Chapter 4: Solitude as Sanctification

The primary task of this chapter is to compare whether or not the discipline of solitude is compatible with Calvin's idea of sanctification. To ease my task in this work of comparison, I would stick to the paradigm of Calvin's sanctification which was introduced in the previous chapter and so progress accordingly. However, before we move onto the comparison between Nouwen and Calvin, it is imperative that this research discuss the biblical validity of the discipline of solitude.

4.1. The Bible and Solitude. Any spiritual discipline- no matter the benefits that it can bring into our lives- that does not find its roots in the Bible must be warily received or even rejected. While Nouwen has brought up that Jesus himself practiced solitude, it is profitable for this thesis to further show that the discipline of solitude does not merely begin with the New Testament. It is, in fact, clearly stated throughout the Bible. It is for this reason that I would like, in this section, to discuss the theme of solitude found in both the OT and NT, with an aim to show that the discipline of solitude is truly a biblical discipline. In my approach towards this part, not only would I be drawing from Nouwen but also opinions from other writers.

4.1.1. *Solitude in the OT.* As a God who speaks to his people and vice versa, it is not incorrect to claim that silence plays only a minor part in the OT. Yet, MacCulloch rightly points out "amid so many scritupural voices, that is not going to be the whole story."[231] Within his survey of the Old Testament with regards to solitude or silence, MacCulloch shows that this theme was not something foreign to the Jewish faith. Pointing out the

[231] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (New York, New York: Viking, 2013), 19

design of a threefold segregation of the antechamber, sanctuary and Holy of Holies, MacCulloch rightly states that the "noisy worship of the Temple was perfectly capable of being hospitable to silence" and that it is capable of tracing "positive use of silence in worship in the Temple."[232] Bonhoeffer concurs with this interpretation when he says that "the stillness of the temple is the sign of the holy presence of God in his Word."[233] When we move to the Prophets (in Jewish arrangement), we find that this theme continues to reoccur. While Hannah's silent prayer in 1 Samuel is a dubious exegetical choice for an argument towards the acceptance of solitude or silence as a biblical discipline, this does not stop church father Bishop Cyprian from using it as his scriptural defense for his conviction for the need of silent prayer.[234] Directing us to Habbakuk, MacCulloch points out that the prophet "interestingly contrasts the well-worn Israelite theme of dumb idols and the noisy worship done to them with the silence which should do proper honor to Yahweh (Hab.2:20). On this point Demarest agrees when he uses the same verse for his support of the discipline of solitude.[235] Within the Ketuvim, the Psalms, more evidently than others, advocates the discipline of solitude and silence. For example, Psalms 37 calls for God's people to be "still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him (v7)." More significantly, as MacCulloch points out, is Psalms 19 where the theme of worshipful silence was developed to "give it a correspondence in the cosmos to silent worship on earth."[236] Using Haydn's *The Creation* to build up his argument, MacCulloch says that

"'The Heavens are telling the Glory of God' is a rumbustious chorus, in which Haydn significantly stops short of setting the end of the extraordinary diminuendo which closes

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[232] MacCulloch, *Silence,* 19
[233] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together,* 34
[234] MacCulloch, *Silence,* 63
[235] Bruce Demarest, *Satisfy your Soul*, 129
[236] MacCulloch, *Silence,* 21

down the psalm's opening proclamation, merely providing a glimpse of it in an unaccompanied vocal quartet, before he returns to one of the most operatically jolly of all his finales. Haydn was clearly exercised by the Psalm-text's turn to *wordlessness* in the praise and knowledge of God."[237]

What he is essentially trying to point out is that even with this great desire to revere God, Psalm 19 "cannot resist balancing silent contemplation of the divine with the speech of human worshippers."[238]

In sum to this survey of the Old Testament, I have to admit that even though the support for solitude is present within the Old Testament, they are but strands; they are evident but they do not add much strength to this practice. In general, the culture of the Old Testament is still one that tends to side with speaking more than silence. These rare incidents spaced throughout the book, however, did not deter New Testament figures and even the early church from practicing and even encouraging solitude.

4.1.2. ***Solitude in the NT.*** When we come to the New Testament, support for solitude seems to be more abundant. In fact, most of the writers who have supported the practice of solitude build up their arguments from the New Testament rather than the Old. Drawing from John the Baptist, Jesus himself and even the early church, these writers have pointed out strong arguments of such discipline within the New Testament. It is, therefore, my task to do a survey of these arguments in the upcoming part.

Nouwen himself, almost in all of his writings, draws his discussion of solitude from Jesus. He points out that Jesus spent the night with God before the appointment of the apostles;[239] how he went off to a lonely place to pray before everyone was looking for

[237] MacCulloch, *Silence,* 21
[238] MacCulloch, *Silence,* 22
[239] Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Living*, 17

him (Mk.1:32-39).[240] Apart from Jesus, John the Baptist was also brought up as a prime example.[241] For Nouwen, there was no doubt that solitude was an integral part of Jesus' life; even going further to say that solitude is the "secret" of Jesus' ministry. It is in solitude that Nouwen argues, where Jesus develops his deep relationship with the Father. Nouwen is clearly not alone with these interpretations was not alone: Walters claim that Jesus is "the archetypal conveyor of God's silence;"[242] agreeing with Dallas Willard, Dr. Siang-Yang Tang states that solitude was a discipline which Jesus himself was "deeply immersed" in;[243] Willard argues that Jesus and his disciples made extensive use of solitude and that in the wilderness, Jesus was "strengthened" by solitude;[244] Foster points out the many occasions that Jesus experienced solitude in the Gospels: in the wilderness (Matt.4:11), in the night before Jesus chose his disciples (Lk.6:12), after Jesus heard the news of John's death (Matt.14:13) and after the feeding of the five thousand (Matt.14:23);[245] Simon Chan says that "solitude was a standing habit of Jesus that his followers should emulate;"[246] all in all, the matter of fact ought to be clear at this point that solitude was seen as a vital discipline by many theologians, with Jesus taken as the prime example.

Outside of the Gospels, we also see some examples of solitude and silence in the lives of the apostles and of the early church. Willard, as a start, sees Paul as the prime example of the practice of solitude. Highlighting Paul's initial conversion experience, Willard points

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[240] Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*,16
[241] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 27
[242] Kerry S. Walters, *Soul Wilderness: A Desert Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 100
[243] Siang-Yang Tan, *Rest: Experiencing God's Peace in a Restless World* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Vine Books, 2000), 61
[244] Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 101
[245] Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 122
[246] Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 121

out that Paul fasted (Acts 9:9, 11) then "fled to the Arabian desert for a lengthy period of time, not "consulting with flesh and blood." In the desert of isolation of the Sinaitic peninsula he continued the interchange with his Lord until he was ready to return to Damascus." For Willard, then, Paul's withdrawal to the desert was his period of solitude; it was where he sought, communed, and was even transformed by God. It was during this time of solitude that Willard argues Paul was "caught up to the third heaven (2 Cor.12:2)" and suffered beatings of "forty stripes save one" (2 Cor.11:24). In other words Paul owed much of his ministry afterwards to his experience of solitude in the desert. His efficacy and power in his ministry cannot be taken apart from his solitude.

Next, a couple of writers have sought to relate solitude with John the Apostle. McGrath argues that the reason why the church of Laodicea was rebuked (Rev.3:14-22) was because they lack of solitude. "With a grim relentlessness, they keep on being passionately busy for Christ, unaware that the same Christ who they are trying to serve is just as passionately trying to refresh and renew them."[247] The church of Laodicea was so engrossed with their own activities that they were unable to hear the knocking (Rev.3:20) of the Risen Christ. They were misled by their own passions and success because they have lost the basic solitude with God. MacCulloch tries to argue that the early Christians saw silence as the place of encounter with Christ. Basing his arguments from the silence after the seventh seal was opened (Rev.8:1), MacCulloch first points out that apart from this silence, "John's account is a crescendo of noise in the classic style of a theophany in the Tanakh: first catastrophic, then triumphant."[248] The fact that this is the only silence written in this event should tell us that "the importance of silence is not overriding, and it

[247] McGrath, *Beyond the Quiet Time*, 12
[248] MAcCulloch, *Silence,* 48

is not the goal of the tribulations in John's vision."[249] However, the most compelling context of this silence is to be found within the Tanakh tradition of "primeval silence and on a cosmic seventh day which Judaism had crafted out of its meditation on the opening story of creation in Genesis." When we connect all the dots, MacCulloch concludes that "the unformed world before creation was silent. This silence was then repeated in the silence of the Sabbath at the end of creation. So it is hardly a surprise that silence will come again at the end of time."[250] In other words, What MacCulloch was trying to point out is while the silence in Revelation 8 was not the main point of the event, it does echoes back to the silence found in the Creation story. At the very least, MacCulloch argues that this was the belief or interpretation of the first-century Christians. This is particularly important because, according to John, this silence is Christ. Christ is the silence before creation; the silence of Sabbath; the silence that has become flesh; and the silence that will come at the end of time for judgment. That Christ is this silence is adopted also by Ignatius (Bishop of Antioch) who calls Christ as God's Word "that come from silence…"[251] In fact, Ignatius amplified this thought when he portrays the "entire life of Christ as wrapped by God in silence: the virginity of Mary and her giving birth were hidden from the ruler of this age, as was also the death of the Lord- three mysteries to be loudly proclaimed, yet which were accomplished in the silence of God.

The New Testament, thus, offers us a variety of examples of solitude with Jesus Christ as its forerunner. It ought to be clear from this brief survey that Jesus was portrayed by the Gospel writers as one who treats solitude as an integral part of his spiritual life. It is no

[249] MacCulloch, *Silence,* 48
[250] MacCulloch, *Silence,* 49
[251] MacCulloch, *Silence,* 49

surprise then that Paul who follows the example of Christ (1 Cor.11:1) would also take up this discipline. Paul's withdrawal for three years was not merely escapism but an encounter with Christ in solitude. It was where Paul knew Christ and was transformed by him. John the apostle, too, attest solitude within his writings, albeit, more indirectly. John's writings, at the very least, give us hints of the importance of solitude and the general reception of silence among early Christians. It is here that I would like to state that- from the biblical evidence- solitude is not merely a monastic invention. While it is true that the discipline of solitude was widely popularized by the monastic movement, it does not originate there; it is within the biblical books that we see a requirement and importance of this discipline.

4.1.3. Calvin on Jesus' Withdrawal. While we are in the subject of the New Testament, it is also important for us to look at how Calvin himself treats Jesus' withdrawal. In most cases where Nouwen speaks of solitude in relation to the person of Jesus, he would bring out the image of Jesus who spent the whole night in communion with God (Mk.1:35; Lk.5:16; 6:12),[252]or how he "went off to a lonely place and prayed there (Mk.1:32-39; Mt.14:23)."[253] It is the aim of this short passage to compare what Calvin has in mind when it comes to verses like these.

It is important to point out that in Calvin's *Harmony of the Gospel,* the matter of solitude is rarely brought up. Even when the text explicitly writes that Jesus went off alone to pray, it seems like Calvin does not puts too much emphasis on it. The fact that the matter of Jesus withdrawal is mentioned so little in his commentary tells that solitude is indeed

[252] Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Living*, 22
[253] Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*, 16

not high in Calvin's list.[254] Even when Jesus withdrew himself in the face of the death of John the Baptist (Mt.14:13), Calvin does not hint that Christ needed this time to be alone with God, rather, that his withdrawal was, in fact, to "keep his trembling disciples at a distance from" the fury of Herod.[255] However, this section is not a total lost cause. One of the places where we find Calvin writing a pretty substantial amount to the matter of solitude can be found in his comments on Mat.14:23 (After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone,). Of course, here, Calvin does not emphasize the necessity of the discipline of solitude, rather, how solitude is important for prayer. Calvin notes through Christ's example, we are warned "to be exceedingly careful to avail ourselves of every assistance for setting our minds free from all the snares of the world, that we may look direct towards heaven." In this regard, Calvin confesses that "solitude has a powerful influence," especially with regards to prayer that it helps Christians to be "more on their guard, to pour their heart into his (God's) bosom, to be more diligent in self-examination."[256] With this, I would like to return to the *Institutes,* where Calvin similarly notes that "prayer is something secret," which requires tranquility far from all our teeming cares."[257] From both his commentaries and the *Institutes,* it is clear to us that for Calvin, solitude does have a role in spiritual life, albeit very narrowed to its function in our prayer.

[254] In Mark 1:35, Luke 5:16; 6:12 where the act of withdrawal is evidently present, Calvin did not mention anything about solitude.
[255] Calvin, *The Harmony of the Gospel*, 231
[256] Calvin, *The Harmony of the Gospel*, 238
[257] Calvin, *Institutes,* III.xx.29

Nouwen, obviously, does not share Calvin's notion of solitude limited to such a narrow sense. Again, for Nouwen, "solitude is its own end."[258] However this does not mean that Nouwen has nothing in common to Calvin in this regard. While denying that solitude is merely a stepping stone, Nouwen highly relates solitude to prayer. Nouwen agrees very much with Calvin's notion of function when he says that solitude is to be ground of prayer. In this sense, solitude does indeed function as an act that helps us better to listen to God without any of the distractions. However, unlike Calvin who points us to listen to God in silent prayer, Nouwen adds another dimension of silence by pointing us to listen to God in a prayerful silence.[259] More than a function (but not denying this aspect), Nouwen says that in prayer, solitude, then, is our direction. Within, it directs us to see our own restlessness; without, it directs us to look at Christ who loves us and calls us the beloved.[260] This is very similar to Calvin who says that solitude helps us to be "more on their guard, to pour their heart into his (God's) bosom, to be more diligent in self-examination."[261]

4.2. *Solitude as an Active Disicpline of Imitation*. Before we go in-depths between the comparison of Nouwen's solitude and Calvin's sanctification, I would like to just briefly point out that with regards to active sanctification, solitude fits the bill in the aspect of (1) being active, (2) imitation and (3) discipline: (1) That sanctification, in general, must be understood as active is very much clear in Nouwen. As a Christian, Nouwen warns that we must not just think that we are the beloved but that we must strive to *become* the beloved; "becoming the beloved means letting the truth of our belovedness become

[258] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* 32
[259] Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Living*, 23-27
[260] Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome*, 28
[261] Calvin, *The Harmony of the Gospel*, 238

enfleshed in everything we think, say or do."[262] What then for solitude? While the "concrete shape of this discipline of solitude will be different for each person," Nouwen insists that solitude is "as concrete and specific as daily life itself."[263] Solitude must never just be an abstract concept. Even though I have argued above that the most important part of solitude is an inner solitude, it must be emphasized that an inner solitude grows from an outer solitude and vice versa. Without the consistent, active and outward discipline of solitude, there can never be a development of an inner one. (2) As a mean of imitation, Nouwen says that solitude is "the furnace of transformation."[264] Solitude is not a place where we take a breather, rather, it is where "Christ remodels us in his own image and frees from the victimizing compulsion of the world."[265] (3) As a discipline, solitude cannot merely be treated as an occasional retreat. Contrary to this solitude must in fact be constantly returned so that the inner solitude can develop. Just as Jesus constantly returned to solitude in his life, so must we. If we can apply such principle on prayer, I think the argument for this principle to be applied on solitude is also strong. It is also important here to mention that as a private discipline, solitude does not contradict Calvin's concept of spirituality. I have shown above how Calvin argues for the necessity of private blessings of God for the individual and how in Calvin's concept of prayer, there is a high level of private exercise. To sum, while Reformed traditions have generally brushed off solitude as a mean of sanctification, the arguments above should have adequately show that- especially in the scope of progressive sanctification- solitude ought to take an important role as our discipline and imitation of Christ.

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[262] Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual living in a secular world (*New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 45
[263] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 31
[264] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 25
[265] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 32

4.3. *Mortification.* Calvin first considers that in mortification, there must be recognition of sin which, in turn, displeases us and bring us to confess that we are truly "miserable and lost and wishes to be another man."[266] The first step to solitude, for Nouwen, is also to recognize that this world is a sinking ship and filled with seductive compulsion.[267] Within this world of social compulsion, we often find that we are not who we are; we have become this falsely fabricated image that is compelled by all the likes and dislikes of society.[268] This is why Nouwen calls solitude a "furnace of transformation." This is rightly so, for in solitude, the old and false self- which we are so full and inclined towards to- must be put off so that we can experience renewal in Christ. In Nouwen's own words, "Solitude is the place of the great struggle and the great encounter- the struggle against the compulsion of the false self, and the encounter with the loving God who offers himself as the substance of the new self."[269] Nouwen's idea of solitude here strikes a great similarity to that of Calvin who also demands that we hate our old self and thus, strive to destroy our flesh; solitude is, indeed, a place of "purification" in its truest sense.[270]

Not only is solitude the place of transformation, it is also the place for a deeper realization of our sin. In this way, solitude complements Calvin's idea of mortification. Calvin says that "when anyone has been brought into a true knowledge of sin he then begins to hate and abhor sin."[271] To this cause, Nouwen's discussions help us on how we can develop a true knowledge of sin. In solitude, we are void of all persons, music, books

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[266] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.iii.3
[267] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 24
[268] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart,* 22
[269] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*,26
[270] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 31
[271] Calvin, *Institutes,* III.iii.3

and every sort of distractions. In other words, entering into solitude is entering into nothingness. Nothingness is dreadful because there is no one or anything to tell us that we are worth something; Nothingness reminds us that we are nothing. Not only so, nothingness brings out the worst in us. Nouwen remarks that when we stay longer in solitude, it brings out

> "Confusing ideas, disturbing images, wild fantasies, and weird associations jump about in my mind…anger and greed begin to show their ugly faces. I give long hostile speeches to my enemies and dream lustful dreams in which I am wealthy, influential, and very attractive- or poor ugly, and in need of immediate consolation."[272]

Thus, solitude is not merely a self-reflection but more so, a struggle to be "brought into a true knowledge of sin." In solitude we are deprived by all the distractions and masks that we have been manipulating to fabricate a false self, and are now left bare-naked to face the ugly truth of ourselves. It is in this kind of struggle that we see our reality as truly miserable sinners and be evoked in our desire to "be another man."

4.3.1. The order of Mortification. In Calvin's discussion of mortification, I have argued how in his process, there is a clear order: To be sanctified, you must first be mortified. This order, though, is not something that is fully shared by Nouwen. It is important to know that for Nouwen, solitude is never the stepping stone; "solitude is not simply a means to an end. Solitude is its own end."[273] For Nouwen, solitude is the encounter of Jesus Christ and this "encounter with Christ does not take place before, after, or beyond the struggle with our false self and its demons." The emphasis here is that there is nothing we can do apart from Christ. While it still makes a strong argument to say that in solitude we must first recognize our false self and then be renewed unto Christ, Nouwen does not

[272] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 27-28
[273] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 32

want to highlight this step in order to emphasize the centrality of a union with Christ in solitude; Being in union means being united in all things, from the beginning until the end. Thus, it is not only vivification which has Christ as its object in solitude, mortification does too. From the perspective of order, while we can say that Nouwen slightly differs from Calvin, he does not, however, contradicts Calvin's idea of process.

4.3.2. Inner and Outer Mortification. It is clear that in Calvin, the priority is with the inner, rather than the outer mortification. The external expression of mortification must always come from within. While he does not deny that there are uses for outward exercises, yet, Calvin does not shy away from spending considerable amount of writing to discuss the potential hazards and misuse that may come with it. As I have said previously, it seems like outward repentance, in Calvin, is scrutinized with suspicious eyes. When it comes to the external practice of solitude, it seems like Nouwen has much in common with Calvin. First, Nouwen says that "the solitude that really counts is the solitude of the heart; it is an inner quality or attitude that does not depend on physical isolation."[274] The external act of being alone in isolated places, void of all distractions and facing the deadening silence are all not the end of solitude, rather, just the means. However much that is true, for Nouwen, it does not deny that it is almost impossible to have this true inner solitude "without any form of withdrawal from a distracting world."[275] Therefore, while we can say that both Nouwen and Calvin both prioritize the inner mortification more than the external one, we cannot say that Nouwen believes the outer discipline comes strictly from the inner mortification. For Nouwen, there is no clear indication of an order when it comes to the inner and outer act of solitude. What is of the

[274] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 37
[275] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 37

inner will affect the outer and vice versa. Thus, it is fair to say that in this regard, Nouwen differs slightly to that of Calvin in the way that he assumes a more synergistic approach towards solitude. While the goal and the motivation are within, it is largely influenced and even initiated from the without.

4.4. *Vivification.* Simply put, Calvin treats vivification as our renewal in the image of Christ which would then enable us to do "righteousness, judgment and mercy. Christ as the objectivity of our renewal in vivification can also be found in Nouwen's solitude. He says that "we enter solitude first of all to meet our Lord and to be with him and him alone."[276] This directly implies that in solitude, we are not merely wandering about in our own misery and guilt; solitude as such may belong to the practice in other religions but not in Christianity. Christian solitude always has Christ as the object in all of its parts, especially in the direction and goal of its growth. Nouwen nicely describes this when he says that "our primary task in solitude, therefore, is not to pay undue attention to the many faces which assail us, but to keep the eyes of our mind and heart on him who is our divine savior." Thus, our renewal in solitude is not merely a renewal of self but the image of Christ who is in us. Just like Calvin who says that our regeneration has its sole end "to restore in us the image of God that had been disfigured," Nouwen similarly remarks that in solitude "it is not we who live, but Christ who lives in us, that he is our true self."[277]

4.4.1. Strength of Vivification. To fight the struggle of solitude is, according to Nouwen, "far beyond our strength. Anyone who wants to fight his demons with his own weapon is a fool." Just like Calvin who believes that we cannot mortify sins just by abhorring sins

[276] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 30
[277] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 30

alone, Nouwen does not believe that in solitude we can mortify our flesh just by our mere strength. The dangers and powers within solitude are so great that by ourselves, we will not able to defeat it. Just like how Christ gives us the direction and power to mortify our sins, Nouwen says that "only Christ can overcome the powers of evil. Only in and through him can we survive the trials of our solitude."[278] Additionally, Nouwen argues also for the necessity of the presence of Christ itself in solitude. What he means by this is without Christ's presence, the affliction and struggles that we face in solitude are neither real nor authentic; "only in the context of Christ himself can a real authentic struggle take place."[279] This image is highly similar to Calvin who says that mortification is headless without vivification. Calvin says that zeal alone without Christ as our goal is merely to "wander about" from one sin to another.[280] In sum, similar to how vivification lends strength and directions to mortification, solitude, too, cannot be won without the power of Christ. Next, similar to how mortification is a mere wandering about without vivification, the struggle in solitude without Christ as the objective goal and direction is neither real nor authentic.

4.5. *Denial of self.* The idea that the Christian is still "flesh" even though he or she has believed in Christ is also shared by Nouwen in his discussions of solitude. Nouwen notes that "our society is not a community radiant with the love of Christ, but a dangerous network of domination and manipulation in which we can easily get entangled and lose our soul."[281] Christians are still so prone to erroneous self-evaluation and still too easily to be caught up by the currents of the world. Especially in "a society that gives much

[278] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 29
[279] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 29
[280] Calvin, *Institutes,* III.VI.2
[281] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 21

value to development, progress and achievement," we are always susceptible to the temptation of wanting to be recognized, self-love and glory seeking rather than pleasing our God. While Calvin states that we are unable to do good without self-denial, it is also true that without solitude we can never do the things that God wants us to do. For Nouwen, our life in action without solitude is merely a life of compulsion; "what matters is how I am perceived by my world."[282] In its function of self-denial, solitude helps to unmasks us of our false image, compulsions and desire to be recognized. Solitude helps in letting us see how much we are truly still so deeply rooted in our "flesh" and gives us room to resolve this. Just like how Calvin then separates his discussions into two main parts, I would also like to continue these discussions the same way, namely: the denial of self to men and the denial of self to God.

4.5.1 ***Denial of self to men.*** Calvin says that self-denial brings us to a real communion with other human beings. For Calvin, our self-love hinders us from truly loving others.[283] Nouwen echoes Calvin's thought by pointing out there needs to be real compassion to relate to other human beings. However, compassion is hard because "it requires the inner disposition to go with others to the place where they are weak, vulnerable, lonely and broken." A true compassion is needed for us to "enter into solidarity with those who suffer." This, in Calvin's words, is not achievable without us denying ourselves. Calvin says that the only remedy is "to tear out from our inwards parts this mostly deadly pestilence of love of strife and love of self."[284] This "tearing", for Nouwen, happens precisely in solitude. In solitude, Nouwen says,

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[282] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 23
[283] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.vii.4
[284] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.vii.4

"We come to the realization that we are not driven together but brought together. In solitude we come to know our fellow human beings not as partners who satisfy our deepest needs, but as brothers and sisters whom we are called to give visibility to God's all-embracing love…in solitude we indeed experience that community is not made but given."[285]

Without solitude as this form of self-denial, "we begin to cling to each other…we quickly become suspicious of each other…to scrutinize each other with a tiring hypersensitivity. Without solitude, shallow conflicts easily grow deep and cause painful wounds."[286] What this means that solitude as a self-denial brings us to a realization that in Christ, we are part of a bigger community. Bound by the person of Christ, there is no longer a place for self-love but now we enter into God's embracing love. "In solitude we become aware that we were together before we came together and that life is not a creation of our will."[287] With solitude we start to embrace this self-denial by learning to "depend on God, who calls us together in love, in whom we can rest, and through whom we can enjoy and trust each other…"[288]

Furthermore, solitude is necessary for us to be able to love. Adding to Calvin who says that the inner-motivation of self-denial is love[289], Nouwen says that this love arises out of solitude; "compassion is the fruit of solitude."[290] Nouwen argues that solitude gives birth to compassion because "it makes us die to our neighbor," which means "to stop judging them, to stop evaluating them, and this to become free to be compassionate."[291] Just like Calvin who admits that we are often hindered to love others because they are, most often

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[285] Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome*, 13
[286] Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome*, 14
[287] Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome*, 14
[288] Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome*, 15
[289] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.vii.7
[290] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 33
[291] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 34-35

than not, unworthy,[292] Nouwen concurs by saying that "those whom we consider lazy, indifferent, hostile, or obnoxious we treat as such."[293] Solitude helps disperse this judgmental attitude by bringing us to "the awareness of the dead person in our own house."[294] In solitude, we realize that we are as dead as the one next to us which keeps us from making judgments towards others; only in such solidarity "real forgiveness becomes possible."[295]

Additionally, forgiveness is possible not only through mutual recognition of our sins but also through our mutual recognition of our limitedness. Here, to deny oneself is to accept that no man is God and that we are all limited. Nouwen says that "forgiveness is to allow the other person not to be God. Forgiveness says, "I know you love me, but you don't have to love me unconditionally, because no human being can do that."" In other words, solitude not only brings us into the realization that all men are sinners but also that all men cannot satisfy us. In solitude, we realize that only God can go into the deepest parts of our hearts and satisfy us. This is important because, more often than not, our inability to forgive lies in our expectation of others to give us "affection and love they cannot afford. If we want other people to give us something that only God can give, we become a heavy burden."[296] Thus, in denying ourselves in relation to men, we do not just deny our sinful nature and be self-abased but more than this, we should also deny ourselves of our own expectations that we put on other people. This difficulty is taken up and resolved in solitude. Thus, in our solitude, we can come to acknowledge ourselves as sinful and

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[292] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.vii.6
[293] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 35
[294] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 36
[295] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 36
[296] Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Living*, 37

limited; not only do we think others as stronger than us (Phi.2:3), but we also accept the fact that other human being cannot love us as much as we desire them to. Only then, we can look to God, not only as the one who loves all his children but also wholeheartedly towards us individually.

Not only does self-denial brings us to humility, Calvin also says that it gives us the ability to "esteem and regard whatever gifts of God we see in other men that we may honor those men in whom they reside."[297] When we stop looking at ourselves and start to see that the gifts we receive all come from the one same God, then we can sincerely celebrate others to be stronger than us. In solitude, we realize that we are all limited, broken people and that all the love and gifts that we receive and express are the gifts of God. Once we look beyond the recipient and see the giver of the gifts, we, then, can celebrate the fact that "God's love is inexhaustible and can be made visible in countless ways."[298]

To deny ourselves in relation to loving others, for Calvin, means that we have to be in solidarity with the pain of others. Calvin explicitly says that in our self-denial, Christians have to "pity his (others) ill fortune as if they themselves experienced and bore it."[299] However, Nouwen, speaking in a broader, universalistic manner, raises these questions: "can we carry the burden of reality? How can we remain open to all human tragedies and aware of the vast ocean of human suffering without becoming mentally paralyzed and depressed?"[300] For Nouwen, to be in solidarity with the pain of others is no easy feat. The great temptation when it comes to the pain of others is that we tend to either "run away

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[297] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.vii.4
[298] Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Living*, 39
[299] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.vii.7
[300] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 55

from the painful realities or to try to change them as soon as possible."[301] Running away from pain is very common but sometimes we try to avoid pain in a more subtle way. In the midst of suffering, we are inclined to offer our words and actions, not because we are being helpful but, rather, we are not ready to experience our powerlessness. Therefore, we try to cover our own weakness with actions.[302] We find it hard to embrace the pain of others not because we do not love others but there is too much pain to bear that it becomes overbearing. The overbearing weight of pain, in turn, makes us realize in our innermost self how powerless we are and we resent this. We do not like to feel like we cannot control our own fate; we do not like to face up with the fact that there are things that we cannot do. This is why we offer those who are in pain solutions, words and actions, in the hope that what we do can avoid us to shoulder this pain together. While it is true that many things are out of our control, however, Nouwen points out that "life can teach us that although the events of the day are out of our hands, they should never be out of our hearts."[303] Without taking the pain of others deep into our hearts, Nouwen argues that the tangible help that we offer to others in the name of solidarity,

"Would degenerate into a desire for quick results, and our generosity is soon exhausted by disappointments. Only when our mind has descended into our heart can we expect a lasting response to well up from our innermost self."

In this sense, it is right to say that to pity the ill fortune of others as if we ourselves experienced and bore it (as Calvin says it), begins in the "solitude of the heart." Again, speaking in a broader manner, Nouwen says that

"In the solitude of the heart we can truly listen to the pains of the world because there we can recognize them not as strange and unfamiliar pains, but as pains that are indeed our

[301] Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*, 40
[302] Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*, 38
[303] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 57

own. There we can see that what is most universal is most personal and that indeed nothing human is strange to us."[304]

To combine these with what Calvin has stated, we can say that in solitude we are brought to deny ourselves in the sense that we do not think every individual belongs only to him or herself. In solitude, by denying our tendency to self-love, we come to the realization that all of us are connected in a much deeper bond. In Christ, we are all joined together in one body. In other words, solitude lets us see the deeper connections that we share in common and thus, also, the pain that we share in common. We can truly embrace the pain of others and to respond to it "because out of an inner solidarity with our fellow humans the first attempts to alleviate these pains can come forth."[305] In solitude, our heart can "grow so wide and deep that nothing human is strange to it. Then we can become contrite, crushed, and broken, not just by our own sins and failings, but also by the pain of our fellow human beings."[306] If Calvin says that our self-denial can prevent us from becoming a "debtor to our neighbor,"[307] Nouwen says that "it is this inner solidarity which prevents self-righteousness and makes compassion possible."[308] In sum, solitude in this sense is what that creates "the inner space where a compassionate solidarity with our fellow human beings becomes possible." It is where we do not treat our innermost being as a "unique property to be defended but as a gift to be shared with all human beings."[309]

4.5.2 ***Denial of self in relation to God.*** Due to our covetous nature to wealth, honor and pride, Calvin calls for Christians to deny themselves and submit to the will of God.

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[304] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 58
[305] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 59
[306] Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*, 47
[307] Calvin, *Institutes,* III.vii.7
[308] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 59
[309] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 62

Before God, Christians have to "neither desire nor hope for, nor contemplate, any other way of prospering than by Lord's blessing."[310] What Calvin is essentially saying is that worldly blessings will destroy us and the seemingly lowly blessings will bring true happiness. In the words of Nouwen, this "worldly blessings" translates to us being esteemed by the standard of the world. In this regard, Nouwen has this to say:

> "We often make the results of our work the criteria of our self-esteem. And then we not only have successes, we become our successes…we slowly come to the erroneous conviction that life is one large scoreboard where someone is listing the points to measure our worth. And before we are fully aware of it, we have sold our soul to the many grade givers. That means we are not only in the world, but also of the world."[311]

In other words, rather than being recognized by Christ, our covetous nature compels us to be recognized by the world through our own accomplishments and actions. However, this route, according to Nouwen, leads to destruction. He says that the more we allow our accomplishments become the criteria of our self-esteem, "the more we are going to walk on our mental and spiritual toes, never sure if we will be able to live up to the expectations which we created by our last successes." Practiced within our lives, this will lead to a formation of a "diabolic chain in which their anxieties grow according to our successes." The end of this road is "self-destruction."[312]

A life of solitude, within the understanding of self-denial, then means "to live in the world without being of it." A life without solitude is a destructive life whereby the results of our actions become our way of self-identification. How solitude helps us in denying ourselves and from destroying ourselves is that it "slowly unmask the illusion of our possessiveness and discover in the center of our own self that we are not what we can

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[310] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.vii.8
[311] Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*, 22
[312] Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*, 23

conquer, but what is given to us."[313] In the aspect of turning to God's blessings and will, solitude lets us to "listen to the voice of him who spoke to us before we could speak a word…who loved us long before we could give love to anyone. It is in this solitude that we discover that being is more important than having, and that we are worth more than our results."[314] In other words, solitude helps us in denying superficial, worldly success and to truly seek the blessings of God in a quiet, unassuming manner.

While this upcoming part is not discussed in Calvin, I would like to add another perspective of self-denial in solitude which would fit nicely to Calvin. For Nouwen, our self-image before God must also be brought into the spotlight of self-denial. Nouwen says that while our deep longing in this life is communion, our communion is "also the source of our unbelief, our despair, and our fear."[315] What Nouwen is trying to say here is that without solitude, we lose sight of who we are before God. The voices of the world "touch our hidden insecurities and drive us to become very busy trying to prove to the world that we are good people."[316] We keep trying to prove our worth and value to make ourselves feel precious and loved, even before God. Yet, in solitude, we have to deny our own effort and come to peace with God's recognition. Nouwen says that "to believe in Jesus means to believe in the communion that exists between Jesus and the Father."[317] To deny ourselves in relation to God in this sense means we listen to the voice of God who says "you are my beloved son." We are beloved in Christ apart from our achievements, accomplishment, effort and etc. All of us have this tendency to create our own self-image

[313] Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*, 25
[314] Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*, 26
[315] Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Living*, 21
[316] Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Living*, 24
[317] Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Living*, 21

after the things that we do, however solitude denies this. In solitude, we come to realize that we belong to Christ before the creation of the world; God does not love us for what we have done but in Christ. When we deny ourselves and accept this voice, we cease to prove ourselves; we accept that our identity is one who is loved by God. It is only then we can deny glory to ourselves in success and extreme sorrows in failures.[318] For Nouwen, solitude brings us brings us face to face with our "drivenness, our compulsiveness, our urge to act quickly, to make an impact, and to have influence." When we deny ourselves in solitude, we can, then, "come to know our true nature, our true self, our true identity."[319]

4.6. *Carrying the cross.* A discipline of solitude must be a discipline of carrying the cross. Just like Calvin who says that the God's children "ought to prepare themselves for a hard, toilsome, and unquiet life, crammed with very many and various kinds of evil," Christians who commit to the discipline of solitude must also expect various kinds of afflictions. Firstly, we have to see that the act of silence itself is an affliction. Going from a noise-filled world to a deadening silence is frightening. Nouwen says that in such a circumstance,

"We feel like children who see the walls of a house collapse and suddenly find themselves in an open field…our ears begin to ache because the familiar noise is missing; and our bodies have become used to that noise as if it were a blanket keeping us warm. We become like addicts who must go through the painful process of withdrawal."[320]

However, "spiritual life does not allow by-passes." In the same way, "by-passing loneliness, hostility or illusion will never lead us to solitude."[321] Similar to Calvin who

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[318] Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Living*, 25
[319] Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome*, 28
[320] Henry Nouwen, *With Open Hands (* Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2006)35
[321] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 19

says that the cross permits us to "experience God's faithfulness and hope for the future," Nouwen says that "when Jesus asks us to take up our cross and follow him we are invited to reach out far beyond our broken and sinful condition and give shape to a life that intimates the great things that are prepared for us."[322]

4.6.1. The Affliction of Solitude. One of the primary and universal forms of affliction that we face in solitude is loneliness.[323] Bearing the cross in this sense means the willingness to bear the painful fact that we are very much lonely and separated within. The very first question that we have to deal with here is whether or not loneliness was a cross Jesus had to bear. If Jesus did not have to bear the afflictions of loneliness, why should we? I would argue that loneliness was indeed part of Jesus afflictions. In his ministry, we see that Jesus was alone; even though many people including the apostles followed him everywhere, no one truly knew the true mission of Jesus. Especially in the light of Mark's secrecy theory, we see that even the closest person closes to Jesus could not fully comprehend what Jesus was about to do. Jesus, while being physically accompanied, was spiritually alone in his ministry. The biggest case for Jesus' loneliness was when he was crucified on the cross. In the context of psalm twenty-two, which Jesus quotes as one of his seven cries on the cross (My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?), we can see that Jesus' afflictions was not merely bodily but to be cut off; to be left alone in his misery without anyone or even God the Father to help. In the context of solitude, I would argue that there is a strong case to treat loneliness as an affliction that we have to accept.

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[322] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 19
[323] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 23

To accept that we are, in our inmost hearts, lonely is not as easy as we think it to be. Accepting that we are lonely is truly an act of cross-bearing. Nouwen points out that "it is far from easy to enter into the painful experience of loneliness."[324] Our tendency is to avoid it, to bury it and to numb ourselves from this pain with every other sort of distraction. We are so used to this state of anesthesia that we fluster when we realize that "there is nothing or nobody to distract us." Nouwen notes that

> "when we have no project to finish, no friend to visit, no book to read, no television to watch or no record to play, and when we are left all alone by ourselves we are brought to the revelation of our basic human aloneness and are so afraid of experiencing an all-pervasive sense of loneliness that we will do anything to get busy again…"[325]

Why do we fear loneliness so much? The answer is simple: it is painful. The roots of loneliness, as Nouwen directs, is found in "the suspicion that there is no one who cares and offers love without conditions, and no place where we can be vulnerable without being used."[326] While this image is bleak, it does honestly portray the condition of the fallen world which we live in. In this fallen world, and our fallen nature, there is indeed no unconditional love that we can rely upon. It is upon this grim, painful fact that loneliness feeds and thrives. In fact, this affliction is so painful that once we realize this, it often drives us wrongly to find immediate solution or comfort among other people. We then begin to demand others to take away our loneliness while we try to do the same for others. However, Nouwen rightly points out that "no friend or lover, no husband or wife, no community or commune will be able to put to rest our deepest cravings for unity and wholeness."[327] These cravings, for Nouwen, are a "divine cravings" which we burdened ourselves and others onto. When this happens, what we end up with is a falling apart in

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[324] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 23
[325] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 27
[326] Nouwen, *Reaching Out,* 26
[327] Nouwen, *Reaching Out,* 30

our relationship. Thus, in this way, solitude is not merely the facing and discovery of our own affliction- which is our loneliness- but it also becomes the place of conversion. Nouwen states that our task is to convert our loneliness to solitude. He adds that "instead of running away from our loneliness and trying to forget or to deny it, we have to protect it and turn it into a fruitful solitude."[328] At this point, I think it is important to go back to Calvin who says that the suffering of the cross helps us in "promoting our salvation."[329] For Calvin, it is important that when sufferings come and we are crushed, we learn humility and to call out to God; the function (if we can put it this way) of the afflictions of the cross is to bring us back to Christ.[330] The response here is of humility and a turning to God. The movement from loneliness to solitude is likewise. For Nouwen, it is important for loneliness to move into an inner solitude. As I have argued in chapter two, an inner solitude is the holy ground where Christ dwells in us; it is where we come to face to face and be united with Christ.[331] To have the solitude of the heart means to be "no longer pulled apart by the most divergent stimuli of the surrounding world but is able to perceive and understand this world from a quiet center."[332] This quiet center is where Christ, in the Holy Spirit resides in us.

Calvin does not consider suffering to be a total lost cause. Suffering for righteousness, is in fact, a "singular comfort." Not only that, Calvin believes that all of our afflictions for the sake of righteousness turns happiness for us.[333] Nouwen, too, believes that the

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[328] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 34
[329] Calvin, *Institutes,* III.viii.1
[330] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.viii.2
[331] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 45
[332] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 38
[333] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.viii.7

afflictions of loneliness in solitude will bring happiness. While it is difficult to achieve, he encourages us to listen carefully to our restless hears and then we

> "May start to sense that in the midst of our sadness there is joy, that in the midst of our fears there is peace, that in the midst of our greediness there is the possibility of compassion and that indeed in the midst of our irking loneliness we can find the beginnings of a quiet solitude."[334]

To be in solitude with Christ is not an easy thing. Just as Christ had to go through loneliness to be in full solitude with the Father, we, too, have to bear the cross of loneliness to have solitude with Christ. However, our comfort and strength is that Christ is truly in us and that if we seek deep and long enough in our solitude, we will find Him.

4.6.2. The Cross as Training. Treating the carrying of the cross as God's training upon us, Calvin also shows how this affliction in bearing the cross can benefit us: (1) the afflictions teach us to be patient; (2) it teaches us to turn away from our own lustful passions and live in obedience unto Christ; (3) to be vigilant. In response to these discussions, first, Nouwen (1) says that silence helps us remember that we are pilgrims in this world.[335] To be a pilgrim is to be a passerby. To be a pilgrim of this world means to accept that this is not where we belong. In solitude and silence, we believe that our true resting place is yet to come and therefore, we have to be patient until that moment finally comes. For the second point, I have amply discussed it above and there would only briefly mention it again. Solitude as a training takes off all the distractions and compulsions around us which keep defining who we are. In solitude, we are brought naked before the presence of Christ and to be formed unto his image. Lastly, we see that solitude does indeed help us to be vigilant. In particular, Nouwen notes that solitude helps

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[334] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 36
[335] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 52

us to discern the will of God amidst all the voices and choices that we have to make. More often than not, the comfort and circumstances of our lives can lead us to our own compulsions and illusions. We think that we are doing God's will but in fact, we are not. Therefore, it is of utmost important that we are able to discern the true guidance of God (Col.1:9-10). One of the fruits of solitude, for Nouwen, is "a profound insight into the *interconnectedness* of all things, through which we can situate ourselves in time and space to know God's will and do God's work in the world."[336] Solitude thus helps us to be vigil- in this sense, to discern- in two ways: (1) by enabling us to perceive, see through, understand and "being aware of God's presence;"[337] and (2) to be "willing to be seen by God;" In other words, to live before the presence of God. In sum to the third point, discernment comes from seeing and being seen by God in solitude. Thus, in this sense we can say that solitude does help us to be vigil.

4.8. ***Meditation of future life.*** Part of our sanctification, according to Calvin, lies in our meditations on future life. This opposes our natural inclination to a "brutish love of this world". Nouwen relates to this idea by saying that "silence is the mystery of the future world."[338] As I have pointed out above, Calvin does not write practical steps on how we ought to contempt this world. This is where Nouwen fits nicely with his idea of silence. Nouwen first notes that silence makes us pilgrims in this world.[339] The central idea in silence is that "speaking gets us involved without becoming entangled in and polluted by the world." Conversations, as Nouwen argues, tend to interest us into this world, to make

[336] Nouwen, *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2013),* 6
[337] Nouwen, *Discernment*, 6
[338] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 49
[339] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 50

our heart "less of strangers here and more citizens."[340] Silence gives us room to listen to God in oppose to chatting away with the current of the world. This listening is, for Calvin, a duty and necessity, for us to shake off "our sluggishness" and to hold this world in contempt.[341]

4.8.1. Grateful for Present Life. While we need to contempt the present life, Calvin warns us not to be ungrateful towards this life. Thus, this life is still God's blessings that we need to glorify God in. Calvin exhorts Christians to be "*burn with zeal for death* and be constant in meditation," in order that we do not waste away God's blessings upon us in this world. Nouwen complements Calvin when he says that silence is the discipline by which "the inner fire of God is tended and kept alive."[342] To burn with zeal means guarding the life of the Holy Spirit within us; this fire, for Nouwen, can only be kept burning through silence. Once again, how speaking attaches us to this world has been argued in the previous chapter.

4.8.2. Moderation in Meditation. Calvin also warns us the importance of moderation in our zeal to contempt this present world. It is a mistake, for Calvin, for us to dive into excess strictness or laxity in our mediations. When Nouwen emphasizes the importance of silence, he, likewise, is not teaching us that we ought not to speak; rather, we should not speak too much and to speak in a way "that participates in the creative and recreative power of God's own words."[343] In other words, the discipline of silence does not teach us to be silent, but actually to speak; more specifically, to speak in wisdom and moderation.

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[340] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 51
[341] Calvin, *Institutes,* III. iv.2
[342] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 52
[343] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 58

To be completely silent, in Calvin's term, is to be excessively strict; to be completely chatty, is to be excessively lax. Thus, it is this discipline that gives us moderation to truly use speech in its appointed measure.