

The Immortality of the Soul

In the treatment of eschatological doctrines proper Calvin expressed himself somewhat sketchily; only in one instance does he make an exception – in regard to the doctrine of the immortality of the discarnate soul in the interval between death and the Last Judgment.

This doctrine, generally accepted in the ancient and mediaeval church but only officially recognized at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, became the subject of debate in the reformation period. Calvin finds himself in opposition to Baptist opponents. In his writing against the Libertines of 1545 he names as such a certain Quintin (Quintinius Piccardus) whom he knew personally.¹ The latter sect seemed to him extraordinarily dangerous, and that not least because of its denial of the immortality of the soul, which was for Calvin of such decisive importance.

It is not without reason that Calvin devoted to this debate his first theological writing – the *Psychopannychia*, which he outlined even before the *Institutio* (1534), but published only later after formal alterations² (1542). This essay is distinguished by the special acrimony of his polemic against the Anabaptists.³ It becomes clear from this how important for Calvin is the problem here posed. Later he scarcely changed the thoughts contained in it; we find them recurring in the relevant sections of the *Institutio* and indeed just in the final

1. Cf. *Contre la secte des Libertins*, C.R. 35, 152.

2. Cf. the letters of Calvin to Christophe Faber and Antoine du Pinet, C.R. 38, II, no. 29, 144; R. Schwarz, *Calvins Lebenswerk in seinen Briefen*, no. 10 and 28. Further, the introduction by Walther Zimmerli to his new edition of this work, Leipzig, 1932.

3. Calvin included the Libertines in the Anabaptist movement, though as a special group whose pantheism he thought to be very dangerous. But whether the reproach of ethical libertinism is exact remains questionable, as direct sources are wanting. (Cf. W. Niesel, *Calvin und die Libertiner*, 1929, 1; pp. 58 ff.)

edition of 1559 in which the eschatological chapter, *De resurrectione ultima*, appears in quite new form; likewise in the appropriate sections of his scriptural exegesis. Sometimes we find formulations which are identical with those in the *Psychopannychia*. Wherever the question of the immortality of the soul emerges Calvin becomes animated and in fact impassioned, speaking with special emphasis. One notices that he finds himself here in a vital conflict with contemporary opponents and that for him much is at stake. In this connexion they disputed not so much the continued existence of the soul after death (this they did only partially) but asserted rather the sleep of the soul in the intervening state, i.e. between death and final resurrection. In this view they are up to a point in the good company of Luther. But Calvin demurs to just this opinion with great violence and bitter contempt. He feels that any denial of the continued existence of the immortal soul in death – hence the title of his polemical study⁴ – calls in question the truth of eternal life generally. Hence the doctrine of the immortality of the soul has special significance for Calvin and his eschatology.

1. Death as Separation of the Soul and Body

First, we must expound Calvin's own doctrine of death as the background to his doctrine of immortality.

We have seen already in Part 1 that for Calvin the endeavour to reach eternal life is primarily an aiming at death. And this is so because death is for him the dividing line between present and future (heavenly) life; less an end of this wretched life than a beginning of that blessed life beyond. Hence the Christian *meditatio mortis* is predominantly a joyful aspiration towards death rather than the fear of death like the gloomy *memento mori* of the heathen. "No one rejoices in death or the cutting off of his lifetime in and for itself; but when we think of the heavenly glory and bliss which beckon to us on the other side then not only do we go obediently to death but hasten gladly towards it as to a goal to which we

4. *Psychopannychia* means not the sleep of the soul but the watchfulness of the soul (*πανεγύχω* to be awake the whole night); cf. Zimmerli, *op cit.*, p. 10.

are summoned by faith and hope.”⁵ The life to come begins already with death because then the soul freed from the body enters the sphere of blessedness. Thus the Christian life of hope or the Christian pilgrimage finds in death a goal (even though provisional). The journey is ended, the course is run, the struggle has been fought out and endured to the end. A Christian “considers death as nothing because it spells for him not annihilation but only the separation of soul and body”.⁶ As such, death is for Calvin the end of the struggle between spirit and flesh – a struggle which lies at the root of our life in regeneration or sanctification, the life of the *mortificatio* and *vivificatio* in the *communio cum Christo*, the life of the *tolerantia crucis*. Death is the final slaying of the flesh and the full vivification of the spirit.⁷ “As soon as we cast off this burden of the body this strife of spirit and flesh ceases. Therefore the slaying of the flesh releases the spirit into life.” Death is thus the end of the fight for believers, “because when they are freed from the body they no longer have to struggle with the desires of the flesh but stand as it were outside the scene of combat”.⁸

Thus for Calvin this mortal body is to be equated with the sinful flesh. Again and again he identifies the anthropological difference of the soul and body with the theological opposition of *σὰρξ* and *πνεῦμα* (in the Biblical-Pauline sense) although as an exegete he is well aware that these two antitheses are not the same. “To attempt to refer the guilt of sin to the body in the usual sense would however be foolish. On the other hand neither does the soul bear such life in itself that it might be called life in the true sense.”⁹ What Paul describes as the body of this death is the sinful mass or material of which the lump of humanity is composed and which holds us in its bonds. “For Paul sees the origin of sin in the fact that man

5. On Luke 12:50; C.R. 73, 682.

6. On 2 Tim. 4:6.

7. “... ubi molem hanc corporis abicimus, cessare pugnam illam spiritus adversus carnem et carnis adversus spiritum. Denique mortificationem carnis esse vivificationem spiritus” (Psy. 54:196; here and in the following passages quoted according to Zimmerli’s edition and C.R. 33.)

8. On Phil. 1:6; C.R. 80, 9 f.

9. On Rom. 8: to f.; C.R. 77, 145.

fell away from the law ordained for him in creation and thus became fleshly and earthly ... and we may add that his soul in so far as it became itself unfaithful was assimilated to the body. Man has lost the superiority of his spirit and has become like the beasts.”¹⁰ And in the *Psychopannychia* we find: “When Paul writes – the spirit lusteth against the flesh (Gal. 5:7) he does not mean that the soul wars against the flesh or reason against desire, but that the soul itself, in so far as it is ruled by the spirit of God, strives with itself in so far as it is empty of the spirit of God and is governed by its own desires”.¹¹ Calvin bases his phraseology on the theory that *πνεῦμα* and *ψυχή* or *spiritus* and *anima*, are frequently used *promiscue* in Holy Scripture. “Often the soul is also called spirit, and although these two words when they are juxtaposed are of different meaning yet spirit when occurring singly means the same as soul.”¹²

But it is questionable whether this partial promiscuous use of *spiritus* and *anima* is systematized in Scripture and may legitimately be made an equation as happens in Calvin. In any event Luther was more aware of the fundamental character of the Biblical antithesis of flesh and spirit (as distinct from that between body and soul) and brought it out in his theology. We may adduce for example his exegesis of 1 Cor. 15:44 f.: “The same distinction is made by Christ in John 3 when He says ‘What is born of the flesh is flesh and what is born of the spirit is spirit’ etc. For by flesh He means the whole man as naturally born with body and soul, reason and senses; such human nature unchanged does not belong to heaven. If it is to come to heaven it must be born again of the Spirit and become spiritual both in body and soul, and thus become quite a different life from the natural one, although the same body – the same human person – remains outwardly unchanged.”¹³

Calvin represents death as the separation of soul and body in a whole series of metaphors. It is the final homecoming of the earthly pilgrim from foreign lands to his father’s house,

10. On Rom. 7:24; C.R. 77, 134 f.

11. *Psy.* 25: 180.

12. *Inst.* I, 15, 2; O.S. 3, 174.

13. W.A. 36, 665.

“Paul says ... that we are travellers in foreign lands, far from the Lord, so long as we remain in the body. But when souls are divested of their bodies they retain their essence and share in blessed immortality.... It is quite enough for us to be rescued from our travels by the common Father of all believers.”¹⁴ Death is the departure of the guest from that tent of the body which is constructed only to be broken up. “Scripture compares the body with a tabernacle (2 Cor. 5:1) which we are bidden to leave when we die, for the Bible interprets us by that part of our being which distinguishes us from the common animals ...”¹⁵ It is only a question of man’s departure from his earthly abode. “If a departure is in question then it is understood that we do not perish utterly in death, since the soul merely departs from the body. Hence we draw the conclusion that death is nothing but an exodus of the soul from the body. Thus this text contains a testimony to the immortality of the soul.”¹⁶

But Calvin also employs once the comparison, so dear to Luther, of death and baptism, which according to Romans 6 implies a dying of the whole man. “He (Christ) compares death with a baptism. For the dissolution of the body signifies for God’s children that for a period they are as it were immersed and soon surge up again into life so that death for them is nothing other than a path through the waters.”¹⁷ But Calvin mostly uses for death the image of emancipation from prison: the immortal soul is freed from the house of bondage of the mortal body. “We are shut up in the disciplinary house of the flesh as slaves ...”¹⁸ As long as we journey on earth we must aspire to death as the sole means by which our disgrace can be ended.... As long as they dwell in the flesh, believers can never fully attain the end of righteousness ... until they depart from the body.”¹⁹ “Death is the redemption from the slavery of sin and the transition into the kingdom of heaven.”²⁰ “If

14. *Inst.* III, 25, 6; O.S. 4, 442.

15. *Loc. cit.*

16. On 2 Tim. 4:6; C.R. 80, 389.

17. On Luke 12:50; C.R. 73, 682.

18. On 1 John 3:2, C.R. 83, 330.

19. On Rom. 7:24 f. C.R. 77, 135 f.

20. On Phil. 1:23; C.R. 80, 18.

emancipation from the body leads to true freedom – what is then this body but a prison?”²¹ This characterization of the body signifies a strong devaluation of it as compared with the soul. It is merely the perishable form of an imperishable content which it simply fetters. “If the body is nothing but the prison of the soul, which is cramped in its earthly tabernacle, what is then this soul when freed from its prison and delivered from its bonds?”²² Almost no word is strong enough for Calvin in order to express this his disesteem, indeed contempt of the body. In his sermons he often calls it “*charongne*” – a rotting carcase. “We are developed from our bodies which are but dung.”²³ Yet at the same time he can speak of the body in the highest terms: “However much our bodies may be but wretched dung, they do not cease to be the temple of the Holy Ghost, and God wishes to be honoured therein.”²⁴

It is a question whether these ideas are scriptural. For the Bible, especially for the Old Testament, man is a creaturely unity whose life as such is corporeal. But if the body is but the material envelope of a spiritual essence then it is properly superfluous: it is not necessary to the life of the soul, which rather only begins truly to live when it is divested of the body. Calvin's point of departure is not a pessimistic contempt of the body but rather a high esteem of the soul which unlike the transient body is unquestionably immortal. But in Scripture the body is not thus devalued, because it is not viewed in this exclusive opposition to the soul. Certainly Paul describes this his present life as standing as a whole both under the sign of the flesh, that is, of sin and death, and under that of the spirit, as a temporal tabernacle which is to be dissolved in death; but he says this by way of comparison with the eternal structure of the new body which awaits him. (Cf. 2 Cor. 5 and 1 Cor. 15.) The Pauline-Lutheran *simul justus et peccator* is necessarily bound up with a hope that is totally orientated

21. *Inst.* III, 9, 4; O.S. 4, 174.

22. *Psy.* 54; 196.

23. “Nous sommes enveloppés de nos corps, dit-il, qui ne sont que charongnes
Sermons sur le livre de Daniel, C.R. 69, 459; quoted after E. Doumergue, *Jean Calvin*, III, 311.

24. *Sermons sur le Deutéronome*, C.R. 55, 19 f.; quoted after E. Doumergue, *op. cit.*

towards the resurrection. It must be asked whether Calvin does full justice to either aspect of the antithesis. We have already seen in his doctrine of sanctification that instead of a *simul* he suggests rather a *partim-partim*: in progressive regeneration the remnants of the flesh are more and more overcome by the spirit, and this spirit is seated pre-eminently in the soul which on its separation from the body in death is completely freed from the fetters of the flesh and attains heavenly perfection. This question was in a way implied by the objection of the Baptists, who as against Calvin's doctrine of immortality brought into the field of discussion the totality of human sin. He answers it with his doctrine of the spiritual death of the soul, which we shall have to expound in its right place.

Calvin with his habitual sobriety gives us no further detail as to how he conceives the separation of soul and body. What man sees in death is only the mortal body; the soul is essentially invisible. But Calvin accepts the Biblical image of breath for the soul, and quotes in defence of his doctrine of immortality texts of Scripture which speak of a breathing out of the soul and a giving up of the ghost. "Scripture says that the soul departs by the same mode of speech as that in which we say popularly that the soul is breathed out. Thus of Rachel: As her soul was departing (for she herself died) she called the name of the boy Ben-Oni (Gen. 35:18). We know that the spirit is breath and wind and thus it was often described by the Greeks as *πνοή*."²⁵ "Thus for example Solomon speaks about death and says 'then the spirit returns to God who gave it' (Ecc. 12:7). Also Christ commends His spirit to the Father (Lk. 23:46) just as Stephen does to Christ (Acts 7:58) and thereby nothing else is to be understood but that when the soul is freed from bondage to the flesh, God is ever its Guardian and Keeper."²⁶

2. The Being of the Immortal Soul

(a) *The independence of the soul*

In order rightly to understand Calvin's doctrine of immor-

25. *Psy.* 25: 179.

26. *Inst.* 1, 15, 2; O.S. 3, 175.

tality we must study more closely his doctrine of the soul which he develops in his theological anthropology. Calvin considers that the soul of man is a substance independent of the body with its own life and being (*essentia*). It is his chief reproach to the Libertines that they refuse to admit this. "But we insist that it is itself a substance and that it continues truly to live after the dissolution of the body, gifted with reason and perception and that according to the clear testimony of Scripture."²⁷ "The soul or the spirit of man is a substance distinct from the body."²⁸ Whereas the body is indirectly created through generation and birth, the soul is directly created by God at the same time as the appearance of the body. "When God has created a human being in the body of its mother, it has as yet no soul: on the other hand we know that while the creature is shaped in the maternal body God breathes into it a soul; it is certain that then a seed of life is extant."²⁹ Thus Calvin teaches with Augustine and Roman dogmatics the doctrine of creationism while Lutheran dogmatists teach that of traducianism – the creation of the soul in and with the emergence of the body in the sense of *creatio continua*.³⁰ Luther himself does not speculate further on the point but here too sees soul and body in their unity. "For who can adequately praise or even conceive the divine work of creating body and soul out of nothing ...?"³¹ The difference between Calvin and the Lutherans at this point is in a sense analogous to their differences in the matter of the Eucharistic controversy. In both cases Calvin shows a spiritualizing tendency. The real action of God is completed in a special spiritual event to which the human corporeal act merely runs parallel.

For Calvin the body is from below, the soul from above. The body is formed from the loam of the earth; the soul

27. *Psy.* 23; 177.

28. *Psy.* 32; 184.

29. "... quand Dieu a mis une créature humaine au ventre de la mère, il n'y a point d'âme; au contraire, nous savons quand la créature est conceuë au ventre de la mère, que Dieu y inspire une âme, il est certain que voilà une semence de vie." *Sermon on Job.* 3:16; *C.R.* 61, 162.

30. Cf. A. Vilmar, *Dogmatik*, I, 348 ff.

31. *W.A.* 31, I, 407, 21.

springs to life from the living breath of God. "The soul of man (unlike that of animals) is not of the earth, but flows from the Word of God, that is, from a secret power."³² The body came from the earth and must return again to earth; but the soul is of God and must return again to God. Body and soul are as different as heaven and earth. "As far as the heaven is from the earth, so far removed is the heavenly soul from the earthly body."³³ The fact that man is composed of body and soul makes him the representative of a middle term between purely heavenly and purely earthly creatures, between angels and animals. He is both a visible and invisible being in this his dualism of body and soul, which Calvin sees more as a tension than as a unity. For the soul is the really good, better and nobler part of man.³⁴ The body is only its despicable abode, a rotten vessel.³⁵ "He (Job) does not call man a worthless vessel but says that he inhabits a worthless vessel. The body is formed of the mud of the earth and as such is destined to pass away in dust and ashes. That must make man humble." For it would be unreasonable for a creature to boast of his pre-eminent position who not only dwells in a mud hut but even is himself partly of dust and ashes.³⁶ But Calvin again tries to qualify this sharp depreciation by adding immediately: "Of course God has condescended to vivify this earthen vessel (ensoul it) and has ordained it as the dwelling place of an immortal spirit. Adam could rightly boast of such generosity on the part of his Creator."³⁷ But this our earthly body is only an animal body animated by the soul. Only in the resurrection do we receive a spiritual body.³⁸ But that too is really only an appendage of the redeemed soul. At the same time the body must not be denied its share in

32. *Psy.* 28; 181.

33. "... quantum distant coeli a terra, coelestem animam a terreno corpore discernent." *Psy.* 55:197.

34. "Quasi bona pars hominis (quae est anima) domicilio illo terreno continatur." *Psy.* 31; 182. Cf. the definition in the *Institutes*: "atque animae nomine essentiam immortalem, creatam tamen intelligo, quae nobilior eius pars est." *Inst.* I, 15, 2; O.S. 3, 174.

35. *Psy.*, *loc. cit.*

36. *Inst.* I 15, 1; *loc. cit.*

37. *Loc. cit.*

38. *Psy.* 64; 202.