7 of Book III is entitled, "The Sum of the Christian Life: The Denial of Ourselves"; chapter 8, "Bearing the Cross, A Part of Self-Denial."⁵⁴ In his introduction to the latter chapter, Calvin links the Christian's duty to follow Christ's example with God's purpose of conforming believers to Christ: "[E]ach must bear his own cross Beginning with Christ, his first-born, [God] follows this plan with all his children"; in fact, Christ submitted to the cross "to show us an example of patience Therefore, the apostle teaches that God has destined all his children to the end that they be conformed to Christ [*conformes eius fian*]."⁵⁵ Apparently, then, the imitation of Christ—properly conceived—is not a peripheral theme, making a few cameo appearances in Calvin's writings; rather, it seems to have shaped the very architecture by which Calvin conceived of the Christian life.⁵⁶ While it might be going too far to conclude with Gordon Bates that Calvin "considered the imitation of Christ to be the Christian's sole end,"⁵⁷ it is clear that the concept was far more prominent in his thinking than Reformed tradition has typically allowed.

⁵³ Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke: Volume II* 194. Compare Calvin's comment on 2 Cor 4:10, where self-denial and "bear[ing] about the dying of Christ" are related to the believer's "conformity with Christ" (*Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* 59–60).

⁵⁴ For overviews, see Joel R. Beeke, "Calvin on Piety," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (ed. Donald K. McKim; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 125–52, esp. 141–43; Sung Wook Chung, "Taking up Our Cross: Calvin's Cross Theology of Sanctification," in *John Calvin and Evangelical Theology: Legacy and Prospect* (ed. Sung Wook Chung; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 163–80; and John H. Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989) 74–79.

⁵⁵ *Institutes* 3.8.1. Many in the Reformed tradition might be surprised to hear Calvin remark that "the word *predestine* [in Rom 8:29] does not refer to election, but to that purpose or decree of God by which He has ordained that His people are to bear the cross" (*Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians* 181). Calvin puts the point more strongly elsewhere: "... let us remember that we were baptized under this condition and for this end—to fix the cross to our shoulders" (*Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke: Volume II* 272).

⁵⁶ See Günther H. Haas, "Calvin's Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (ed. Donald K. McKim; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 93–105; I. John Hesselink, *Calvin's Concept of the Law* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series 30; Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1992) 278–85; and Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 51–77.

⁵⁷ Gordon Bates, "The Typology of Adam and Christ in John Calvin," in *Calvin and Hermeneutics* (ed. Richard C. Gamble; Articles on Calvin and Calvinism 6; New York: Garland, 1992) 158. More measured is Stephen Edmondson, who calls imitation "a central theme of the Christian life" (*Calvin's Christology* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004] 155; cf. 169).

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This article has attempted to demonstrate that maintaining “orthodox Protestant tradition” need not involve hostility toward the imitation of Christ. In fact, to adequately reflect the biblical and theological insights of John Calvin, Protestant and Reformed tradition must issue both stern warnings against the potential abuses of imitation, *and* equally strong exhortations to make the imitation of Christ’s example a key feature of the Christian life—which is to say, a key feature of faithful response to the grace of Christ the Redeemer. To present a one-sided, and largely negative, perspective on imitation is therefore to truncate the Reformed tradition, which has in Calvin a robust proponent of the imitation of Christ.

Why, though, is this conclusion significant? That is, why is it important that this particular aspect of the Reformed heritage be recovered? Three answers suggest themselves. First, a proper, biblical emphasis on the imitation of Christ will help to clarify the relationship between grace and human agency.⁵⁸ The appropriate response to divine grace is not one of passively awaiting spiritual transformation that comes without cost or effort on our part. Rather, grace prompts us to an active pursuit of whole-hearted and self-sacrificial love to God. Following the lead of Scripture, Calvin’s teaching on imitation consistently presents both the grace of the Redeemer and the believer’s obligation to reflect the pattern of that grace in his or her conduct.

Second, a proper emphasis on imitation will serve to magnify the transforming power of the gospel. On a biblical understanding, the imitation of Christ necessarily involves meditation on our Savior and his love; this, in turn, prompts the wonder that fuels radical, Christ-like obedience. Such logic is reflected when Calvin, just before and after explicit exhortations to imitate Christ’s humility, writes of his death on the cross, “It is assuredly such an example of humility as ought to absorb the attention of all men; it is impossible to explain it in words suitable to its greatness.”⁵⁹ To be sure, not all appeals to Jesus’ example carefully reflect this indicative-imperative relationship; but it will be difficult to magnify the greatness of that example if we rarely speak of its rightful place in Christian ethics.

Third, closer attention not simply to the imitation of Christ, but to Calvin’s teaching on this topic in particular, can help us to rule out flawed models of imitation. For instance, Calvin will not allow us to separate imitating Christ from embracing the salvation he uniquely accomplishes, nor would Calvin recognize as true imitation any attempt to soften the demands of obedience—and particularly of self-denial and cross-bearing. Likewise, Calvin, demonstrating pastoral wisdom, often warns us against a conception of Christlikeness so seemingly impossible that it generates despair. Finally, Calvin’s emphasis on self-sacrificial love (especially in his

⁵⁸ So John B. Webster, “Christology, Imitability and Ethics,” *SJT* 39 (1986) 310: “language about the imitation of Christ may well be one of the most important means at our disposal to . . . move towards affirmations of the substantial nature of human agency without necessarily implying unwarranted moral autonomy.”

⁵⁹ Calvin, *Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians* 249; cf. *Institutes* 2.13.2.

comments on the Lord's Supper) rules out a model of imitation that focuses on individual spiritual attainment to the neglect of others' good. A recovery of Calvin's teaching on the *imitatio Christi*, rooted as it is in Scripture, can help us to distinguish abuse of a biblical theme from its proper use.

If the case made to this point is cogent, two practical implications follow. On the one hand, Protestant and Reformed scholars, pastors, and teachers must integrate into our ministries a robust, biblical emphasis on the imitation of Christ. While holding this emphasis in proper balance with other biblical truths, we must also take care that in our teaching the imitation of Christ does not die the proverbial "death of a thousand qualifications." Thus, on the other hand, Protestant and Reformed scholars, pastors, and teachers must beware the tendency to associate the imitation of Christ solely with "worst-case-scenarios" of sanctification. In our received (and truncated) tradition, the imitation of Christ is often equated with denying union with Christ as the vital source of spiritual growth, relying on self rather than on the Spirit's work, and failing to embrace the redeeming work of Christ.⁶⁰ While abuses of imitation do exist and must be countered, we would do well to follow Calvin's example of including this theme in our positive—and not just our polemical—discussions of the Christian life. Commenting on Rom 15:4, Calvin recognizes Paul's concern that readers of the epistle might think "that his exhortation [in v. 3] to imitate Christ was too far-fetched."⁶¹ Too often, the Reformed tradition has treated the imitation of Christ just this way—as too "far-fetched" to receive anything other than negative attention.⁶² Perhaps it is time for us, instead, to acknowledge with Calvin that the imitation of Christ, faithfully conceived, ought to be a central feature of the Christian life—and therefore of our tradition.

⁶⁰ E.g. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics. Volume 1: Foundations* 185 ("based on the believer's efforts," "legalistic"), 186 ("it makes of Christ a Law").

⁶¹ Calvin, *Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians* 304.

⁶² Cf. Marguerite Shuster, "The Use and Misuse of the Idea of the Imitation of Christ," *Ex Auditu* 14 (1998) 77: "[T]he idea of the imitation of Christ finds its proper place in the course of sanctification. Calvin makes numerous *surprisingly strong* pleas for imitation in this context" (emphasis added).