

Background Problem

Carson points out that while the most urgent “need in Western Christendom is a deeper knowledge of God,” yet, the west is “spiritually stunted.”¹ Rather than evangelism, seminaries, missions, preaching, church planting and many other external activities, Carson thinks that the foundational step in meeting this need is prayer. Even so, Carson admits that prayer- which is “one small vital part” of knowing God better- is not the one-stop solution to this problem for beneath it lies a more foundational problem: an obvious negligence in spirituality.² Here, we come one step closer to the matter that this research is trying to enter into: Christian spirituality. McGrath denies the idea that Christian spirituality is merely about ideas, rather, “it is about the way in which the Christian life is conceived and lived out. It is about the full apprehension of the reality of God.”³ A Christian life that is “conceived and lived out” is not foreign also to John Calvin. For Calvin, sanctification is “to *manifest* in the life of believers a harmony and agreement between God’s righteousness and their obedience, and thus to confirm the adoption that they have received as sons.”⁴ If we bring these statements together, we can say that Christian spirituality is the reality of a life with Christ in which life, with all its components, go through sanctification for the purpose of bringing Christians to better know and be conformed to God. I have to admit here that this definition is far from adequate but it serves the purpose of stating the unbreakable relationship between a spiritual life, sanctification and knowing God. I believe that by establishing this

¹ D A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1992), 15

² Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 16

³ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: an Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 2

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, Trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III.vi.1

relationship I echo Paul's desire when he says that he wants to "know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead (Phi.3:10-11)."

However, as I have pointed out in the beginning, there is a lack of lived spiritual life- at the very least today, within Protestants. Not only prayer but it seems like many spiritual exercises rooted within the history of Christianity have also been neglected in our circle.

With regards to this spiritual crisis, Lovelace seems to agree by saying that "that

"spirituality was a drastically neglected subject among (protestant) scholars."⁵ The

question we have to ask today is what led to this decline or negligence in spirituality?

Why have we come to a state whereby a basic spiritual exercise such as praying needs to

be *revived* within Christianity? While these questions will not and cannot be answered

definitively in this research, we are able to gain some insights when we look at Reformed

spirituality historically. Rice states that due to the insistence of Reformers on the

"centrality of grace as God's freely given gift, any spiritual practice that could suggest

that grace could be earned or deserved came under their utter and total condemnation."⁶

He continues by saying that "these early Reformers were convinced that many medieval

spiritual practices were human efforts to bridge the gap that sin had created." In other

words, by concentrating on a spirituality of faith, many of these spiritual practices were

merely treated as works righteousness. I am not here to deny that the reformers were

wrong for, both biblically and historically, we can see too easily how spiritual

manifestations have been misused to become an expression of self-righteousness and

⁵ Richard F. Lovelace, "Evangelical Spirituality: A Church Historian's Perspective." *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (1988), 25

⁶ Howard L. Rice, *Reformed Spirituality: an Introduction for Believers* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 49

even the way to salvation. The self-righteous Pharisee praying in the temple (Lk.18:9-14) and Catholic's being "justified in the process of being sanctified" states the case.⁷

However, we have to also consider the charge which the Catholics have often made to Luther in that Protestant's emphasis on *Sola Gratia* has "made all good works unnecessary."⁸ Rice voices out a similar sentiment when he encourages Reformed Protestants that they

"Need to accept the fact that we have become overly negative about practices that were never intended to earn merit. The great medieval mystics did not claim that one could earn salvation by following their particular way. They insisted that any suggested practice or discipline was a response to God's graciousness, an act of thanksgiving, and an answer to God's invitation to enter into a deeper relationship."

At this point, what I would like to propose is that there is a need to tap into our history for this revival of spiritual practices; more specifically, Reformed Protestants ought to go into Catholic traditions with regards to spiritual practices and spirituality. It is not that Reformed Spirituality is mistaken but that it is, indeed, insufficient. Of course, many Protestants would, I assume, reject this idea of going back to catholicity, yet, in all fairness, this is not something alien within the reformed traditions. Rice points out that while early reformers rejected works righteousness, they "were not hostile to all the medieval disciplines of the spiritual life. Consistently, they held in high regard the necessity of private or secret prayer, family meditation, and devotional reflection on the scriptures."⁹ Even Calvin himself does not reject catholic spiritual disciplines in an absolute sense. While Calvin stress that the outward spiritual practice of repentance must not be the chief end, yet, he does commend weeping and fasting has its "suitable use" and

⁷ Lovelace, *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 26

⁸ Howard Hageman, Frank C. Senn, ed., *Protestant Spiritual Traditions* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000, 1986), 62

⁹ Rice, *Reformed Spirituality*, 50

that public confessions is not something to be utterly avoided.¹⁰ To add another bring to this bridge between Reformed and medieval theology, Tamburello, as a Catholic, has also amply shown that there are “understandings of mysticism that can embrace both (St.) Bernard’s and Calvin’s respective theologies.”¹¹ On this note, it should be clear that I intend to explore the problem of Christian spirituality in this direction. In the book *Reformed Catholicity*, the wager of both Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain is that “to be Reformed means to go deeper into true catholicity, not to move away from catholicity.”¹² They argue that there are “Reformed theological and ecclesiological warrants for pursuing a program of retrieval” which would promise a “theological and spiritual renewal” for Christianity as a whole.¹³ Along with this, Zachman, using the words of Carlos Eire, argues that “Protestantism and Catholicism cannot be fully understood in isolation from each other.” Basing his arguments on Calvin himself, Zachman states that Calvin did not envision himself as a founder of a new movement but, rather, “one who sought to restore the Catholic Church to what he called its “purer form” under the apostles and early church writers.” Reformed Christians must constantly remind ourselves that Calvin did not only associate himself with the likes of Luther, Melancthon, Bucer and other Reformers but also with Catholic church fathers such as “Cyprian, Ambrose, Chrysostom, and Augustine.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.iii.18

¹¹ Dennis E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, ©1994), 3

¹² Michael Allen, *Reformed Catholicity: the Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015), 4

¹³ Michael Allen, *Reformed Catholicity*, 13

¹⁴ Randall C. Zachman, ed., *John Calvin and Roman Catholicism: Critique and Engagement, Then and Now* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, ©2008), 9-10

On the basis of these arguments and also the reformed faith of *Sola Scriptura*, I would argue that this is an endeavor worth pursuing; the call for Reformed Christians is not to reject whatever that is catholic but unscriptural. Christian Protestant spirituality must not be exclusive of its own history but inclusive.

Statement of the Problem

In this research, what I would like to embark upon can also be considered an effort of catholic retrieval, albeit in a much smaller scale; a small brick of a great fortress. With regards to the matter of spirituality and its practices, I have decided to focus on *solitude* as the focus of my research. Condemned as being too individualistic and otherworldly, the practice of solitude has been, more often than not, treated with great contempt in Reformed traditions. Rice puts it well by saying “any spiritual practice that produces a withdrawal of concern for what is going on in the world and loss of concern for other people has been rejected by Reformer.” With its emphasis on corporate spirituality and adding upon it the suspicion of private religious experience and sentiments, the practice of solitude exercised by many early Christians was bound to end within the Reformed circle.¹⁵ History, however, would tell us that all is not lost. The Puritans, reacting against cheap grace, “sought to graft patristic and medieval spirituality onto the Reformation base of justification by faith,” and in doing so, tried to “turn ordinary Protestant laypersons into married, unenclosed monastic practicing Scriptural mysticism.” The spirituality of “quiet time” we have today in evangelical circle comes from this movement.¹⁶ John Calvin, while emphasizing the importance of corporate spirituality, does not shy away from the importance of an individual and private spiritual discipline.

¹⁵ Rice, *Reformed Spirituality*, 51-53

¹⁶ Lovelace, *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 30

By pointing out that even Jesus went out to pray *alone* (Mt.14:23; Mk.1:35; Lk.5:16), Calvin even points out that prayer should be done in secret.¹⁷ Commenting on Matthew 6:6, Calvin understands “go into your room” as a “retreat that would help us to descend into our heart with our whole thought and enter deeply within.”¹⁸ Thus, it is clear enough, while not going deeper into the matter, Calvin does not reject the practice of individual solitude. On a communal level, while Calvin clearly admits that he dislikes the “ancient form” of monasticism- in which solitude is so highly related to- he, nonetheless, still provides a small room for the existence of monastery by stating the differences between the ancient and his present-day monasticism.¹⁹ In stating out the difference between present day monastery and Augustine’s type of monastery, we can see that Calvin was still agreeable, to a certain extent, towards the idea. Thus, to sum, the effort to retrieve solitude into a Reformed spirituality is not a wild choice but one that grounds itself in both biblical and historical traditions. It is my conviction that a deeper understanding and application of solitude today would bring a more robust spirituality towards not only Reformed but Protestant spirituality as a whole.

Yet, a brief survey of solitude would tell us that even within Catholicity, solitude bears a diverse meaning. For example, the practices and understanding of solitude can differ widely between a hermit and a cenobite.²⁰ It is neither within my capability nor to seek out all of the diverse meaning of solitude within the Catholic tradition. This is not a study about solitude in its deepest and widest sense but, rather, to show the common grounds

¹⁷ Rice, *Reformed Spirituality*, 53

¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xx.29

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xiii.16

²⁰ Hermits are people who cut themselves off from the society and live in solitude *alone*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermit>. Cenobites are people who cut themselves off from the society to live in solitude communally, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cenobitic_monasticism. (accessed April 25, 2018)

between spirituality of solitude and sanctification and thus argue for its adoption as a practice. It is to this cause that I have turned to Henry Nouwen, a Dutch Catholic priest, and his thoughts on solitude to help me progress in this research. The choice of Nouwen, among many other things, is supported by the fact that he “ranks as one of the most significant leaders of our time.” A study conducted at the University of Chicago in 2003 shows that “both mainline Protestant and Catholic clergy named Nouwen as the author they most often read, other than the Bible, in their work as pastors.” A brief survey of Nouwen’s work will also tell us that he often used three core themes in his work, with solitude being one of them.²¹ Thus, as a Catholic representative of the concept of solitude in a modern world, I would argue that the choice of Nouwen, from a Catholic side, is warranted. It is also important to add that Nouwen not only represents a catholic side in this research but also as a contemporary one. If sanctification is still important today and that spiritual exercises too, then, it is vital that the thoughts on solitude would be applicable today as well. Once again, I would like to stress that while Nouwen, alone, will not suffice to represent the catholic spirituality of solitude as a whole, this research does not intent to do that as well.

A retrieval it will not be if this research only intends to describe Nouwen’s concept of solitude. Rather, this thesis intends to show the mutual relationship between Nouwen’s concept of solitude and Calvin’s spirituality. It is through this method that I would like to put my brick in this fortress of Reformed Catholicity. I will argue that there are mutual benefits when we apply the discipline of solitude into Calvin’s sanctification. To start off, Nouwen says that “solitude is the furnace of transformation” whereby men encounter

²¹ Henry Nouwen Society, *His Historical Impact*, <http://henrinouwen.org/about/about-henri/his-historical-impact/> (accessed April 25, 2018)

“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.”²² This is very much in line, as I have stated above, with Calvin who says that sanctification is “to manifest in the life of believers a *harmony and agreement* between God’s righteousness and their obedience.” Both consider each concept’s goal as a transformation unto Christ. Thus, it is the aim of this research to show how Nouwen’s concept and practice of solitude can enrich Calvin’s view of sanctification. By doing so, it is my hope that the practice of solitude can be much more vitalized within the Reformed circle for a deeper reality of our union with Christ.

Calvin defines sanctification (or in his own words, repentance) as “the true turning of our life to...and it consists in the mortification of our flesh and of the old man, and in the vivification of the Spirit.”²³ The two components of mortification and vivification in Calvin’s sanctification are something very familiar within the Reformed circle. However, it is important to take note that Calvin also states that we will never be able to proceed into these components “unless self-denial precedes.”²⁴ What this shows is that the topic of self-denial, and along with it, bearing the cross, is so highly related to Calvin’s concept of sanctification that it should not be omitted out when we are discussing this topic. In fact, Calvin shows how important these two topics are by giving them a chapter each in the *Institutes* in book III chapter VII and VIII respectively. Thus, when it comes to Calvin’s sanctification, I would like to touch upon these four paradigms in my research. To be more specific, this research would like to relate Nouwen’s concept of solitude with

²² Henri J M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry*, harpercollins pbk. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 25-26

²³ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.iii.5

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.iii.8

Calvin's sanctification, namely in mortification, vivification, denial of self and carrying the cross.

Brief biography of Henry Nouwen

Nouwen was an internationally renowned priest and author with over thirty-nine books under his name. His books have been translated in over twenty-eight languages and have sold more than eight million copies. As a teacher, Nouwen has taken post as professor in University of Notre Dame, Yale Divinity School and Harvard Divinity School among a few others.

Born in 1932 into a Dutch, Catholic family, Nouwen has always wanted to become a priest, in fact, ever since he was six years old. In his family, he considered that there were two voices: the first was the voice of his mother who would always tell him to love Jesus and the second, his father who kept challenging him to become "a better and more successful person." Nouwen commented that he spent the first part of his life listening to his father, and the second part, his mother. Nouwen's desire to become a priest eventually led to him to study theology in Rijnsburg/Driebergen before he was ordained a priest on 1957. After this, Nouwen spent six years studying psychology at the University of Nijmegen while also being a pastor and chaplain in numerous places. In 1971, Nouwen accepted an invitation by Yale Divinity School where he spent ten fruitful years teaching. It was during his time in Yale that he "discovered solitude by twice spending about seven months living as a monk in the Trappist Monastery of the Genesee in New York State." In 1983, he accepted a position in Harvard Divinity School which would not last too long. In his time at Harvard, Nouwen commented that he was "praying poorly, living somewhat isolated from other people" and that he was heading towards a "spiritual

death”. Nouwen eventually left Harvard after two years and finally found his “home” in L’Arche community of Daybreak in Toronto, a community of intellectual and development disabled people, where he served as pastor. It was in this community that Nouwen “began to experience perhaps his deepest fulfillment as a priest, friend, author, lecturer and mentor.” In 1996, Nouwen suffered a heart attack and passed away.²⁵²⁶

As a “theologian of the heart”, Nouwen was not without his struggle. One of the most highlighted aspects of his life by the public was his sexual orientation. Even though Nouwen never directly discussed his nor publicly identified himself as homosexual, he did confide this matter in private journals and conversations. There are such confessions documented in Nouwen’s biography, *Wounded Prophet*, written by Michael Ford. However, there was no evidence that Nouwen embraced the idea of homosexuality or broke his vow of celibacy.²⁷

Thesis Statement

Is solitude as a spiritual discipline compatible with Calvin spirituality? This thesis will try to argue that it does by comparing Henry Nouwen, as a contemporary catholic representative, and John Calvin. This thesis will do so by showing that Nouwen’s concept of solitude, applied as a spiritual discipline, enriches Calvin’s concept of sanctification, namely in the area of mortification, vivification, denial of self, carrying our cross and meditations of the future life. The lived reality of solitude as a spiritual discipline will

²⁵Henry Nouwen Society, *His life*, <http://henrinouwen.org/about/about-henri/his-life/> (accessed 25 April, 2018)

²⁶Henry Nouwen Society, *His Spirituality*, <http://henrinouwen.org/about/about-henri/his-spirituality/> (accessed 25 April, 2018)

²⁷Wikipedia, *Henri Nouwen*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri_Nouwen#Sexuality (accessed 25 April, 2018)

help Christians in our sanctification and bring about in us a deeper experience of our union with Christ.

Methods and limitations

This thesis will primarily involve literary research between the works of John Calvin and Henry Nouwen. For Calvin, the literary used for this thesis will be limited to the *Institutes of Christian Religion* and also his commentaries. For Henry Nouwen, all of his books that contain the topic of solitude will be used (not exhaustively); this list includes: *Out of Solitude*, *Clowning in Rome*, *A Spirituality of Living*, *Reaching Out* and *The Way of the Heart*. It is through the comparison between these two groups of work that I shall conclude that Nouwen's solitude can complement Calvin's concept of sanctification.

This is neither a research regarding Christian spirituality nor asceticism (of which solitude as a discipline falls under) in general. It is a specific research on the relationship between Nouwen's solitude and Calvin's concept of sanctification. Therefore, this thesis will not seek to spend much effort in trying to wholly explain either of these aspects in a broad sense even though it cannot be fully avoided. Lastly, under the scope of Calvin's sanctification, only the matter of mortification, vivification, denial of self, carrying the cross and meditations of future life will be discussed.

One of the related topics which must be put into greater consideration at this point is the Puritan tradition of daily devotion, "quiet time", which I have briefly mentioned above.

One can argue that this *quiet time* is an alternative or even a better form of solitude adopted from Catholic traditions; Lovelace states that the puritans put great effort in

trying to develop the layman to become a “*better* sort of monks and nuns.”²⁸ Yet, I digress. Quiet time is a form of solitude but it lacks depth. When it comes to the concept of solitude, we are not merely dealing with “a regular time each day for some form of prayer and Bible reading,”²⁹ rather, a greater range of spectrum that includes withdrawal from the society, living in solidarity, internal solitude and more, which will be discussed below. In our context today, we do not have to agree with the whole extent of this spectrum but neither can we reduce solitude merely to the fraction of its parts. Doing so would be isolating solitude in its already isolated state. Here, I would like to argue that Puritan concept of quiet time is not quite to the extent of solitude as a whole for this research to take it as one of the primary topics to explore.

Purpose of the Thesis

First and foremost, this research is written for a final thesis as required by IRES for students enrolled in M.Th program. Next, considering the general lackluster spirituality in Christianity as pointed out by Carson above, I would like to show that the practice of solitude, as with prayer, is a biblical and beneficial spiritual exercise that ought to be revitalized in our spiritual journey with Christ. Particularly in the line of Nouwen, this research would like to show that solitude is necessary as a spiritual discipline and is compatible with Calvin’s concept of sanctification. Solitude is not something that Reformed Christians should shy away from but rather, embrace. On a more general platform, by showing commonality between Nouwen and Calvin, this research also hopes

²⁸ Lovelace, *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 30

²⁹ Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: a Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 192

that it can serve, albeit in a small scale, to create deeper ecumenical understanding between Catholics and Protestants.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis will be divided into five chapters. The first chapter introduces the background problem, thesis statement, limitations and methodology.

The second chapter will state broadly what solitude in Nouwen's perspective. The chapter will begin with the general traits of solitude then move on individually to its relation towards silence, inner disposition, prayer and community. It is important to point out here that while the discussion of solitude revolves around Nouwen, this research would also utilize other writers. While it is so, the writers that would be mentioned during the research are those who have mentioned Nouwen and his thoughts in solitude in their discussions.

In the third chapter, I would like to lay out the concept of sanctification, specifically, areas that are directed towards the theme of this research. With regards to this thesis, it is important to show that sanctification- at the same time agreeing on the sovereignty of God- is an active work. Even though sanctification is wholly the work of the Holy Spirit, it does not mean that we do not have to actively seek God to be sanctified. In other words, sanctification is neither wholly passive nor merely an exercise of the mind or the inner soul; but it is an external exercise that brings changes to our spirituality. Once this matter has been settled, the research will progress to Calvin's view of sanctification, namely: mortification, vivification, denial of self, carrying the cross and meditation of the future life.

The fourth chapter will begin by first arguing that solitude is indeed a biblical practice show how solitude can complement Calvin's concept of sanctification. The fact that solitude can be complimented to Calvin's sanctification must come from the basis that solitude is, first and foremost, a biblical discipline. It is only then, this chapter that the research will intensively begin to compare Nouwen's work and Calvin and argue for its mutuality. The last chapter will conclude all work that has been done in this research.

Proposed thesis structure:

CHAPTER. 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Background Problem
- 1.2 Statement of the Problem
- 1.3 Brief Biography of Henry Nouwen
- 1.4 Thesis Statement
- 1.5 Purpose of Thesis
- 1.6 Methods and Limitations
- 1.7 Structure of the Thesis

CHAPTER. 2. THE NATURE OF SOLITUDE

- 2.1 Preface to Solitude
- 2.2. Solitude and its Dimensions
 - 2.2.1 Physical Isolation
 - 2.2.2 Social Disengagement
 - 2.2.3 Contemplation
- 2.3 Solitude and Silence
 - 2.3.1 Silence and Future Life
- 2.4 Inner Solitude
- 2.5 Solitude and Prayer
- 2.6 Solitude and Community

CHAPTER. 3. CALVIN'S SANCTIFICATION

- 3.1 A Case for an Active Sanctification
 - 3.1.1. Sanctification as Active
 - 3.1.2. Sanctification as Imitation
 - 3.1.3. Sanctification as Discipline
 - 3.1.4. Sanctification as Discipline of Imitation of Christ
 - 3.1.5. Sanctification as Private
- 3.2 Mortification
 - 3.2.1 The Order of Mortification
 - 3.2.2 Lifelong Mortification
 - 3.2.3 Inner and Outer Repentance

- 3.3 Vivification
 - 3.3.1. Strength of Vivification
- 3.4 Denial of Self
 - 3.4.1. Denial of Self to Men
 - 3.4.2. Denial of Self to God
- 3.5 Carrying the Cross
 - 3.5.1. The Cross as Training
- 3.6 Meditations of Future Life
 - 3.6.1. Grateful for Present Life
 - 3.6.2. Moderation in Mediations

CHAPTER. 4. SOLITUDE TO SANCTIFICATION

- 4.1 Solitude with Biblical Data
 - 4.1.1. Solitude and OT
 - 4.1.2. Solitude and NT
 - 4.1.3. Calvin on Jesus' Withdrawal
- 4.2 Solitude as Active Sanctification
- 4.3 Solitude with Mortification
 - 4.3.1. The Order of Mortification
 - 4.3.2. Inner and Outer Repentance
- 4.4 Solitude with Vivification
 - 4.4.1 Strength of Vivification
- 4.5 Solitude with Denial of Self
 - 4.5.1. Denial of Self to Men
 - 4.5.2. Denial of Self to God
- 4.6 Solitude with Carrying the Cross
 - 4.6.1. The Affliction of Solitude
 - 4.6.2. The Cross as Training
- 4.7 Solitude with Mediations of Future Life
 - 4.7.1. Grateful for Present Life
 - 4.7.2. Moderation in Meditation

CHAPTER. 5. CONCLUSION

- 5.1 Summary of the Study