

'And behold a ladder': Descent and ascent in Calvin's soteriology

Author:

Nico Vorster¹

Affiliation:

¹Faculty of Theology, North-West University, South Africa

Correspondence to:

Nico Vorster

Email:

nico.vorster@nwu.ac.za

Postal address:

PO Box 20004, Noordbrug,
Potchefstroom 2522,
South Africa

Dates:

Received: 29 July 2015

Accepted: 22 Sept. 2015

Published: 20 Nov. 2015

How to cite this article:

Vorster, N., 2015, "'And behold a ladder': Descent and ascent in Calvin's soteriology", *In die Skriflig* 49(1), Art. #2022, 8 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v49i1.2022>

Copyright:

© 2015. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS
OpenJournals. This work is
licensed under the Creative
Commons Attribution
License.

This article investigates Calvin's use of the schema of descent and ascent to construct his soteriology. The main argument offered is that Calvin utilises the notion of descent-ascent as a tool to weave together juridical and mystical categories in his soteriology. The descent-ascent scheme enables him to construct a theocentric soteriology that is personal and dynamic in nature, whilst concrete in ethical application. It also endows his soteriology with a strong pneumatological and eschatological orientation.

'Aanskou die leer': Neerdaling en opvaring in Calvyn se soteriologie. Hierdie artikel ondersoek Calvyn se gebruik van die neerdaling-opvaringskema in sy soteriologie. Die argument is dat Calvyn hierdie skema as 'n instrument gebruik om die juridiese en mistieke kategorieë in sy soteriologie te integreer. Die neerdaling-opvaringskema stel hom in staat om 'n teosentriese soteriologie te ontwikkel wat persoonlik en dinamies van aard is, maar terselfdertyd konkreet in etiese toepassing. Dit verskaf ook 'n deurslaggewende pneumatologiese en eskatologiese oriëntasie aan sy soteriologie.

Introduction

The scheme of descent and ascent is a fundamental feature in Calvin's theology and permeates his works from start to finish. It is characterised by a cycle of exchange between the infinite God and finite beings based on the principle of gift: because of Christ's descent to earth we can ascend to heaven; through Christ's appropriation of mortality, we acquire immortality; and, because of Christ's submission to weakness, we receive heavenly strength (*Inst.* 4.17.2; *CO* 2.1003).¹ In the process God acts consistently as Giver and the human as receiver who responds in gratitude to God's gratuity. The descent-ascent theme is of course not exclusive to Calvin; he picks up on a patristic and scholastic theme. However, there is a different emphasis in Calvin's construction. Whereas Augustine focuses on the soul's ascent and Aquinas on ascent through grace in an ontological sense, Calvin is concerned with Christ's ascent, specifically the way in which we ascend in him and through the Spirit to the Father (*Inst.* 2.12.1; *CO* 2.340).

The pervasive nature of the theme of descent-ascent in Calvin's theology has been noted in Calvin scholarship, but surprisingly not analysed in any depth. Julie Canlis' work, *Calvin's Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (2010), is a notable exception. Canlis traces in her book how Calvin reworks the notion of the soul's ascent into a 'Protestant manifesto' and indicates that this theme forms the foundation of his doctrine on participation (Canlis 2010:43–44). Canlis (2010:3) specifically focuses on how Calvin's notion of *koinonia* can assist us in creating a spirituality at a time when humanity is experiencing fracturing, individualism and fundamentalism. This article attempts to build on the ground-breaking work of Canlis by focussing on how Calvin employs the theme of descent and ascent in the construction of his soteriology. The aim is to highlight some issues that either do not fall within the scope of Canlis's book or that function on the periphery of her book by widening the net beyond Calvin's doctrine of participation and spirituality to his soteriology as a whole. This article argues that Calvin uses the theme of descent and ascent as a tool to provide his soteriology with coherence. It provides his soteriology with a strong theocentric and pneumatological character and allows him to relate transcendence and immanence in a non-substantial manner to each other. It also enables him to relate the work of the historical Jesus and exalted Christ, to distinguish between, but also relate justification and sanctification, whilst avoiding the extremes of utopianism and individualism. Moreover, it infuses his theology with a personal dynamism.

Read online:


Scan this QR
code with your
smart phone or
mobile device
to read online.

1. The *Calvin Opera* volumes (Calvin 1863–1900) will be referenced as CO with notice of the relevant volume and page, whilst the *Supplementa Calviniana* (Calvin 1961) will be referenced as SC, also with notice of page and volume. English quotations from John Calvin's 1559-Institutes are taken from Calvin (2008).

This article first discusses the way in which the cycle of descent and ascent informs the various themes of Calvin's soteriology. Thereafter the argument probes the significance of the descent-ascent theme in Calvin's soteriology.

The cycle of descent and ascent in Calvin's soteriology

Calvin's Christology, as developed in Book 2 of his *Institutes*, discusses three main topics namely the two natures of Christ, the three offices of Christ and the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. The theme of descent and ascent permeates Calvin's Christology and soteriology. It is not a static once-off event, but denotes in Calvin's theology a continuous cycle. The Son not only descended to earth through his incarnation, but as the glorified Christ he continuously descends to humanity through his Spirit and Word, whilst acting as our mediator before the Father. Through the Spirit, Christ enables believers to ascend to God, yet this ascent is not possible if they do not continuously descend into themselves through self-mortification and repentance to be resurrected to a new life in true union with God.

The descent of Christ and atonement

For Calvin the *telos* of human life is union with God through the communion that Christ makes possible as Redeemer. The Fall, however, seriously endangers the human's created communion with God. After the disruption of the Fall, union with God is only possible 'if the Godhead himself descends to us, it being impossible for us to ascend to God' (*Inst.* 2.12.1; CO 2.340). To restore communion between God and humanity, Christ descends to humanity in order to 'raise' us again with him unto the Father (*Inst.* 1.13.26; CO 2.113). Only this affective pull of God can draw us into communion with him:

'And behold a ladder'. It is Christ alone therefore, who connects heaven and earth: he is the only Mediator who reaches from heaven down to earth: he is the medium through which the fullness of all celestial blessings flows down to us, and through which we in turn, ascend to God. (Calvin 1850:113; CO 51.295)

Christ descends to create a covenantal union between God and believers based on love (Fisk 2009:312). The incarnated Christ displays the true image of God, because in him 'we contemplate face to face the glory of God' (Calvin 2009:92). We cannot have any knowledge of our salvation until 'we behold God in Christ', nor can we truly understand what our image entails before we see the image in Christ (*Inst.* 2.6.4; CO 2.251). Kehm (1971) rightly notes that in Calvin's thinking our *telos* as images of God cannot be 'discovered by an analysis of the immanent properties of man's soul and body, but [only] in the actual embodiment and revelation of it in Jesus Christ, the true man'. Whereas creation and the human being can only mirror God's glory in a vague sense, Christ mirrors God's will in a direct and bright sense. Even the incarnation did not inhibit the majesty of God shining forth in Christ, but he displays God's glory despite being surrounded by 'the low condition' of flesh (Kehm 1971:202).

Christ's imaging of God, after all, is not embodied in physical appearance, but is tied to his role in the Trinity as the Speech who not only reveals himself, but is the eternal Wisdom and Will of God (Calvin 1857:47; CO 47.12). As God's Speech Christ reveals through his preaching the unique and hitherto unknown mystery of the kingdom's gospel (Calvin 1857:26; CO 47.1). As God's Wisdom he reflects God's knowledge, purity, righteousness and true holiness (*Inst.* 2.9.3; CO 2.311).

For Calvin Jesus' sinless relationship with the Father reopens community between God and humanity. Calvin (CO 44.130) attributes the sinless nature of Christ in his Commentary on Matthew 4:1 to Christ not having a mutable nature as Adam had. Because of his sinless nature, Christ can act as the pledge through which the promises of God are sealed, because his coming confirms that the promises of the Law are fulfilled (*Inst.* 2.9.4; CO 2.312). Christ alone can redeem humanity, because he is the true image of God, untainted by sin and therefore alone able to 'wipe away our guilt' and 'appease the anger of God' (*Inst.* 2.12.3; CO 2.342). Those who deviate from Christ have no other form of access to God, but are subject to God's wrath and judgement (*Inst.* 3.20.19; CO 2.645). Calvin insists that God loves no human being 'outside Christ', because his love dwells in his Son, from whom it afterwards is extended to us (*Inst.* 3.2.3; CO 2.424, 2.425).

Christ's descent to earth culminates in his substitutionary work through which he makes the great exchange possible that brings us back into communion with God:

This is the exchange which out of his measureless goodness he has made with us: ... 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. (*Inst.* 1536.4.24; CO 1.119)

Stripped of our own righteousness, Christ covers us with his righteousness; unrighteous in our works, Christ justifies us (Calvin 1972, art. 16; CO 5.335).

For Calvin the crucifixion stands 'at the nexus of descent and ascent' (Canlis 2010:93). Christ's death is a mysterious encounter between God's love and justice. In Christ both God's love for humanity and his demand for justice are at work. God reconciles us to him, because he has loved us since before the foundation of the world; yet his justice demands the punishment of sin (*Inst.* 2.16; CO 2.370). Blochner (2004:283) notes that Calvin mainly uses two language sets when speaking about the atonement. One is the cultic language of sacrifice with terms such as *expiation*, *curse*, *propitiation*, *uncleanness* and *purification through the shedding of blood*. The other is forensic or judicial language such as *guilt*, *imputation*, *judgement*, *penalty* and *remission*. Calvin, seemingly, regarded the sacrificial and legal images in Scripture 'as the core foundation of a doctrine of atonement' (Vorster 2012:131). Christ in his death was offered to the Father as a 'propitiatory victim' so that expiation could be made by his sacrifice (*Inst.* 2.16.6; CO 2.373). Through his expiatory work Christ appeases God's wrath on sin and reinstates God's favour to us (*Inst.* 2.15.6; CO 2.366). The satisfaction that Christ brings is thus twofold: it is a satisfaction of the righteous demands

of the law, and an acquittal of the penalty due to sin (Vorster 2012:132; *Inst.* 2.16.6; 2.16.7; CO 2.373; 2.374). Being reconciled by the righteousness of Christ, God becomes instead of a 'Judge', an 'indulgent Father' (*Inst.* 3.1.1; CO 2.390).

The ascent of Christ and descent of the Spirit to raise us up to Christ

The descent of Christ to crucifixion and death is directed at bringing humanity up to the Father (Canlis 2010:126). The Spirit is the key actor in the descent and ascent of Christ as well as the eventual ascent of the believers (Canlis 2010:96). Christ is according to his human nature in heaven, and thus sends the Spirit to act as 'substitute' for his 'absence' (*Inst.* 4.17.26; CO 2.1026). The Spirit is the bond of connection between us and Christ that unites us with Christ and bestows on us 'everything that Christ has' (*Inst.* 4.17.12; CO 2.1011). By emphasising the work of the Spirit, Calvin deliberately moves away from scholasticism's ontological notions of gradation of being to avoid the possible conflation of divine and human essences. Instead the Holy Spirit makes it possible for human nature to participate in divine nature without assimilating the two natures.

The resurrection and ascension of Christ is, according to Calvin, essential to the work of Christ, because his reign only truly commences when he lays aside the 'ignoble condition of a mortal life' (*Inst.* 2.16.14; CO 2.370). Yet, his ascension does not create a void in the human-divine relationship, because Christ exercises his power on earth through the Spirit (see Canlis 2010:96–97).

Calvin regards redemption as the fruit of the perichoretic cooperation between the Father, Son and Spirit. The Father's love is the efficient cause, the Son's obedience is the material cause and the Holy Spirit's illuminative work is the instrumental cause in God's salvational work (*Inst.* 3.14.21; CO 2.578). The illuminative work of the Spirit consists of him working faith in the hearts of the elect, which raises them to heaven and makes them partakers in divine life (Calvin 1972, art. 15–16; CO 5.334; 5.335). By faith believers ascend to God so that they are born again into a new divine life. The noetic orientation of Calvin's theology is quite evident here: just as sin primarily has a noetic effect on the human being, God's restoration of the believer through the Spirit is first and foremost illumination, that is, an 'opening of our intellectual eyes' (*Inst.* 3.1.4; CO 2.396). Calvin therefore often refers to the Spirit as the Spirit of truth and understanding (*Inst.* 3.1.4; CO 2.396).

True to the noetic orientation of his theology, Calvin relates the work of the Spirit closely to the Word. Through the Word the Spirit descends to us to reveal God's will in a language that accommodates our weakness. The human mind is too blinded to ascend from itself to God and that is why the Spirit must first descend to us through the means of the Word to enlighten our minds (*Inst.* 3.2.7; CO 2.403). The Word is the instrument through which the Spirit calls us, works faith in us and strengthens our faith. Calvin regards the Word as the

'outward' working of the Spirit, because, through the Word, the Spirit calls all people. Yet, this 'outward' working of the Spirit must be accompanied by the 'inward' working of the Spirit that consists of him illuminating the minds of the elect (*Inst.* 3.2.7; CO 2.403). The external manifestation of the Word ought to be enough to bring us to faith, but due to human blindness the Word has no effect without the illumination of the Spirit (*Inst.* 3.2.33; CO 2.425).

Through the Word the Spirit directs and governs the human will by moving, impelling, correcting, reforming and renovating the will (*Inst.* 2.5.15; CO 2.243). The result is that the human will is renewed to such a degree that its nature is changed to doing what the Spirit does in us (*Inst.* 2.5.15; CO 2.243). Yet, Calvin must not be misunderstood as intimating that the human will is coerced by the Spirit. The Spirit transforms human nature, but does not obliterate human agency. Although the human being is acted upon by the grace of God, the human acts whilst being acted upon, meaning that the Spirit does not circumvent the human's faculties in renewing the human will.

The ascent of believers through justification and sanctification

Although Calvin regards justification and sanctification as interconnected and temporally inseparable, he consistently holds that to be justified is logically different from being made a new creature (see Venema 2007). In contrast to Osiander, who regards justification as an infusion of faith, Calvin describes justification as a forensic act of acquittal:

We simply interpret justification as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as if we were righteous, and we say that this justification consists in the forgiveness of sins and imputation of the righteousness of Christ. (*Inst.* 3.11.7; CO 2.538)

For Calvin justification is a prerequisite for sanctification, whereas sanctification denotes a gradual and incremental process of inner moral renewal brought about by the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit:

But as it is too well-known by experience, that the remains of sin always exists in the righteous, it is necessary that justification should be something very different from reformation to newness of life. (*Inst.* 3.11.2; CO 2.533)

Billings (2009:428) is thus correct when he states that Calvin is careful not to absorb 'one category in the other'. In fact, Calvin grounded the inseparability, yet distinctiveness of justification and regeneration in the Council of Chalcedon's doctrine on the two natures of Christ that asserts the *distinctio sed non separatio* of the divine and human natures in Christ (Calvin 1847:357; CO 49.317). In doing so, Calvin emphasises that, although justification and sanctification 'are distinct in conception, they are inseparable in reality' (Venema 2007:78).

Calvin understands justification as 'imputation'. When God justifies us through the intercession of Christ, he does not acquit us on the basis of our own innocence, but he attributes Christ's righteousness to us so that 'though not righteous

in ourselves, and strictly deserving of punishment, we are deemed righteous in Christ' (*Inst.* 3.11.3; CO 2.534). Garcia (2009:419) rightly asserts that imputation entails for Calvin that the 'distinctive righteousness of Christ, which is proper to him alone, is attributed to believers only within and because of the reality of their union with him'. Justification is thus wholly an act of God alone. No human works are able to acquire God's justification.

Yet, Billings (2009:440) rightly cautions that Calvin does not view imputation 'as a dry abstract legal decree'. Although justification is 'irreducibly forensic', it is 'accessed as part of the double grace of union with Christ'. Salvation does not depend on justification alone, but on justification and sanctification together (Billings 2009:446). For Calvin imputation is part and parcel of our participation in Christ. It thus not only denotes a forensic acquittal, but also a communication and transfusion of the righteousness of Christ to the believer, who is engrafted in him:

Our righteousness is not in ourselves, but in Christ; that is the only way in which we become possessed of it is by being made partakers with Christ ... Our Lord Jesus Christ communicates his righteousness to us, and so by some wondrous way, insofar as it pertains to the justice of God, transfuses its power into us. (*Inst.* 3.11.23; CO 2.552)

Being illuminated through faith, believers are justified and engrafted into Christ; resulting in the faithful obtaining the right to be adopted as 'sons of God' (Calvin 1857:42; Canlis 2010:146). Through adoption the believer receives 'both the legal declaration of becoming a child of God' and the gift of the Spirit who conforms us further to the image of Christ (Billings 2009:429). The child metaphor is especially important in Calvin's doctrine on sanctification. Childship denotes God's goodness and love, and inspires in us moral agency. Canlis (2010:138, 237) notes that Calvin uses the notion of adoption to 'highlight a radical participation in the divine that simultaneously secures creaturehood'. It affirms that the believer truly is an 'heir of heaven, a partaker of righteousness, a possessor of life' and receives all the merits of Christ, but his sonship is an acquired one and not a divinisation of human nature (*Inst.* 3.15.7; CO 2.584). This honour of adoption belongs to the faithful, solely on the basis of Christ's merits. Faith is not a human achievement with which believers raise themselves up to God, but it is a gracious gift of the Spirit through which believers 'receive Christ' and become inheritors of all his 'blessings' (Calvin 1847:44; CO 47.12).

The Spirit, who dwells in the believer, is the agent that makes the union of the believer with Christ possible. The *telos* of the sanctification that the Spirit brings about in the believer is a restoration into the image of God as exhibited by Christ. Actually, the regeneration of the believers is 'nothing else than the formation anew of the image of God in them' (Calvin 1854:296; CO 51.208). The restoration of the *imago Dei* occurs through repentance, which 'consists of two parts: namely mortification of the flesh and vivification of the spirit' (*Inst.* 3.3.8; CO 2.440). Calvin is adamant that reconciliation with

God is not possible through penitence and contrition. Fear of God cannot transform moral agency. God's love enables transformation. True repentance thus rests on the grace of God.

Repentance entails that the human being must descend into himself and contrast his conduct with the righteousness of the Law, which reveals to us how far we are from living in accordance with God's will to obtain the fruits of Christ's substitutionary work. The consequence ought to be that we develop distrust in our own ability and seek our salvation outside ourselves in Christ (*Inst.* 2.8.3; CO 2.268). For Calvin, true knowledge is not knowledge of our excellence, but of our destitution and inherent depravity because of sin (Zachman 2009:467). The human being thus must respond to Christ's descent with a descent of his own. When we deny ourselves by being aware of our sins, we make the remarkable discovery of apprehending the immensity of God's grace and kindness in Christ.

For Calvin, Christ's death and resurrection becomes the life pattern of the believer in the sense that 'the transition in Christ from humiliation to exaltation, suffering to glory, cross to resurrection and obedience to eschatological life (becomes) the historical location of the believer's present life in Christ' (Garcia 2009:426). Calvin (1855) explains in his commentary on 1 Peter 4:1 what conformity to the death of Christ entails for the believer:

Scripture recommends to us a twofold likeness to the death of Christ: that we are conformed to Him in reproaches and troubles (Phil 3:6), and also that the old man being dead and extinct in us, we are to be renewed to a spiritual life (Rom 6:4). Yet, Christ is not simply to be viewed as our example, when we speak of the mortification of the flesh, but it is by His Spirit that we are really made conformable to His death, so that it becomes effectual in us to the crucifying of our flesh. (p. 120; CO 55.270)

Conformity to the death of Christ thus consists of an ongoing process of turning away from the self towards God. Self-renunciation and mortification, implying an uprooting of all ambition and cravings for glory and a dying of the self, is the precondition for a genuine love towards the neighbour and God (Senior 2012:126). True human existence is only possible in a decentred existence that finds its goal and destiny in God.

Communion with the resurrection of Christ, conversely, entails for Calvin (1851) a raising-up of the Christian mind to the resurrected and exalted Christ:

Ascension follows resurrection: hence if we are members of Christ we must ascend into Heaven, because He, on being raised up from the dead was received up into Heaven that he might draw us with Him. (p. 205; CO 52.117)

This 'raising up' leads to a Christian life embedded in a practical conformity to the image of Christ, which exhibits the supernatural gifts that the human lost because of the Fall. By reflecting the supernatural virtues of uprightness, knowledge, purity, righteousness and true holiness the believer conforms to the image of Christ and becomes *filii*

Dei (*Inst.* 1.15.4; 3.8.1; CO 2.138, 2.515; see Van Vliet 2009:77). For Calvin, Christ's image of God is the only image that signifies God's essence and attributes, whereas the human's restored image is the result of an imputed, transfused and communicated righteousness that reflects some attributes of God, but not God's essence. The image is not restored by God by means of nature, but by grace (Torrance 1957:82). Although believers are able to reflect God's attributes, Christ alone can reveal God's attributes perfectly, because he is the infinite God, whereas humans as finite beings are only capable of reflecting God's attributes in a limited measure (Van Vliet 2009:87).

Despite the miracle of God's grace, Calvin is realistic about the effects of our sanctification. He avoids the notion of realised sanctification by emphasising the need for continuous self-mortification (see Murphy 2008:201). God's grace ends the 'reign' of sin in us, but sin still 'dwells' in believers. Christ's image is therefore only 'partly' seen in the elect, insofar as they are regenerated by the Spirit (*Inst.* 1.15.4; CO 2.138). The effects of the Fall still linger in the elect, because there 'always remains some relic of their fleshly corruptions' (Calvin 2009:491; SC 11/1.328). Because sanctification is a gradual process of transformation and not a once-off event, we have to struggle throughout our entire lives against our fleshly desires (Calvin 2009:491; SC 11/1.328).

Because our struggle against sin remains a lifelong commitment, the law maintains an important position in the life of believers. It 'excites' us to a life of holiness and purity by reminding us of our duty (*Inst.* 3.19.2; CO 2.614). Whereas the law previously accused us because of our transgressions, it now serves as a 'lantern' that enlightens our way and keeps us from wandering away from God (Calvin 1972, art. 17; CO 5.335).

Union with Christ

Union with Christ is not only for Calvin a personal reality, nor merely a communal reality in the sense that the church is engrafted in the body of Christ, but it is also a cosmological reality, because the whole of reality is united with God in Christ through the work of the Spirit. Canlis (2010:21) rightly notes that in contrast to the 1536 edition of the *Institutes*, the later editions go beyond personal salvation to ground the *telos* of the whole creation in the mediating work of Christ. Calvin regards all things as created by Christ, existing in him and created for union with him.

With regard to human reality, Calvin believes that true humanity is only possible when the human being lives in union with God. Johnson (2007:76) rightly notes that union in Christ stands in Calvin's thinking 'at the foreground of the *ordo salutis*'. Billings (2009) describes Calvin's use of the phrase 'union with Christ' as follows:

The phrase 'union with Christ' is best seen as a shorthand for a broad range of themes and images which occur repeatedly through a wide range of doctrinal *loci*. These images are often clustered together – like participation in Christ, ingrafting in

Christ, union with Christ, adoption and participation in God. Yet, the images function differently in different doctrinal and at times, polemical contexts. (p. 429)

The believer's union with God denotes in Calvin's thinking a highly affective relationship with God. For Calvin, to be engrafted in Christ means that Christ dwells in us through his Spirit so that we become 'one' with him. Accordingly, he is called 'our Head' and the 'first born among the brethren' (*Inst.* 3.1.1; CO 2.393). Our union with Christ is at the same time union with the 'fullness of the Godhead', because the Father and the Spirit are in Christ (*Inst.* 3.11.5; CO 2.531). The purpose of the Spirit's enlightenment is not to bring us to an intellectualist contemplation of the divine, but to energeise us into living in communion with God. Just as the sun's rays 'generate, cherish and invigorate its offspring', the radiance of the Spirit transfuses to us the communion of Christ's flesh and blood (*Inst.* 4.17.12; CO 2.1010).

For Calvin, partaking in the divine nature entails that we experience the 'quickening energy' of the Spirit in us (*Inst.* 1.13.14; CO 2.102). His emphasis on the work of the Spirit serves as a safeguard against any notion of substantial participation that might threaten either God's divinity or the human's creatureliness. The scholastics employed the Platonic notion of *methexis*, which amounts to a participation in eternal realities based on a substantialist ontology. Calvin, instead, understands participation as a sharing in personal relationships. His anthropology is bound up in a participation in Christ, not an innate Godward movement of the soul that presupposes continuity between nature and divine reality. Although, being 'one with Christ', is a transfusion of divine communion, not substance. This transfusion is as powerful as any unity in substance could be, because it invigorates, sustains and preserves us (*Inst.* 4.17.18; CO 2.1007). That is why prayer is of such crucial importance in Calvin's theology. Discipline of prayer is essential to sustain our communion with God. It is a 'Spirit enabled activity' in which the Spirit raises believers up to pray to God so that the believer can be sustained by God (Billings 2009:437).

By grounding our participation in God in 'relationship' and not 'transfusion of essence', Calvin preserves the transcendence of God and the individuality of the human being in order to make communion possible.

The sacraments and the cycle of descent and ascent

In Calvin's thought the sacraments are an institution of God and not the church. For Calvin, the ministering of the sacraments exemplifies the descension of God to raise us up to him through the Spirit of Christ.

Our union with Christ entails that the faithful receive the gifts of the Spirit, which enable us to have fellowship with him and to share in his righteousness (*Inst.* 3.11.10; CO 2.540). The dual function of the sacraments is to affirm

this reality, while also 'being the means of participation' in divine reality (Canlis 2010:164). They are aids through which we are 'engrafted in the body of Christ', or, if already engrafted, more and more united to him (*Inst.* 3.11.9; CO 2.540). The corporeal signs of the sacraments represent God's invisible promises in a manner adapted to our weak capacity, whilst we, in turn, testify our faithful acceptance (*Inst.* 4.14.1; CO 2.942). They only perform their office when accompanied by the Spirit, who alone can work faith in us. Without him the sacraments are of no avail, because the office of the sacraments is only to make the Spirit's promises visible to our eyes (*Inst.* 4.14.9; 4.14.12; CO 2.947; 2.949).

The sacraments signify that believers are part of the *ekklesia* as the body of Christ that lives in the realm of the Spirit. The sacraments signify this spiritual, but also embodied existence. Through the sacraments Christ descends unto us, both through the external symbol and the Spirit (*Inst.* 4.14.24; CO 2.959). Baptism testifies, according to Calvin (*Inst.* 4.14.22; 4.15.10; CO 2.958; 2.967), that we are washed and purified, and that the condemnation imputed to us and the penalty that original sin brought about has totally been taken away from us. It is the initiatory sign by which the believers are admitted to the *koinonia* of the Church, 'engrafted into Christ', and counted as children of God (*Inst.* 4.15.1; CO 2.962). As such it signifies that we are 'united to Christ himself as to be partakers of all his blessings' (*Inst.* 4.15.6; CO 2.965). According to Calvin, by baptism Christ 'has made us partakers of his death, engrafting us into it'. Those who receive baptism 'therefore experience the efficacy of Christ's death in the mortification of their flesh, and the efficacy of his resurrection in the quickening of the Spirit' (*Inst.* 4.15.6; CO 2.965).

For Calvin (*Inst.* 4.14.22; CO 2.958), the Supper is the celebration of our redemption and union with Christ. Butin (1995:118) notes that in Calvin's thought Christ descends during the Supper in the Spirit to believers by means of visible elements, whilst at the same time drawing the church into a heavenly worship of the Father in the Spirit through the mediation of the ascended Christ. The Supper seals the sacred communion through Christ, transfuses his life into us, and denotes the *koinonia* of the believers with God and each other (*Inst.* 4.17.10; 3.20.38; CO 2.1009; 2.663). Through the Supper we are enjoined to take and eat the body of Christ so that we can experience the efficacy of his death for us (*Inst.* 4.17.1; CO 2.1002). As bread nourishes and sustains us, the body of Christ keeps our soul alive through the Spirit (*Inst.* 4.17.3; CO 2.1003). In contrast to Zwingli, Calvin does not understand the Supper to be merely symbolic in nature, nor is it a mere imitation of Christ or a partaking in his benefits, but it is a true communion with Christ who is present in the Supper through his Spirit (see Billings 2005:324). We truly eat the body and drink the blood of Christ through the mouth of faith (*Inst.* 4.17.5; CO 2.1005). Christ can exert his energy wherever he wants. He is present within us, sustains, confirms and invigorates us just as if he is with

us in the body. He can feed us with his body, transfusing his communion in us (*Inst.* 4.17.18; CO 2.1016). Murphy (2008:209) rightly notes that the sacraments are in the thinking of Calvin 'spiritual food operating in a progressive *theosis*, binding us more and more to Christ, until such union is made perfect in heaven'.

The eschatological orientation of human life

The cycle of descent and ascent provides Calvin's theology with a strong eschatological orientation. Believers must 'raise' their minds to the resurrection and aim to reach it to partake in the benefits of Christ. This involves that all members of the body be utilised to serve God (*Inst.* 3.25.2; CO 2.730). Kehm (1971:209) rightly notes that Calvin 'regards orientation toward the future as a dominant axis both of Christian existence and of human existence generally'. Meditation on the future life is a key ingredient of Calvin's doctrine on the Christian life. Calvin assesses the responsibilities of earthly life from the perspective of the 'destiny beyond death' (Kehm 1971:209). The end of the resurrection will be that believers become 'partakers of divine nature' so that Christ will be all in all (*Inst.* 3.25.10; CO 2.741).

Even though Calvin regards the body as an accessory to the soul, he does not exclude the human body from God's salvational work. The body as 'tabernacle' of the soul is the home of the quickening Spirit that dwells in us so that God's life flows into us and vivifies the body (Calvin 1972, art. 20.4; CO 5.339). The Spirit sanctifies every part of the body and enjoins the various parts of the body to praise and glorify God (*Inst.* 3.25.10; CO 2.736). This vivifying work of the Spirit becomes particularly evident in the sacrament of the Supper when the believer partakes in Christ (*Inst.* 4.17.11; 4.17.12; CO 2.1010; 2.1011).

Whereas the immortal soul needs no resurrection, but retaining its own essence 'migrates' after death from its tabernacle, the body will be the special object of God's resurrecting power (*Inst.* 3.25.6; CO 2.735). The resurrection entails that the 'Lord will then revive us from mortality into immortality and receive us glorified both in body and in soul into blessedness that will last forever' (Calvin 1972, art. 20.9; CO 5.342). Christ's own resurrection serves as warrant that the believer's body will be resurrected and eternally changed from a 'vile body' to 'glorious body' (*Inst.* 3.25.3; CO 2.730). Calvin insists that the believer does not receive a new body with the resurrection, but receives a revived body. To suggest that the believer receives a new body amounts to a denigration of the earthly body. The earthly body is, after all, a temple of God and God will not allow his temples to fall into corruption without hope of resurrection (*Inst.* 3.25.7; CO 2.736). For Calvin the immortality of our earthly body is the culmination of the gradual process of our restoration in the image of Christ (Engel 1988:177). Moreover, if we receive a substituted body, the connection between the body of Christ and our earthly bodies will be broken. Christ did not receive a new body, because this would have meant that what he offered

as an expiatory sacrifice has been destroyed. This indicates, according to Calvin, that believers also do not receive a substitute body, because they are resurrected in the same way that Christ was (*Inst.* 3.25.8; *CO* 2.738).

The significance of Calvin's construction of the descent-ascent theme

The introduction stated the aim of this article as analysing how Calvin uses the scheme of descent and ascent as an operational tool to construct his soteriology. Seven features will be highlighted.

Firstly, as noted earlier the cycle of descent and ascent in Calvin's theology is essentially a divine movement. This marks Calvin's soteriology as theocentric in nature. Julie Canlis (2010) rightly states that descent and ascent is, in Calvin's thinking, essentially a divine movement:

Calvin brilliantly synthesises the two movements of ascent and descent into one primary activity: the ongoing story of God himself with us. God has come as man to stand in for us (descent), and yet as man he also leads us back to the Father (ascent). The entire Christian life is an outworking of this ascent – the appropriate response to God's descent to us – that has already taken place in Christ. (p. 3)

Humans are not the agents in the mystical union with Christ. Instead, our ascent to God depends on Christ first descending to us and then enabling us to ascend with him to the Father through the work of the Spirit. Through the divinely activated cycle of descent and ascent, mediated by the Spirit, Calvin avoids voluntarism, anthropocentrism and deism in favour of a reciprocal relationship between God and believers of gift, and return that subsists in God's own being. Murphy (2008:199) calls this approach a 'soft omnicausalism that generates the divine-human relationship according to the purposes and good pleasures of the Deity'. The result is that there is no gift of God that human beings can return to him 'other than God's own love relationally given to them' (Murphy 2008:199). True love thus always has a 'divine rather than human etiology' (Murphy 2008:199).

Secondly, Calvin utilises and transforms a patristic and scholastic theme to develop a soteriology with a strong pneumatological emphasis. The Spirit, not a creational ontology that emphasises innately created capacities in the human being, acts as the connection and bridge between God and human beings. This pneumatological emphasis allows Calvin to avoid both monism and dualism, because the Spirit acts as the Agent that differentiates between Creator and creature, whilst also relating them. Moreover, Calvin's emphasis on the Spirit as enabling our ascension provides his theology with a dynamic quality that medieval theology lacked.

Thirdly, Calvin's use of the theme of descent and ascent allows him to weave together the juridical and mystical categories of our union with Christ. In Calvin we do not

find juridical and participationist models that compete with each other, but he succeeds to integrate the two aspects of Christian soteriology without absorbing the one category into the other. Through Christ's descent we are forensically acquitted and justified, whilst, through the descent of the Spirit to earth and our spiritual ascent to heaven mediated by the regenerative work of the Spirit, we are mystically united with Christ. The process of acquittal and mystical union is part of the same cycle and this cycle cannot come to fruition without the one or the other. Yet, there is a logical difference between the two.

Fourthly, Calvin uses the schema of descent and ascent to denote the relationship between God and the believer as a dynamic personal relationship grounded in a covenantal union based on love. Calvin thus avoids theological abstraction by locating the believer's union with Christ in the concrete historical particularity and story of the person of Jesus Christ and the work of the Spirit that communicates the effects of the historical Jesus' atoning work to us. Hereby, Calvin provides an alternative to ontological participation theories that ground participation in innately created anthropological categories and an impersonal high Christology. Instead he emphasises Christ's personal activity in the mystical union between God and believers that allows for an I-Thou relationship that neither consists of a fusion of divine and human essences, nor a mere moral relationship, but of an authentic communion that actualises the human being without erasing our creaturely status (Murphy 2008:203). Calvin's emphasis on the I-Thou personal relationship between God and human, however, must not be misconstrued as a justification for individualism. Calvin's understanding of participation, as reflected by his understanding of the Supper, contains a strong communal motive. The people of God are the body of Christ and ascend as one body to God through the Spirit.

Fifthly, the descent-ascent construction enables Calvin to develop a concrete and dynamic ethic for Christian life modelled on the example of Jesus Christ. The Spirit raises us up to Christ to follow the example of Christ who is the true image of God. As believers grow in their spiritual union with Christ through the continuous process of self-mortification and vivification enabled by the Spirit, their moral ability to replicate the impeccable nature of Christ increase (see Fisk 2009:319). By developing a doctrine of union with Christ that is based on Christ as model and that asserts the indwelling of the Spirit in us who re-invigorates us, Calvin develops a dynamic ethical model that asks for the continuous renovation, sanctification and reformation of Christian life and society. The dynamism of Calvin's ethical construction, however, does not come at the expense of human security, because the Spirit ensures that our union with Christ is not severable (Fisk 2009:323). Calvin also does not fall into the trap of utopianism, but he exhibits a remarkable realism as far as the Christian vocation and the sanctification of human life is concerned. He warns against a misdirected obsession with the earthly that will result in idolatry. Instead, the Christian must perform his or her

duty realising that sanctification can never be fully realised during our existence on earth.

Sixthly, through the cycle of descent and ascent Calvin supplies us with a model on the relation between transcendent and immanent reality. As noted earlier, Calvin understands salvation in a comprehensive cosmological sense. The divinely activated cycle of descent and ascent indicates that immanent reality cannot sustain itself without participating in transcendent reality. Without the descent of Christ and the Spirit, immanent reality cannot maintain itself, but is destined to descend into the abyss of sin and chaos. However, in Christ and through the mediation of the Spirit, immanent reality is able to 'raise' itself to God. This 'raise' to transcendent reality allows immanent reality to endure, subsist and persist. However, the participation of immanent reality in transcendent reality for Calvin does not consist of an ontological union or a fusion of substances between the two realities, but is actualised through the Spirit of God that sustains and preserves creation. This allows Calvin to develop a participation model that relates immanent and transcendent reality to each other, but, at the same time, preserves the integrity of both by not positioning the immanent and transcendent on the same ontological levels. Participation in God thus does not dissolve human creatureliness nor compromise the 'otherness' of God.

Lastly, Calvin's descent-ascent construction provides a strong eschatological orientation to his soteriology in the sense that the believer, who is bound up in the ascended and exalted Christ, is in a continuous process of being 'raised up'. Calvin consistently links union with God to both our past createdness in the image of God and to the future resurrection and consummation of the believer (Horton 2009:403). Christ liberates us from a perverse love of this world and turns our eyes to the 'power of the resurrection' so that we will long for the life to come (*Inst.* 3.9.6; CO 2.527, 2.528). This expectation nourishes the believer in his existence and enables him to carry his cross with joy.

Conclusion

The divinely activated cycle of ascent and descent in Calvin's theology is *not* the theme of Calvin's theology. His theology is too complex and multi-faceted to make such a claim. It would rather be described as a tool Calvin uses to integrate the various themes of his soteriology. Calvin uses the cycle of descent and ascent in order to weave together the juridical and mystical categories in his soteriology without postulating an ontological unity between God and human. This descent-ascent schema furthermore strengthens the theocentric and pneumatological character, eschatological outlook and personal dynamism of his theology and assists him in devising a concrete ethical framework located in the life of the historical Christ and the work of the Spirit. Finally, the descent-ascent construction enables Calvin to relate the immanent and transcendent realities to each other in a manner that avoids theological abstraction.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

References

- Billings, J.T., 2005, 'United to God through Christ: Assessing Calvin on the question of deification', *Harvard Theological Review* 98(3), 315–334. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000994>
- Billings, J.T., 2009, 'John Calvin's soteriology: On the Multifaceted "Sum" of the Gospel', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11(4), 428–447. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2400.2009.00470.x>
- Blochner, H., 2004, 'The atonement in John Calvin's theology', in C.E. Hill & F.A. James III (eds.), *The glory of atonement*, pp. 279–303, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
- Butin, P.W., 1995, *Revelation, redemption and response: Calvin's trinitarian understanding of the divine-human relationship*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Calvin, J., 1847, *Commentary on the epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, transl. J. Pringle, Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh.
- Calvin, J., 1850, *Commentaries on the first book of Moses called Genesis*, vol. 2, transl. J. King, Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh.
- Calvin, J., 1851, *Commentaries on the epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, transl. J. Pringle, Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh.
- Calvin, J., 1854, *Commentaries on the epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, transl. J. Pringle, Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh.
- Calvin, J., 1855, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, transl. W. Pringle, Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh.
- Calvin, J., 1857, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1, transl. W. Pringle, Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh.
- Calvin, J., 1863–1900, *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, E. Cunitz, J.W. Baum & E.W.E. Reuss (eds.), Schwetsche, Brunsvigae. (Corpus Reformatorum).
- Calvin, J., 1961, *Supplementa Calviniana: Sermons inédits*, J.I. McCord (ed.), Neukirchner Verlag, Neukirchner-Vlun.
- Calvin, J., 1972, *Catechism or institution of the Christian Religion*, transl. L.W. Battles, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh.
- Calvin, J., 2008, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, transl. H. Beveridge, Hendrickson, Peabody, MA.
- Calvin, J., 2009, *Sermons on Gen 1-11*, transl. R.R. McGregor, Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh.
- Canlis, J., 2010, *Calvin's Ladder. A spiritual theology of ascend and descend*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- CO, see Calvin 1863–1900.
- Engel, M.P., 1988, *John Calvin's perspectival anthropology*, Scholars Press, Atlanta, GA.
- Fisk, P., 2009, 'Calvin's metaphysics of our union with Christ', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11(3), 309–331. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2400.2009.00451.x>
- Garcia, M.A., 2009, 'Imputation as attribution: Union with Christ, reification and justification as declarative word', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11(4), 415–427. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2400.2009.00472.x>
- Horton, M.S., 2009, 'Union and communion: Calvin's theology of word and sacrament', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11(4), 398–414. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2400.2009.00468.x>
- Johnson, M., 2007, 'Luther and Calvin on union with Christ', *Fides et Historia* 39(2), 59–77.
- Kehm, G., 1971, 'Christ and Man in Calvin's theology', *Perspective* XII(3), 197–217.
- Murphy, G., 2008, 'Reformed Theosis?', *Theology Today* 65, 191–212. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/004057360806500206>
- SC, see Calvin 1961.
- Senior, J., 2012, 'Cruciform Pilgrims: Politics between the Penultimate and Ultimate', *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 32(1), 115–133. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sce.2012.0000>
- Torrance, T., 1957, *Calvin's doctrine of man*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Van Vliet, J., 2009, *Children of God. The Imago Dei in John Calvin and His Context*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.
- Venema, C.P., 2007, '"Calvin's understanding of the "twofold grace of God" and contemporary ecumenical discussion of the Gospel', *MJT* 18, 67–105.
- Vorster, N., 2012, 'The nature of Christ's atonement', in E. van der Borgh & P. van Geest (eds.), *Strangers and Pilgrims on Earth. Essays in Honour of Abraham van de Beek*, pp. 129–147, Brill, Leiden.
- Zachman, R.C., 2009, '"Deny yourself and take up your cross": John Calvin on the Christian life', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11(4), 466–482. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2400.2009.00469.x>