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**CHRISTIAN  
LIFE**

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*On the Christian Life*



# ON THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

• *A New Translation* •

John Calvin

Introduced and Edited by Anthony N. S. Lane  
Translated and Annotated by Raymond A. Blacketer  
With Translation Consultation by Kirk M. Summers

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# Editor's Introduction

*Anthony N. S. Lane*

John Calvin's concern to make the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* useful and practical is especially manifest in his teaching on the Christian life.<sup>1</sup> He did not have a chapter on the Christian life in the first, short edition of the *Institutes* (published in 1536), but he added a concluding chapter on this topic in the second edition (published three years later in 1539). Calvin considered this material to be of such great importance that in 1550 he had it printed as a booklet on its own, both in Latin and in his native French.<sup>2</sup>

The final form of Calvin's *Institutes* is comprised of eighty chapters spread across four "books." Book 3, containing twenty-five of those chapters, expounds the manner in which Christians receive the grace

1 For two helpful recent accounts of this teaching, see Randall C. Zachman, "'Deny Yourself and Take Up Your Cross': John Calvin on the Christian Life," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 4 (2009): 466–82; Scott M. Manetsch, "John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 61, no. 2 (2018): 259–73.

2 Geneva: Jean Crespin and Conrad Badius, 1550. The sections in the 1550 booklet follow those in the fourth edition of the *Institutes* (1550). The sections in this translation follow those in the 1559 *Institutes*.

of Christ, and this is where Calvin placed his material on the Christian life, now divided into five chapters (chaps. 6–10).

Chapters 6–7 discuss self-denial, and chapters 8–10 deal with bearing our cross, our view of the life to come, and the implications for our attitude toward this life. The new English translation featured here is taken from the definitive 1559 edition of the *Institutes*,<sup>3</sup> written in Latin, where Calvin added a small amount of extra material.<sup>4</sup>

### Chapter Summaries

In the first of these five chapters (i.e., chap. 6), Calvin sets out general principles about the Christian life and the factors that should motivate us to pursue it. He aims to enable the godly to order their lives aright by setting out a universal rule to determine their duties (3.6.1). The Christian life is a journey, and we should look for daily progress, but without expecting perfection (3.6.5).

The next two chapters are based on Jesus's statement that following him involves denying oneself and taking up one's cross (Matt. 16:24). In chapter 7, Calvin focuses on the need for self-denial, saying no to ourselves and yes to submission to God. This is the key to progress in the Christian life, whereas "wherever self-denial does not predominate, there either the most loathsome vices predominate without shame, or virtue, if there is any appearance of it, is negated by a corrupt lust for glory" (3.7.2). Those who deny themselves resign themselves totally to God's will and allow every part of their lives to be governed by it (3.7.10).

Calvin continues his exposition of Matthew 16:24 with chapter 8 on bearing the cross, which is an aspect of self-denial. Bearing the cross involves patiently suffering whatever tribulations God may send our way. These have many purposes: to show us our weakness, to

3 Translated from the Latin text included in OS 4:146–81.

4 The chapter titles, a new section (3.7.3), and other new material.

build up our character, to test our patience, to train us in obedience, to subdue our sinful flesh, and to discipline us. Greatest of all is suffering for the sake of righteousness, such as for the gospel (3.8.7–8).

Chapter 9 is devoted to the theme of meditation on the future life. Calvin shrewdly observes that although we all know in theory that we are mortal, “we relapse into our negligent confidence in earthly immortality, oblivious not only of death but of mortality itself, as if no rumor of it had ever reached us” (3.9.2). We should be grateful for the good things of this life, but in comparison with our future life they must be “entirely despised and scorned” (3.9.4).

It is only with this attitude that we can make correct use of the present life and earthly possessions, as Calvin explains in the final chapter (chap. 10). Here he sets out a middle way between the twin errors of affluent materialism and ascetic legalism. “This is a slippery subject, and there is a tendency to slide into either extreme.” Rather than lay down rigid rules, Calvin sees in Scripture general principles for “the legitimate use of things” (3.10.1). These principles are still of great value today.<sup>5</sup> They include a moderate use of the things of this world without enslavement to them, stewardship of all our possessions, and generosity in sharing our resources.

### Calvin's Audience and Aim

As a teenager, Calvin studied in the Collège de Montaigu in Paris, which was profoundly influenced by the late medieval *Devotio Moderna* (Modern Devotion)—a spiritual renewal movement emphasizing conversion, practical Christian living and holiness, meditation (especially on the life and death of Jesus), and frequent communion—exemplified especially by Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation*

5 I have expounded five principles that Calvin set out in Tony Lane, *Sin and Grace: Evangelical Soteriology in Historical Perspective* (London: Apollos, 2020), 299–307.

of *Christ* (ca. 1418–1427).<sup>6</sup> In these chapters of Calvin's work, we see the clear imprint of the *Devotio Moderna* but translated from a medieval monastic to a Protestant "secular" setting. Calvin's target readership is not monks in a medieval monastery but Christians living in society at large. Thomas's asceticism undergoes a radical transformation in the light of Reformation doctrine.

These chapters illustrate clearly that Calvin's aim in all his theology was not just to inform the mind but to form the heart through the mind.

The gospel . . . is not a doctrine of the tongue but of life. It is not grasped merely by the intellect and memory like other disciplines, but it is taken in only when it possesses the entire soul and when it finds a seat and place of refuge in the most intimate affection of the heart. . . . The gospel should penetrate into the most intimate affection of the heart, take hold of the soul, and have an effect on the whole human being. (3.6.4)

### Translation History

The first time this material was translated into a language other than Latin was when Pierre de la Place, as early as 1540, rendered it into French, though it was never published. In 1549, Thomas Broke translated it into English and printed it in London.<sup>7</sup> Calvin himself published a new Latin edition of the *Institutes* in 1550, and Jean Crespin extracted the material on the Christian life from this edition and published it separately in Latin, along with his own prefatory letter

6 Calvin never actually mentions either Thomas or *The Imitation of Christ*. For his relation to the *Devotio Moderna*, see especially Lucien Joseph Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1974). See also Anthony N. S. Lane, "Calvin's Way of Doing Theology: Exploring the Institutes," in *Calvin: Theologian and Reformer*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Garry J. Williams (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 52.

7 John Calvin, *Of the Life or Conversation of a Christen Man: A Right Godly Treatise* [ . . . ] (London: J. Daye and W. Seres, 1549).

that exhorted Christians, as spiritual soldiers, to exercise loyalty to their captain and commander in chief, Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup> Crespín also published a French translation of the treatise that same year and reprinted it in a smaller format in 1552.<sup>9</sup>

It was not until the nineteenth century that the treatise began to be called “the golden booklet” of the true Christian life, when a translation from German to Dutch gave it that title.<sup>10</sup> In 1952, Henry J. Van Andel’s loose translation from Dutch to English was published by Baker Book House as *Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*. Sixty-five years later, in 2017, a new translation appeared by Aaron Denlinger and Burk Parsons, *A Little Book on the Christian Life*, published by Ligonier Ministries.

### This New Translation

This publication of *On the Christian Life: A New Translation* is a foretaste of the forthcoming new translation of Calvin’s *Institutes*, several years in the making, to be published by Crossway.<sup>11</sup> This edition aims to serve lay readers, pastors, students, and scholars across the English-speaking world in the twenty-first century. The translation itself will be fresh, contemporary, and accurate; it will be based on the Latin text with reference in the footnotes to Calvin’s own French translation when it is significant. The edition will clearly indicate Calvin’s own citations, whether of biblical passages or other

8 See *Bibliotheca Calviniana: Les oeuvres de Jean Calvin publiées au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle. I. Écrits théologiques, littéraires et juridiques; 1532–1554*, ed. Rodolphe Peter and Jean-François Gilmont (Genève: Droz, 1991), 50/10, 354–55.

9 *Traicté tresexcellent de la vie chrestienne* [. . .] (Geneva: Jean Crespín and Conrad Badius, 1550); *Bibliotheca Calviniana*, 50/18, 52/10, 1:378–79, 467–68.

10 *Gulden boekste over den regt [sic] christelijken wandel* (Hilversum: P.M. van Cleef, 1858).

11 Translated by Raymond A. Blacketer and edited by Anthony N. S. Lane. Latinist Kirk Summers, professor of classics and director of the classics program at the University of Alabama, has been an indispensable consultant and reviewer throughout this project.

material, such as early and medieval Christian authors or Greek and Roman classical authors.

So in this present volume, Calvin's biblical references are included in the body of the text in parentheses. Where corrections are made or additional data is added (especially verse numbers), these are included in square brackets, alerting readers to the fact that these are not from Calvin. Calvin's biblical references include those given in editions other than the 1559 Latin—that is, in other Latin or French editions during Calvin's lifetime. Where the editors wish to draw attention to a biblical passage that is not unambiguously cited by Calvin, they have included the reference in a footnote. Further, Scripture quotations in Calvin's text are translations of Calvin's citations and paraphrases, and thus biblical quotations do not precisely correspond to any English version. He also regularly combines two or more portions of Scripture (e.g., extracts from different verses, often from the same immediate context) in one quotation.

In this portion of the *Institutes*, Calvin has only one nonbiblical marginal citation, which is found in 3.8.4 (n. 7) and introduced with "Calvin's marginal note." The bracketed material in that footnote has been added by the editors to provide more precise citation information. The other footnotes in this volume reference original-language material in Latin and French, as well as explanatory notes where necessary, refraining from imposing modern categories into the text.

Reflecting typical conventions of early modern composition and printing, Calvin numbers each section. Modern style often requires the addition of further paragraph breaks within each section to aid readability. Where this translation divides a section into more than one paragraph, it is done by the editors in order to help readers understand the text more easily.

Finally, while Calvin provided titles for books and chapters, he did not provide section headings. These have been added by the editors

to aid readers. To ensure that modern categories are not imposed on Calvin, these section headings are loosely based on those that first appeared in the 1587 edition of Thomas Norton's English translation of the *Institutes*, paying special attention to the wording of the current translation.





# Abbreviations

## General

- ANF*      *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Cox. 10 vols. 1885–1887.
- CO*        *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*. Edited by Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss. 59 vols. *Corpus Reformationum* 29–88. Brunswick and Berlin: Schwetschke, 1863–1900.
- COR*      *Ioannis Calvini opera omnia: Denuo recognita et annotatione, critica instructa, notisque illustrata*. Edited by Brian G. Armstrong et al. Genève: Librairie Droz, 1992–.
- Comm.*    *Calvin's Commentaries*. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844–1855.
- CWE*      *The Collected Works of Erasmus*. Edited by Dominic Baker-Smith et al. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974–.
- FC*        *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1947–.

- LCL        Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912–.
- LFC        A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church, Anterior to the Division of the East and West. London: J. G. and F. Rivington Oxford: J. H. Parker, 1838–1881.
- PL         Patrologia Latina. Edited by Jacques-Paul Migne. 217 vols. Paris, 1844–1864.
- NPNF<sup>1</sup>    *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Series 1. Edited by Philip Schaff. 14 vols. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1886–1890.
- OS         *Joannis Calvini opera selecta*. Edited by Peter Barth, Wilhelm Niesel, and Dora Scheuner. 5 vols. Vol. 2, 2nd ed. Vols. 3–5, 3rd ed. Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1926–1974.

## Classical, Patristic, and Medieval Works

### AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS

*Res ges.*        *Res gestae*

### AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

*Bon. conj.*    *De bono coniugali*  
*Enarrat. Ps.* *Enarrationes in Psalmos*

### CICERO

*Fin.*            *De finibus*  
*Leg.*          *De legibus*  
*Off.*          *De officiis*  
*Sen.*          *De senectute*  
*Tusc.*         *Tusculanae disputationes*

## CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE

*Mort.*        *De mortalitate*

## DIOGENES LAERTIUS

*Vit. phil.*    *Vitae philosophorum*

## LACTANTIUS

*Div. inst.*    *Divinae institutiones*

## LIVY

*Urb.*        *Ab urbe condita*

## PINDAR

*Pyth.*        *Pythian Odes*

## PLATO

*Phaedr.*    *Phaedrus*

## SENECA

*Ben.*        *De beneficiis*

*Ep.*        *Epistulae morales*

*Prov.*       *De providentia*

*Tranq.*     *De tranquillitate animi*

*Vit. beat.*   *De vita beata*



BOOK 3

HOW WE OBTAIN  
THE GRACE OF CHRIST

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*The Benefits That Come to Us and the Fruits  
That Follow from That Grace*



## CHAPTER 6

# The Life of a Christian

*First, the Arguments That Scripture  
Uses to Encourage Us to That Life*

### **1. It is necessary to derive a plan for ordering our lives from the Scriptures.**

We have said that the goal of regeneration is that there should appear in the life of believers a symmetry<sup>1</sup> and agreement between God's righteousness and their obedience, and that they may thus confirm the adoption by which God has accepted them as his children. Now, the law itself contains within it that new life<sup>2</sup> by which the image of God is restored in us. Nevertheless, because our lethargy needs both many incentives and helps, it will be worthwhile to derive from various passages of Scripture a method for the composition of life so that those who have a heartfelt desire for repentance may not go astray in their pursuit of it.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the Fr. "harmony."

<sup>2</sup> Lat. *novitas*. Calvin very likely refers to the newness of life that Paul mentions in Rom. 6:4; cf. the Vulgate. Beza interprets it as a Hebraism and translates it as *nova vita*, new life.



Now, as I take up the matter of the formation of the life of a Christian, I am aware that I am entering into a wide-ranging and extensive topic and that its magnitude could fill a long volume were I to examine every aspect of it. We see how lengthy the exhortations of the fathers are when they write on just a single one of the virtues. And this is not due to excessive verbosity. For whatever virtue you plan to recommend in your treatise, this naturally leads to a copious style due to the abundance of material. The result is that you do not seem to have properly discussed it unless you have spoken at length. But regarding the instruction in living that I now propose to teach, I do not intend to prolong it to the extent of detailing each of the virtues individually or digressing into exhortations. You may look for this in other writings and especially in the homilies of the fathers.<sup>3</sup> It will be more than enough for me if I can demonstrate the method by which a devout person may be directed to the right purpose in ordering life and if I will have briefly marked out some universal rule for properly determining a person's duties. Perhaps there will be an opportunity sometime for discourses,<sup>4</sup> or I may leave to others the duties at which I am not so adept. By nature, I love brevity,<sup>5</sup> and if I wanted to speak

3 The Fr. adds "that is to say, popular sermons."

4 The Fr. adds "as there are in the sermons of the ancient doctors."

5 Calvin declares and defends his methodology in the dedicatory letter to his 1540 Romans commentary, where he extols the virtue of "perspicuous brevity." *COR* 2/13:3; *CO* 10/2:402; *Comm. Romans*, xxiii. He means both that he will avoid expounding theological loci or commonplaces in his commentaries, as was the method of Bucer and others, and that he has a general preference for rhetorical brevity, the rhetorical style that Erasmus calls Laconic, as opposed to the prolix and abundant style that Erasmus himself preferred. Erasmus also observed that both Laconic and copious styles held their dangers. See *Copia*, in *CWE* 24, esp. 299–301. Calvin also recognized this fact. See, e.g., *Institutes* 4.14.1; 4.14.16; 4.17.20. One of these dangers is that brevity can lead to obscurity; thus, Calvin adds the qualifier "perspicuous" or lucid. Calvin also expresses his preference for brevity in the "Theme of the Present Work," prefaced to his *Institutes*, where he says that he will omit "lengthy digressions" in his commentaries because he will have "elaborated at length" on

with more prolixity, it might not turn out well. But even if a more prolix method of teaching were most worthy of acclaim, I would nevertheless hardly care to attempt it. In addition, the plan of the present work requires that we constrain the simple teaching with as much brevity as possible.

Moreover, just as philosophers<sup>6</sup> have settled definitions of what is right and honorable from which they infer individual duties and the entire chorus of virtues, so Scripture does not lack its own order in this matter but maintains a most beautiful organization, and one that is far more certain than all the philosophical ones. It differs only in this, that the philosophers, as they were ambitious men, fervently affected a consummate clarity of arrangement by which they could show off the deftness of their genius. But the Spirit of God, because he taught without affectation, did not so precisely or consistently observe a methodical plan. Yet when he occasionally does specify such a plan, he implies well enough that we should not neglect it.

## 2. We are called to a love of holiness because God is holy.

Now, this instruction of Scripture that we are discussing consists primarily of two parts. The first is that the love of righteousness, to which we are otherwise not at all inclined by nature, should be instilled

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theological topics in the *Institutes*. But even in the *Institutes* he prefers to maintain a compact and sparing rhetorical style in these elaborations. See Raymond A. Blacketer, *The School of God: Pedagogy and Rhetoric in Calvin's Interpretation of Deuteronomy* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 68–72; Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 28–29, 32, 38, 111–17, 143–45, 182–83; Olivier Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole: Étude de rhétorique réformée* (Genève: Editions Slatkine, 1992), 733–62.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin uses “the philosophers” to refer to the eminent Greek and Roman philosophers of the classical period—especially Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, and Cicero—who were studied and respected in the early modern period. Calvin also mentions the two main Greek philosophical schools, the Epicureans and the Stoics.

and introduced into our minds. The second is that there should be a standard stipulated for us that does not permit us to go astray in our pursuit of righteousness.

Moreover, Scripture has plentiful and excellent reasons for commending righteousness, many of which we have previously cited in various passages, and still others that we will briefly touch on here. What is a better foundation with which to begin than when Scripture urges us that we must be made holy because our God is holy (Lev. 19:2; 1 Pet. 1:[15–]16)? When we were scattered like straying sheep and dispersed through the labyrinth of the world, he gathered us together again to join us to himself. When we hear mention of our union with God, let us remember that holiness must be its bond. This is not because we enter into communion with him through the merits of holiness, since, by contrast, we must first cling to him so that, filled with his holiness, we may follow where he calls. Rather, it is because it particularly belongs to his glory that he has no partnership with wickedness and uncleanness.<sup>7</sup> This is why Scripture also teaches that holiness is our calling's goal, which we should always keep in mind if we wish to answer when God calls (Isa. 35:8 and elsewhere). After all, for what purpose were we plucked out of the wickedness and pollution of the world that engulfed us if we allow ourselves to wallow in them throughout our whole lives? In addition, Scripture likewise warns us that to be counted among the Lord's people we must reside in the holy city of Jerusalem. Since he has consecrated this city to himself, it is wrong to profane it with the uncleanness of its inhabitants. From this come those statements that there will be a place in God's tabernacle for those who conduct themselves without stain and pursue righteousness (Pss. 15:[1–]2; 24:[3–4], etc.). This is because it is not at all fitting that the sanctuary in which he dwells should be stuffed with filth like a stable.

7 The Fr. adds "we must resemble him because we are his."

### 3. A second motivation to holiness is the holiness of Christ, which God has made to be a pattern for us.

And to better rouse us to action, Scripture shows that just as God the Father has reconciled us to himself in his Christ, so he has impressed an image in Christ for us, to which he wishes us to be conformed (Rom. 8:29).<sup>8</sup> Now then, let those who think that only the philosophers rightly and methodically organize moral philosophy find me a more outstanding system among the philosophers. The philosophers, while they especially want to urge us to virtue, merely assert that we should live in harmony with nature.<sup>9</sup> Scripture, however, draws its exhortation from the true fountain.<sup>10</sup> It does so when it directs us to give our entire life back to God, its author, to whom it is obligated. Not only that, but after it has taught us that we have fallen away from the true origin and principle of our creation, it adds that Christ, through whom we have been restored to God's favor, was set before us as a model<sup>11</sup> so that we may imitate his example in our lives. What can you ask for that is more effective than this one truth? Yes, what can you ask for beyond this one truth? For the Lord has adopted us as his children on this condition, that our lives manifest Christ, the bond of our adoption. If this is so, unless we yield and devote ourselves to righteousness, we not only fall away from our Creator with the most wicked treachery but also disown the Savior himself.

Further, the Scripture derives grounds for exhortation from all God's benefits that it records for us and from each part of our salvation. Ever since God showed himself as a Father to us, we would have to convict ourselves of the utmost ingratitude if we, in turn, did not

<sup>8</sup> Calvin erroneously cites Rom. 6:18; the correct reference is Rom. 8:29.

<sup>9</sup> See Cicero, *Off.* 3.3.13 (LCL 30:280–81); Cicero, *Fin.* 2.11.34, 3.7.26, 4.15.41 (LCL 40:120–21, 244–45, 344–45); Seneca, *Vit. beat.* 8 (LCL 254:116–19).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the Fr. "The Scripture rightly leads us into a better fountain of exhortation."

<sup>11</sup> The Fr. adds "of innocence."

show ourselves to be his children (Mal. 1:6; Eph. 5:1; 1 John 3:1). Ever since Christ cleansed us through the washing of his blood and also shared this purification with us through baptism, it is inappropriate for us to pollute ourselves with new filth (Eph. 5:26; Heb. 10:10; 1 Cor. 6:11; 1 Pet. 1:15, 19). Ever since we were engrafted into his body, we who are members of his body must carefully beware that we do not defile ourselves with any stain or defect (1 Cor. 6:15; John 15:3[–6]; Eph. 5:23[–33]). Ever since Christ himself, who is our head, ascended into heaven, it is right for us, as we set aside desire for worldly goods, to aspire to heaven with our whole heart (Col. 3:1). Ever since the Holy Spirit consecrated us as temples to God, we must take care that God’s glory is reflected through us and that we do not commit any act that would desecrate us with filth (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16). Ever since both our soul and body were destined for heavenly imperishability and an unfading crown,<sup>12</sup> we must strive vigorously to keep them pure and uncorrupted until the day of the Lord (1 Thess. 5:23). I say that these are the most auspicious foundations for a life well-constructed. There is nothing like them to be found among the philosophers, who, in their commendation of virtue, never ascend above the natural dignity of human beings.<sup>13</sup>

#### **4. The gospel is a doctrine not just of intellect and tongue but of heart and life.**

And here is the place to rebuke those who possess nothing more than the label and badge of Christ and yet want to be called “Christians.” Where do they get the audacity to boast in his holy name? After all, no one has any dealings with Christ except those who

<sup>12</sup> See 1 Pet. 5:4.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Cicero, *Tusc.* 5.15.45 (LCL 141:470–71); Cicero, *Fin.* 2.21.68, 2.23.76 (LCL 40:156–57, 166–67); Seneca, *Ep.* 84.13 (LCL 76:284–85). The Fr. adds “when it comes to the question of showing a person what their duty is.”

have gained a true knowledge of him from the word of the gospel. And yet the apostle denies that any have rightly learned Christ who have not been taught “to put off the old self, which is being corrupted in keeping with their deceptive desires” (Eph. 4:22). They are, therefore, proven guilty of falsely as well as harmfully<sup>14</sup> claiming the name of Christ, regardless of how eloquently and flowingly they chatter about the gospel in the meantime. For it is not a doctrine of the tongue but of life. It is not grasped merely by the intellect and memory like other disciplines, but it is taken in only when it possesses the entire soul and when it finds a seat and place of refuge in the most intimate affection of the heart.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, let them either stop boasting of being what they are not, which is an affront to God, or show themselves to be worthy students of Christ, their Schoolmaster. We have given the leading role to doctrine, in which our religion is contained, because our salvation begins there, but this teaching must flow into our heart and permeate our conduct of life and even transform us into itself so that it will be productive for us. The philosophers rightly burn with anger and disapprovingly expel from their company those who, when they profess a discipline that should be the schoolmistress of life,<sup>16</sup> turn it into sophistical babbling. How much more reason do we have to despise these blathering sophists! They are content with rolling the gospel on the tips of their tongues<sup>17</sup> (the gospel that is a hundred times more effective than the cold appeals of the philosophers) when the gospel should penetrate into the most intimate affection of the heart, take hold of the soul, and have an effect on the whole human being.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. the Fr. “and in this they do him great injury.”

<sup>15</sup> The Fr. adds “otherwise it is not properly received.”

<sup>16</sup> See Cicero, *Tusc.* 2.6.16, 5.2.5 (LCL 141:162–63, 426–29); Seneca, *Ep.* 94.39 (LCL 77:36–37).

<sup>17</sup> The Fr. adds “despising him with their entire life.”

## 5. The mark of a Christian is not perfection but single-minded progress toward it.

And I do not demand that a Christian person's conduct breathe nothing but the perfect gospel—which, nonetheless, we should wish and strive for. But I do not so strictly demand evangelical perfection that I would not acknowledge as a Christian a person who has not yet attained it, because then everyone would be excluded from the church, since no one is found who is not still far distant from that perfection,<sup>18</sup> and there are many who have made only a little progress so far, but who nevertheless do not deserve to be rejected.

What should we do, then? Let us set that target before our eyes as the only one to which we direct our efforts.<sup>19</sup> Let us determine that as the goal line toward which we strive and compete. After all, it is not right for you to divide things with God such that you take on part of those duties that he stipulates in his word and neglect others at your own discretion. In the first place, God everywhere commends integrity as the foremost part of worshiping him (Gen. 17:[1]; Ps. 12; and elsewhere). By the term “integrity,” he means a pure simplicity of mind that is free of subterfuge and pretending, the opposite of a double heart. It is as if to say that the principle of living rightly is spiritual, in which the inner affection of the mind is—without pretending—dedicated to God for the cultivation of holiness and righteousness. But no one in this earthly prison of a body has been given sufficient strength to run the course with the requisite enthusiasm, and the majority are so overwhelmed with weakness that they slowly move forward by staggering, limping, and even crawling on the ground. Consequently, let each of us move forward according to the measure of our meager ability and continue the journey we have

<sup>18</sup> The Fr. adds “even if they have made good progress.”

<sup>19</sup> The Fr. adds “it is to strive toward the perfection that God commands for us.”

begun. No one advances so hopelessly as not to make at least a bit of progress daily on the way. Thus, let us not cease doing so, that we may continually make some progress along the way of the Lord. And let us not give up hope at the insignificance of our results. Although our results may not live up to what we wish, when today is better than yesterday our effort is not wasted. Let us only focus on our goal with a pure simplicity and strive for the finish line, not charming ourselves with flattery or gratifying our vices, but pressing on with continual effort toward this goal, that we may outdo ourselves until we reach goodness itself. It is this goodness, in fact, that we seek and pursue throughout the whole span of our lives, but we will take hold of it only when we are divested of the weakness of the flesh and are received into his complete fellowship.