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# Nakedness and Shame in Calvin's Writings

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by Alida Sewell

**M**y aim is to explore the link, which appears to be inevitable in Calvin, between nakedness and shame. Is this inevitability a result of his personal prudery? Is it the cultural conditioning of his times? Is there any room in his thinking for an appreciation of the naked body as God created it? Why does he not more fully comment on the Genesis narrative, where it says that Adam and Eve were naked and not ashamed (Genesis 2.25)? Calvin's commentaries

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and sermons on the stories of Adam and Eve, and Noah, and a few others will be analyzed to gain an understanding of Calvin's thinking. The commentary on Genesis and the sermons on Genesis both date from Calvin's later years—1554 and 1559 onwards respectively—and presumably express his mature thoughts. The translations from the French sermons are my own. For the Latin commentaries I have relied on published translations in English and Dutch.

If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so is shame, it seems. Where some people see nakedness plain and simple, others only see a *shameful nakedness*. For Calvin, bodily nakedness is strongly associated with shame and disgrace. He also lists nakedness among dire situations such as poverty, famine, diseases, and reproaches. He never expresses it as something positive, except that before the Fall "there was nothing but what was honorable ...[;] our parents had nothing in themselves which was unbecoming until they were defiled with sin."<sup>1</sup> The Fall, of course, caused the defilement of sin. Calvin wonders why deformity should appear in only one part of the body (and by that he means the genitals), since our whole human nature is infected by squalid sins. He concludes that it was enough for God that a certain shameful sign was conspicuous in the human body which would remind us of our sins. This is how he links the genitals especially with shame.<sup>2</sup> Augustine said something similar when he discussed shame and lust.<sup>3</sup>

In the very first chapter of his *Institutes* of 1559, Calvin also links nakedness and shame. He writes, "For, as a veritable world of miseries is to be found in mankind and we are thereby despoiled of divine raiment, our shameful nakedness exposes a teeming

horde of infamies” (*ICR* 1.1.1). It is true that in this particular context Calvin may be thinking of spiritual nakedness, in which case he thinks that our fallen nature has need of divine clothing, “the garments of salvation ... and the robe of righteousness” of which Isaiah speaks (61.10). But for Calvin,

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spiritual nakedness and bodily nakedness are both characterized by shame.

In his *Commentary on Genesis* as well as in the *Institutes*, Calvin goes out of his way to ascribe honor to God for the way he created everything, but especially humankind. In the *Institutes* he writes,

Likewise, in regard to the structure of the human body one must have the greatest keenness in order to weigh, with Galen’s skill, its articulation, symmetry, beauty, and use. But yet, as all acknowledge, the human body shows itself to be a composition so ingenious that its Artificer is rightly judged a wonder-worker.<sup>4</sup>

Also, in the twelfth *Sermon on Genesis*, Calvin states, “Thus we should not be surprised if Adam and Eve were not ashamed of being naked, inasmuch as there was nothing in their body, nor in their soul which was not like a testimony to the goodness and wisdom of God. It was without shame; everything was honorable.”<sup>5</sup> But in the sixth *Sermon on Genesis* he had already stated that it is the soul that has

reason, intelligence, and will, “which is much more than all that is found in the exterior of the body.”<sup>6</sup> In the same sermon he describes the parts of the body, which should be an instrument to serve the soul, as a kind of weapon with which the devil wages war against us in order to lead us to perdition.<sup>7</sup> Whenever Calvin compares body and soul, he always values the soul above the body. This is where Calvin’s Platonism is clearly present. He wants to give honor to the Creator of the body, “this corruptible vessel,” but Calvin himself values it only insofar as it is the home of the graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit and thus may bear God’s image.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of the praise he gives to the Creator of the human body, every mention of nakedness, even metaphorical, is connected to a word of negative connotation, such as *deformity, turpitude, disgrace, or ignominy*. According to Calvin, the fact that man was created in the image of God gives him “the highest nobility,” but his being made of the dust of the earth should cause him to learn humility (*Commentary on Gen.* 2.7). In his ninth *Sermon on Genesis* Calvin says, “This is what is expected of us, that we should always look at our origins, where we have come from, in order to lower our eyes and walk in all humility, confessing that we are but earth and dust.”<sup>9</sup> The need for humility in the face of God’s majesty is a strong theme in Calvin’s writings.

Commenting on the verse, “*And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed,*” Calvin writes, “That the nakedness of men should be deemed indecorous and unsightly, while that of cattle has nothing disgraceful, seems little to agree with the dignity of human nature.” He then continues by making a sweeping generalization: “We cannot behold a naked man without a sense of shame; yet at the sight of an ass, a dog, or an ox, no such feeling will be produced. Moreover, everyone is ashamed of his own nakedness, even though witnesses may not be present.”

In his twelfth *Sermon on Genesis*, he expresses similar sentiments and goes even further, saying that it is a shameful thing for men and women to disrobe. Even if a man were to be by himself, he would barely look at himself for shame. He continues by saying that we should be ashamed to look at our own bodies and should also be in a state of blame and shame when others see us.

Calvin attributes all this to the Fall into sin. God did not put this sense of shame in the animals after

the Fall. But God wanted to increase the opprobrium that he put in our persons. Speaking of the animals, Calvin says, "He did not put such an infamy in their bodies."

Calvin goes on to say that if there were no prohibition or punishment for it, there would be many people who would "brutalize" themselves by going nude and being a spectacle. Calvin might have been thinking about the Anabaptists of Münster, who took it upon themselves to proclaim the naked truth by walking around naked. The Münsterites also practiced polygamy and adultery, excesses that horrified Calvin. He probably linked these sins with the practice of nakedness.

The interesting thing here is that when Calvin speaks about the original condition of humankind, he says that "they were without shame, because God created them in this condition, so that his image would shine in their bodies, inasmuch as their bodies were to be the homes [*domiciles*] of their souls, which were formed and created in the image of God."<sup>10</sup> The "which" refers to the souls. So far, this is the only place I have come across where Calvin speaks of the body as a home for the soul, and he does so in the context of discussing Adam and Eve's original condition. Everywhere else he frequently, some 41 times, refers to the body as "the prison of the soul," a concept derived from Plato, though never acknowledged as such by Calvin. This prison metaphor appears to have informed much of Calvin's thinking about the body.

This negativity and shame of one's own body, as expressed by Calvin, even in solitary privacy, seems extreme. Considering the way poor people lived, there must have been some at least in Calvin's day who were somewhat accustomed to nakedness and not ashamed or embarrassed at their own or others' nakedness. They probably bathed in streams and lakes. There were public baths in his time, but, as Luther records,

... the more modest and more serious people  
... avoid the public baths, although the private  
parts are carefully covered both by women and  
by men.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, we may surmise that Calvin's sense of shame about the body must have arisen out of his personal prudery and prejudices. Calvin nowhere admits that the innocence about our naked body, which we lost

in the fall, may be regained in Christ, even though he states, "Scripture everywhere admonishes us of our nakedness and poverty, and declares that we may recover in Christ what we have lost in Adam" (*Commentary on Genesis 3.6*). In the sermons also, Calvin states, "It is said that the Spirit of Christ is life, although he lives in our mortal bodies. For there is only corruption; it is nothing but a mass of filth and villainy in man, it is a vessel full of foul smells, until the time that it may be renewed." He goes on to say "Be that as it may, when a little portion of the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ lives in us, it is life, says St Paul; it is enough to wash all the rest and to take away all that is corrupt in us, and to restore us, so that we are participants of the glory of our God and of the heavenly life."<sup>12</sup> But, in spite of the life-giving Spirit in our bodies, and the participation in God's glory, Calvin sees the body only as unworthy, something to be ashamed of, with no restoration in sight until the resurrection.

The question arises, "Why does Calvin emphasize the negative so much, when he also seems to appreciate the renewing power of the Holy Spirit in man?" He even states that God's grace "is more abundantly poured forth, through Christ, upon the world, than it was imparted to Adam in the beginning."<sup>13</sup> If he really believed that, should he not have had a more positive view of the human body? While Calvin may have applied the recovery to spiritual nakedness and poverty, he did not extend it to his feelings about the body. Nor did he apply the more abundant grace to his appreciation of the body. For Calvin, "we have nothing with which to glorify ourselves, ... for we are nothing but earth and mud, when all is said and done."<sup>14</sup>

Calvin sometimes asserts that the image of God only applies to the soul and consists of reason, intelligence, and will. Here he echoes Augustine. Spiritual life is only present in reason, intelligence, and will, not in the body.<sup>15</sup> This is Hellenistic rather than Biblical thinking.

At other times he seems to suggest that the body was also made in God's image, as in *Sermon 12* on Genesis, where he says, "But, as we said, sin is as well shown in the body as in the soul, for all that the soul was pure and clean, that it tended towards God's justice, as one could see, there it was that God engraved his image in man, and that was also the case in the body, which had none of the dissolute character it has today."<sup>16</sup> Further in the same sermon

he states that there is “nothing but turpitude and villainy in our bodies.”<sup>17</sup>

The account of Noah’s drunkenness as interpreted by Calvin, in his *Commentary on Genesis*, is very revealing as to his attitudes. Calvin faults Noah mainly for his drunkenness, which he calls “a filthy and detestable crime,” which made him lose all “self-possession” so that he did “in a base and shameful manner, prostrate himself naked on the ground, so as to become a laughing-stock to all” (300-301). Calvin expresses his usual fears about excesses and going beyond bounds, but he is exaggerating here: Noah was naked in the privacy of his own tent. There was no public spectacle. Nor does the Bible specifically say that Noah was “mocked by his own son.” It just says that Ham told his two brothers. Most commentators agree that the failure of Ham to cover his father, and with it the sin of drunkenness, spoke to a character fault in Ham that was exacerbated in his son Canaan. That fault was a lack of filial respect. Calvin writes at length about the respect and reverence that was due to Noah as father: “This Ham, therefore, must have been of a wicked, perverse, and crooked disposition; since he not only took pleasure in his father’s shame, but wished to expose him to his brethren” (302). Shem and Japheth are praised for their filial respect and modesty in covering their father without looking on his nakedness.

The problem with this story is that although it was Ham who saw Noah naked, it is his youngest son, Canaan, who is cursed. One wonders if something was left out of the story. Some authors have suggested that what was left out was that Canaan may have castrated his grandfather, and the sight of the bloody mess was the thing that was so awful as to need covering.<sup>18</sup> That would explain why he was cursed. Ham is listed as the middle son of Noah, not the youngest. Canaan is the youngest son of Ham and in that sense the youngest son or grandson of Noah. The account clearly states that when “Noah awoke from his wine he knew what his youngest son had done to him. So he said, ‘Cursed be Canaan.’” If his youngest son had merely *seen* Noah naked, how would he know that as soon as he woke? Looking at someone is not usually described as being *done to* somebody. Therefore, the theory that Canaan had mutilated his grandfather may well be a valid one, or at least a possible one.

Calvin, in discussing the story of Noah, reads much more into the story than is justified by the mere

biblical text, and in doing so, he goes outside his own stated principles of exegesis. He claims that Ham was “reproachfully laughing at his father” and adds, “Ham alone eagerly seizes the occasion of ridiculing and inveighing against his father” (*Commentary on Genesis*, 302). Neither claim is substantiated by the text. As critical as Calvin is of Ham, so he is approving of Shem and Japheth:

And thus they gave proof of the regard they paid to their father’s honour, in supposing that their own eyes would be polluted, if they voluntarily looked upon the nakedness by which he was disgraced. At the same time they consulted their own modesty. For (as was said in the third chapter) there is something so unaccountably shameful in the nakedness of man, that scarcely any one dares to look upon himself, even when no witness is present.<sup>19</sup>

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Note that Calvin states that it is “unaccountably shameful.” If he could not account for it, he should have reconsidered why nakedness should be shameful, especially for someone who believes that God himself designed and made the human body! In commenting on the curse, Calvin rather ties himself in knots trying to justify the curse on Canaan, while it was Ham’s behavior, in Calvin’s eyes, that deserved the condemnation. Various exegetes have suggested that the curse was a prophetic one on a tribe, headed by Canaan, that would later be known for ungodly, idolatrous, and sexually perverse behavior and the enemy of Israel. So the viewing of the nakedness (if

that was all that occurred) was the occasion of the prophetic curse but not the direct cause.

Calvin's discussion of circumcision also yields some interesting comments. Calvin's unease about circumcision is expressed in his comments on Genesis 17.11, where the rite of circumcision was first commanded to Abraham and his offspring. Calvin calls the command to circumcise "very strange and unaccountable ... at first sight."<sup>20</sup> He finds it hard to credit the idea that the sign of so great a mystery should be situated in the shameful parts.<sup>21</sup> He even thinks that "God seems to us foolishly to have commanded" circumcision. It was "necessary for Abraham to become a fool, in order to prove himself obedient to God." Calvin concludes that circumcision was a sign of repentance, and that God's aim was to "completely abase the pride of the flesh." Calvin seems to have been unaware that circumcision was common among the peoples of the Ancient Near East, as he calls the rite something "whereby the seed of Abraham is distinguished from other nations" (*Commentary on Genesis*, 453-54). It should be noted that if no-one went about naked, people would never see the distinguishing sign of circumcision, and so it would be pointless as far as being a witness to others of God's special relationship with the Jews. And if other tribes around them also circumcised their males, there would be no peculiar aspect to it.

Calvin further comments on circumcision in his commentary on Isaiah, where God commands Isaiah to go round naked for three years (Gen. 22.3). Here too, Calvin reveals much about his views on nakedness. First of all, he states that if anyone went around naked of his own accord he would be "justly ridiculed," but not if God commands it. This is a strange manner of reasoning, as if God acts totally apart from the very morality that he requires of his people. In response to those who said that nakedness would be unbecoming in a prophet, Calvin argues that this "nakedness was not more *unbecoming* than circumcision, which irreligious men might consider to be the most *absurd* of all sights, because it made an exposure of the *uncomely* parts. Yet it must not be thought that the Prophet went entirely naked or without covering those parts which would present a *revolting* aspect [*italics added*]."<sup>22</sup> Note these negative words in regard to what God had created. He concludes on this matter, "I am therefore of the opinion that Isaiah walked naked whenever he discharged the office of a prophet, and that he

uncovered those parts which could be beheld without shame" (*Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah* 88). In other words, he was not really naked.

In this way, Calvin reveals how he associates shame with the human body and distorts the plain meaning of Scripture to accommodate his negative feelings about the body in general, and genitals in particular. In the Bible passage it is clear that Isaiah's nakedness was to exemplify the forced nakedness of the captives who had their buttocks uncovered, so we may assume that naked did indeed mean naked. Prisoners of war were usually stripped naked to be humiliated. In the sermons on Micah, Calvin notes nakedness as being a result of involuntary removal to a foreign land, the result of their sin, their "malice and rebellion" (Micah 1.11). So Calvin is aware of this manner of humiliating prisoners of war. But because he is uncomfortable with the picture of a prophet of God literally acting out this condition, so he changes it to mean partially clothed.

My provisional conclusions are as follows: Calvin's discomfort and feelings of shame about the body are probably at least partially related to his own ill health throughout most of his life. Still, in commenting on the various Bible passages we discussed, he ought not to have read more into them than is present. What he read into them was informed more by his prejudices and prudery than by the actual words of Scripture. By sometimes reading more into the text, as in the Noah account, or by sometimes changing the plain meaning of the text, as in Isaiah, Calvin betrayed his own exegetical principles in order to accommodate his prudery. Moreover, he should have more consistently applied his teaching that in Christ we are restored to our innocence. Just because bodies are often troublesome and pained, and are not perfect, does not mean they are full of turpitude or something to be ashamed of.

#### Endnotes

1. *Opera Calvini* 23.51 (*Joannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, Ed. W. Baum, E. Cunitz & W. Reuss [Brunswick 1863-1900]): "Nunc satis habet dicere, in natura integra nihil nisi honorificum fuisse: unde sequitur, quidquid in nobis probrosum est, esse culpae nostrae imputandem, quia parentes nostri nihil in se habebant non honestum, donec peccato foedati sunt." *Commentary on Genesis*, Vol. 1, tr. John King (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948; first published in England, 1847), 137.



2. *Commentary on Genesis*, 159 in f.n. 4: “Sed Deo fuit satis, extare in corpore humano aliquam pudendam notam, quæ nos peccati commonefaciat.” *OC* 23.65.
3. *City of God*, Book 14, Chapter 20, last paragraph.
4. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.5.2: “Similiter in humani corporis structura connexionem, symmetriam, pulchritudinem, usum, ea quam Galenus adhibet, solertia pensiculare, eximii est acuminis. Sed omnium tamen confessione, prae se fert corpus humanum tam ingeniosam compositionem, ut ob eam merito admirabilis opifex iudicetur.”
5. *SC XI/1, 58* (*Supplementa Calviniana Sermons ineditis*. Ed Erwin Mulhaupt et al. [Neukirchener Verlag, 1936-1961]), Sermon 12 on Genesis: “Ainsi ne nous esbahissons pas si Adam et Eve n’ont point eu honte d’estre nudz, d’autant qu’il n’y avoit rien en leur corps non plus en leur ame qui ne fust comme tesmoignage de la bonté et sagesse de Dieu. Or cela estoit sans vergogne; tout y estoit honorable” (148).
6. *SC XI/1, 58*, Sermon 6 on Genesis du samedi 9e jour de septembre 1559: “l’ame, comme j’ay dit, a la raison, intelligence et volonté, qui est beaucoup plus que tout ce qu’on trouvera en ce corps exterieur.”
7. *SC XI/1, 60*, Sermon 6 on Genesis: “nostre corps, qui doit estre instrument pour servir à l’ame, ... toutesfois il est comme pour equiper le diable, pour nous faire la guerre ... à fin de nous mener à perdition.”
8. *SC XI/1, 61*, Sermon 6 on Genesis: “Si nous regardons à nostre corps, il est formé de terre, et cependant Dieu a eleu ce vaisseau corruptible, et mesmes où il n’y a nul honneur ni dignité, il l’a voulu faire domicile de ses graces et des dons de son saint Esprit, tellement que nous portions son image.”
9. *SC XI/1, 97*, Ninth Sermon on Genesis: “Voilà donc ce qui nous est icy proposé: d’une part, c’est que nous regardions tousjours à l’origine dont nous sommes sortiz, pour baisser les yeux et chemyner en toute humilité, confessant que nous sommes que terre et poudre ...”
10. *SC XI/1, 147*, Sermon 12 on Genesis: “il signifie qu’ilz estoient sans honte, pource que Dieu les avoit creez à ceste condition, que son image reluit en leur corps, d’autant que leurs corps estoient les domiciles de leurs ames qui estoient formées et cré[e]s à l’image de Dieu.” I have summarized Calvin’s argument preceding this quotation.
11. *Luther’s Works* Vol. 1, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St Louis: Concordia, 1958), 139.
12. *SC XI/1, 98-99*, Sermon Nine on Genesis: “Mais il est dit que l’esprit de Jesus Christ est vie, combien qu’il habite en noz corps mortelz. Car il n’y a corruption; ce n’est qu’une masse d’ordure et de villeinye que l’homme; c’est un vaisseau plein de puantise, jusques à ce qu’il soit renouvelle. Or, quoi qu’il en soit, quand il y habite quelque petit portion de l’esprit de nostre Seigneur Jesus Christ en nous, c’est vie, dit saint Paul; cela suffit pour laver tout le reste et pour oster tout ce qui est de corruption en nous, et nous restaurer, en sorte que nous sommes participans de la gloire de nostre Dieu et de la vie celeste.”
13. *Commentary on Genesis*, p. 158. *OC* 23.64: “Nam uberior eius gratia per Christum effusa est in mundum, quam Adae collata esset a principio.”
14. *SC XI/1, 96*, Sermon Nine on Genesis, “nous n’avons point de quoy nous glorifier, ... car nous ne sommes que terre et fange, quand tout sera conté.”
15. As, for example, in *SC XI/1, 99*, Sermon 9: “il n’y a que l’ame en laquelle nostre Seigneur nous a formez à son image.” And in *SC XI/1, 116*, Sermon 10: “Il faut comprendre la vie spirituelle qui est en la raison, intelligence et volonté.”
16. *SC XI/1, 147*, Sermon 12 on Genesis: Mais, comme nous avons dit, le peché s’est aussi bien monstré au corps comme à l’ame, car tout ainsi que l’ame estoit pure et nette, qu’elle tendoit à la justice de Dieu, qu’on pouvoit veoir, voilà Dieu qui a engravé son image en l’homme, cela estoit aussi bien au corps, qu’il n’y avoit point d’intemperature comme aujourduy.”
17. *Ibid*, p. 148. “Que en nos corps il n’y a que turpitude et villenye.”
18. See “The Legend of the Fourth Son of Noah,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, 73:1/2 (Jan. – Apr., 1980), 321-330 and “Noah’s Nakedness and the curse of Canaan. A Case of Incest?” *Vetus Testamentum* 21:2 (Apr., 1971), 232-237.
19. *OC* 23:151-152. In John King’s translation, p. 303.
20. *Commentary on Genesis* 17.11, p. 453. *OC* 23:240-241, “Valde absurdum specie ac ridiculum videri potuit hoc mandatum.”
21. “Tanti mysterii insigne statui in pudendis partibus.” *OC* 23:241.
22. *Comm. on Isaiah* Vol. 2, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 88.