

## Article

# With Whom Should One Worship? A Fresh Perspective on John Calvin's Liturgical Theology of Physical Proximity and Spiritual Epidemic

Sam Ha 

H. Henry Meeter Center for Calvin Studies, Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary,  
Grand Rapids, MI 49546-4388, USA; nh092@calvinseminary.edu

**Abstract:** COVID-19 has taught us that whom one surrounds oneself with has a profound influence on one's well-being. In that light, does whom we worship with matter as well? John Calvin would in fact argue that the people we physically worship with have a great impact on our spiritual life. According to Calvin, if you simply worship with (who he deemed to be) the unrighteous group of people, you will lose your spiritual health or even endanger salvation. This is why he was so insistent on asking the French Protestants to leave France and join him in Geneva. What is striking is that worshipping with the right kind of people does not have that automatic effect. Rather, they have to actively engage in many beneficial activities together, encouraging and empowering one another. This is because, for Calvin, while unrighteousness itself is highly contagious, growing in a nurturing community takes conscious and purposeful effort. In this sense, Calvin explains that idolatry and unrighteousness were a spiritual epidemic that is spread physically, while true piety is acquired through a communal practice of many forms of spiritual exercises. This article will have many important contributions to the field of worship and faith formation. Most notably, while scholars have long been addressing Calvin's view of active practices during worship which help faith formation, I will show that that is not all there is. Instead, I will demonstrate how even simple physical proximity in worship can have an impact on one's spiritual growth in Calvin's thought. Another important contribution of this article would be offering a clearer presentation of Calvin's sacramental theology of body and soul. Scholars have long been arguing that, for Calvin, the bodily participation in a Roman Catholic mass while believing in (what was for him) the true gospel was a serious sin of idolatry and hypocrisy. My article will further develop this idea by noting that, according to Calvin, not only is it wrong to do one thing with one's body and another with one's soul but having one's body in a negative environment is harmful to one's soul. If one's body is surrounded by other people who do not believe in the true gospel, it would have a devastating impact on one's soul. In other words, for Calvin, the body and soul influence each other in a way that has sacramental and developmental implications.

**Keywords:** John Calvin; liturgical theology; spiritual epidemic; worship formation



**Citation:** Ha, Sam. 2023. With Whom Should One Worship? A Fresh Perspective on John Calvin's Liturgical Theology of Physical Proximity and Spiritual Epidemic. *Religions* 14: 1073. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14081073>

Academic Editors: Hwarang Moon and Greg Peters

Received: 1 July 2023

Revised: 17 August 2023

Accepted: 18 August 2023

Published: 21 August 2023



**Copyright:** © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

It has often been considered that John Calvin had little interest in the forms of worship or liturgy and that he saw “the preaching of the word as the first essential of the worship experience” (McKim 1992, p. 305). Recently, however, scholars such as Witvliet and Moon have shown that, in Calvin's liturgical theology, external elements in worship are in fact described as an aid for people to experience God better and as a method to help believers' faith formation (Witvliet 2003, p. 127; Moon 2015, pp. 24–26).

Nevertheless, there are two aspects which were neglected by these interpreters of Calvin. First, although they both see the importance of looking at writings by Calvin other than his *Institutes*, such as his exegetical works and catechisms, they do not address

Calvin's letters in depth, despite the fact that they offer profound insights into his thoughts on worship and faith formation (Witvliet 2003, p. 129; Moon 2015, p. 23). Second, while they successfully demonstrate Calvin's liturgical perspective on the relationship between *how* one worships and faith formation, they do not discuss an important question in Calvin's liturgical theology: whom should one worship with? These two issues are precisely what this article will address. I will argue that Calvin's letters to the Protestants in France offer a unique insight into his worship theology. These pastoral epistles show that whom we worship with matters to believers' spiritual formation because virtues and vices are contagious like infectious diseases, as people are assimilated to those with whom they physically worship.

In order to make this case, I will use the following structure. First, I will describe the historical context of Calvin that is specifically relevant to Calvin's liturgical theology of contagion. This section will also include some discussion about Calvin's insistence on exile as well as his theology of body and soul as a necessary background for the following argument. Second, I will analyze Calvin's letters which deal with the contagious nature of virtues and vices in liturgical settings. Third, the implications of my findings will be explored.

## 2. Historical Context: Calvin's Insistence on Exile

In order to understand Calvin's worship theology of contagion, it is crucial to grasp his thoughts on exile. In Calvin's era, being an exile was not necessarily a unique condition. For example, in the 15th century, more than 100,000 Jews in total were expelled from Germany, France, and Spain. Another example would be the Muslims during the early 1500s. Around 200,000 Muslims in Granada had to choose between being baptized into the Christian faith or exile (Terpstra 2015, p. 2). In this larger context, many early Protestants in France faced various dangers which made them ponder exile. To be more specific, after what is so-called the Placard Affairs of 1534 (Marcourt 1534), as many as 400 Protestants were imprisoned and at least nine of them were burned to death (Kelley 1981, p. 13). According to one historical source of the 16th century, Francis I of France decreed that everyone associated with Lutheranism be arrested (Crespin 1570, p. 81). After this event, the king persistently persecuted them, though the degree of oppression ebbed and flowed (Gordon 2009, pp. 40–41; Heller 1986, pp. 14–17). It is unsurprising that this created many exiles.

Calvin was acutely aware of the persecutions against the Protestants in France. According to one letter which Calvin wrote to the pastors of the church in Tigurina in 1537, he explains how Protestants in Nîmes were in grave danger. According to this account, the Protestants in this town were going through "the fire of persecution", and, consequently, many were incarcerated and two were put to death.<sup>1</sup> In this letter, Calvin laments the sufferings of these believers and insists that something must be done to rescue those who were in peril.<sup>2</sup>

In light of this historical context, in many, if not most, letters where Calvin talks about the possibility of exile, he almost always tells the individual recipients to choose exile. In fact, he does not really offer other options. One would expect him to give them alternatives, such as staying where they are while sustaining persecution and keeping their faith or getting ready to be martyred for the gospel, but those are hardly ever mentioned. For Calvin, exile is presented as the only choice for most of his individual letter receivers. Examples of Calvin's insistence on the choice of exile alone are evident in so many letters, but here are some of the clearest and most direct incidents.

When Calvin was writing to Monsieur de Budé in 1547, Calvin encouraged him to pursue the cure for the situation that he was in, and this remedy was to remove himself from the bondage through exiling. Here, Calvin does not contemplate other options at all; no other possibilities are mentioned. Instead, he is clear that this is the "only" option for Monsieur de Budé to take.<sup>3</sup> Calvin emphatically affirms that God is pressing him in every possible way and that he is not allowed to extinguish the gracious opportunity to flee that God has given him.<sup>4</sup> In a similar manner, in a letter written to an anonymous

French Seigneur, Calvin considers that, for the Seigneur, there is no reason to neglect an opportunity to flee at all.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, when Calvin wrote to Monsieur de Clervant in 1559, he expressed that, in order to “remain constant and unshaken in the profession” and to follow the “truth of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ”, he should be ready to leave his house, give up his worldly wealth, and abandon his homeland.<sup>6</sup>

If these letters seem too gentle to be considered as evidence for Calvin’s insistence on the necessity of exile, there are other places where Calvin appears even more determined. In a letter to Madame de Pons, Calvin proclaims that she has to leave her homeland in order to follow God properly and even declares that God will “avenge” her if she does not pursue exile immediately.<sup>7</sup> When he wrote to another lady a few years after, he was equally firm about this issue. In this letter, Calvin does not even spare a few sentences to share greetings or offer encouraging words. Instead, he begins his letter by noting that it is about time for her to quit the spiritual captivity that she is in and by rebuking her for having marched so sluggishly toward that goal. Having lamented such a slacking attitude, Calvin warns her that she should not be going back and forth, and worries that, if she continues to put off her exile, God may even decide to overturn his plan to rescue her from her captivity.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Calvin’s Theology of Body and Soul

If Calvin were so fixated on the necessity of exile for so many of his connections, why was it the case? There may be various ways to explain the logic, but Calvin’s theology of body and soul is one of the most persuasive explanations. As Calvin insists that people should leave their homeland, he explains such flight is necessary because God needs to be honored and worshipped with one’s body as well as one’s soul. In his letter to Monsieur de Falais, who was the second cousin of Emperor Charles V and converted to evangelical faith in the 1540s (Bonali-Fiquet 1991, pp. 14–15), Calvin admits that it is not as though God is giving him a direct revelation to leave the country. However, he insists at the same time that, in order to obey the commandment to honor God, he and his wife must leave their homeland. Calvin then connects the situation of Jacques de Falais to that of Abraham and argues that God’s command toward Abraham to leave his country and people applies to him as well, because the glory of God cannot be upheld where he was currently living.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it would be unreasonable to assume that Calvin had no political agenda in convincing them to come to Geneva to join him and his evangelical movement (Gordon 2009, p. 280), but it is also nevertheless true that, for Calvin, exile was highly recommended, first and foremost, for the glory of God. When Calvin wrote a letter to his wife, Madame de Falais, on the same day, he expressed a similar sentiment, saying that, because the glory of God surpasses everything in this world—which naturally includes her life in France—she should choose exile for the honor of God.<sup>10</sup> The letter which Calvin wrote to Jacques de Falais in the following year also reflects this reasoning. According to Calvin, he should prefer honoring God to any other worldly desires.<sup>11</sup> There are also other letters where he connects the glory of God and obligation of exile.<sup>12</sup> For Calvin, if one is not able to worship God purely in one’s homeland, they must leave, however difficult that is.

How, then, can these correspondents protect and uphold the glory of God through exile? How does leaving and abandoning one’s own country help one honor God properly? For Calvin, these questions can easily be answered with one concept: worshipping with both *body* and *soul*. When Calvin exhorted Monsieur de Falais to exile for the glory of God, he stated that he has to honor God both in body and soul.<sup>13</sup> According to Calvin, knowing the true gospel (with one’s soul) while worshipping in a manner that was not appropriate (with one’s body) is harming the glory of God, because God wants and deserves to be honored both in body and soul. In short, they could not worship God purely in body and spirit if they stayed where they were and, hence, could not give the due glory to God unless they exiled.

A very clear example can be found in a letter that Calvin wrote to Monsieur de Falais in 1544. In this letter, Calvin praises God for enabling Jacques de Falais to overcome the obstacles that had been keeping him from “worship[ping] purely” and for making him prefer honoring God instead of prioritizing the world.<sup>14</sup> Here, it is evident that Calvin is equating pure worship with proper honoring of God. In other words, for Calvin, honoring God can only be done through exile because pure worship is only possible through exile.

The importance of worshipping appropriately and purely as the reason for insisting on exile can be found in other letters as well. In a letter written to Madame de Budé, Calvin admits that exile can seem like such a drastic measure for her, but he nevertheless stresses that she should prefer a place where God is purely worshipped to her homeland, desire to be in the church rather than seeking comfort, and seek to be where God is glorified rather than being robbed of the honor that is rightfully his.<sup>15</sup> For Calvin, God deserves to be worshipped with one’s body as well as one’s soul because it is the temple of the Holy Spirit,<sup>16</sup> and the liberty to worship purely is in fact “the chief point of all” for one’s flight.<sup>17</sup> Calvin even tells someone who is being mistreated at home that the mistreatments that she is suffering are nothing at all if they are compared to the miserable captivity by which she is held back from worshipping God properly.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, for Calvin, God is not only glorified through a person who worships purely, but he is also honored through those who help other people revere him properly. Calvin’s letter to the Duchess of Ferrara in 1563 shows that the duchess took a number of refugees in so that they could settle in a place where they could worship purely. In this letter, Calvin writes that God has done her a remarkable honor in allowing her to carry God’s banner by accepting these exiles and that God is glorified in this duty of hers.<sup>19</sup>

Although Calvin insists that risking God’s honor is infinitely more problematic than exile, this by no means signifies that Calvin considers exile to be an easy option. Calvin’s emphatic language of the importance of the glory of God and weightiness of pure worship should not be a reason to believe that he took exile lightly. It was in fact quite the opposite. Throughout his lifetime, Calvin continuously highlighted how awful exile is, despite the fact that it enables people to worship freely. Again, Calvin tells Monsieur de Falais that even Abraham himself must have been greatly reluctant to leave his homeland and did not have all things the way he wanted them.<sup>20</sup> In a letter to an anonymous French lady, Calvin compares exile to the Exodus—leaving Egypt for wilderness. Indeed, the wilderness is the place where one can follow God, but Egypt is indeed full of “flesh-pots and pleasures” and, consequently, it is by no means easy to abandon one’s homeland to live in a strange land.<sup>21</sup> Quitting one’s own house, giving up one’s wealth, and leaving one’s homeland, in order to choose to live according to what God deserves, is indeed not a small temptation at all, according to Calvin.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. Virtue and Vice Contagion in Worship

What, then, does it mean to worship purely for Calvin? Answering this question would require an entire monograph or two. There are indeed countless ways to approach this question, but perhaps it would be reasonable to say that the scholarly consensus on this matter is that, for Calvin, to worship God purely is to honor God only according to his decrees as they are written and expounded in the Scriptures (Eire 1989, p. 201). According to Calvin, the biblical witness is clear on the definitions of true and false worship. Throughout his exegetical works as well as his *Institutes*, Calvin constantly stresses *how* one is to worship God properly and purely according to Scripture (Eire 1989, pp. 201–02). However, I will focus on one particular aspect of worship that Calvin insists on in letters to the Protestants in France during his time.<sup>23</sup> Generally speaking, Calvin justified his insistence on exile by arguing that believers need a community of worship which consists of people who share the same truth. Calvin contended that worshipping with the like-minded and equally virtuous believers is indispensable for one’s faith formation.

Analyzing the way Calvin understood this particular liturgical theme is necessary partly because it is an aspect which has not been considered thoroughly in the liturgical studies in the recent years. The current discussions on the relationship between worship, community, and formation revolve around the question of *how* one worships. For example, Regule argues that participating in certain rituals helps believers realize the meanings of living as a Christ-follower (Regule 2020, p. 46). Similarly, according to Saliers, different models of worship and liturgical patterns influence the emotional conditions of believers (Saliers 2021, p. 8). To be sure, Johnson affirms that there is an element of imitation and assimilation in his understanding of worship (Johnson 2020, p. 15). However, his perspective is much more concentrated on the rhizomatic process of liturgical practices, rather than the significance of the ethical and theological nature of a worshipping community in any authentic way.

It must be noted that even the liturgical interpreters of Calvin have not paid attention to this issue. As noted in the Introduction, Moon is one of the latest scholars who have attempted to analyze and present Calvin's theology of worship. Moon must be commended for introducing various ways to understand the relationship between liturgical practices and faith formation in Calvin's thought. He has shown how Calvin saw diverse specific physical rituals impacting believers' faith formation, such as bodily gestures of prayer and repetition of certain practices (Moon 2015, pp. 25–26). However, his interpretation of Calvin has neither the indication of the importance of the theological and virtuous attributes possessed by a worshipping community nor the consequences of whom one worships with. With this scholarly gap in mind, I will begin to analyze letters by Calvin to observe and examine how he connects faith formation with worship community.

In a letter written to an anonymous Mademoiselle, Calvin subtly but firmly tells her that she should not give up an opportunity, which he calls "the remedy", to go to a place where she can give glory to God purely and properly through worship.<sup>24</sup> He highlights that she will be joined to the flock there, by which he means a church community. For Calvin, the message is not that it is important for her to find a place where she does not have to participate in the Roman Catholic Mass. Nor is it that finding a good community may be helpful to a degree. Instead, he urges her to be a part of a worshipping community of like-minded people. To be sure, Calvin does not explicitly use the word "worship", but he certainly implies the idea. For him, to be joined to the flock was not simply becoming a member of a suitable community. Rather, one of the key elements of the said joining is worshipping together at the same time in a physical proximity. We know this to be the case because Calvin notes that, if she joins this flock, she will be able to "hear the voice of the Shepherd".<sup>25</sup> This expression no doubt refers to the sound of teaching and preaching. According to Calvin, this hearing cannot be done individually. Calvin insists that one has to be a part of corporate worship where preaching happens synchronously. Had the receiver of this letter needed sound religious doctrines and had that been sufficient, Calvin would have written that it was what she needed. He could have simply encouraged her to acquire the appropriate literature or receive private education from a trustworthy instructor. However, that was not the case. In this specific case, it was Calvin's insistence that she joins a worshipping community of the righteous where she could listen to the word of God with other believers. He also affirms that she will enjoy this important aspect in a Protestant church once she exiles. For Calvin, anyone who does not belong to a healthy gospel community of worship is nothing but a sheep wandering in the wilderness, bound to get lost and end up in the mouths of "wolves".<sup>26</sup>

Why, then, is being a part of a worshipping community so important for Christians in Calvin's liturgical theology? Why does he think it is very difficult, if not impossible, for believers to survive, grow, and thrive if they worshipped with the wrong kind of people? Why does one need to be joined to a flock? The reason has to do with Calvin's understanding of assimilation and contagion. Perhaps the better word here would be the spiritual epidemic, now that the word "pandemic" has become familiar to us. According to him, believers are easily influenced negatively by those with whom they worship.

In a letter to an anonymous French lady, likely a noblewoman, Calvin explains that God's light has reached her who was in the place of profound darkness. Here, we are already seeing Calvin's way of comparing where she was and where she ought to go. He then writes that God has reached out his hand to her who was in the deepest abyss, which again stresses the contrast between two drastically different kinds of worship settings, and that she was now obligated to glorify God's name. As he connects the concept of the glory of God with the necessity of exile, he directly expresses why her body should be in a different physical place where she can worship with the people who believe in the true gospel with her soul. "For in calling us to himself, God sets us apart in order that our whole life may be his glory, which cannot be without our withdrawing ourselves from the pollutions of this world".<sup>27</sup> Not only are the meanings of this sentence loud and clear, but they have extensive implications. For Calvin, it is clear, if she continues to worship God with the same people who are unrighteous, she will definitely be assimilated to their pollution. If she continues to surround herself with the wrong kind of worshippers, it will become impossible for her to honor God with her entire life.

In this letter, Calvin writes that she is surrounded by "the pollution of the world (*pollutions de ce monde*)". By definition, pollution influences what is around it. With this word, Calvin was implying the possibility of assimilation. Just like a contagious disease, if you are near someone who has it, you will doubtlessly be affected. According to a letter written by Calvin in 1540, we see the clear connection between pollution and contagion in Calvin's thought. Calvin writes that "nothing is more infectious than association with the ungodly".<sup>28</sup> Calvin explains that, because human beings are all naturally "inclined to vice . . . when we frequent corruption, the contagion spreads more widely".<sup>29</sup> For Calvin, when believers get in contact with the impious, they will be infected by their sinful actions. One may wonder how this question of proximity is connected to worship. In fact, in this letter of 1540, Calvin emphasizes the risk of idolatry as the key problem regarding the assimilation. In other words, believers are likely to worship like the people with whom they worship, and they are also likely to live as they do in this context.<sup>30</sup>

Much like COVID-19, if you do not keep the social distance, you will be influenced. Unlike COVID-19, there were no vaccines or masks that could protect one from the infectiousness of the spiritual disease, according to Calvin. Calvin does not give her any indication that she may be able to glorify God in her own way while worshipping with the wicked. In Calvin's thought, if you worship with the spiritually weak and wicked people who do not know and practice the gospel in the proper way, you are most likely to become like them in various ways.

According to this letter, the reasoning behind this problem of assimilation is simple: human frailty. Calvin explains that, when one is surrounded by the unrighteous, no one is able to retain their virtues. Everyone, including himself, needs to be completely prepared. For Calvin, because God's honor is more important than one's life, this preparation has to include worshipping with the righteous. He writes: "let us not think it strange, if for his name's sake we be chased from one place to another, and that we must forsake the place of our birth".<sup>31</sup> Once he stresses that she needs to be living in a different physical location, Calvin then repeats his reasoning of contagion by noting that, if she remains in the current "bondage", she cannot worship God purely without the rage of the wicked.<sup>32</sup>

What needs to be emphasized now is the relationship between my analysis above and the long-standing debate concerning Calvin's view on Nicodemism. According to numerous scholars, Calvin criticized the Nicodemites for their inadequate theology and practice of worship.<sup>33</sup> For example, Eire explains that Calvin was not able to see how believers could separate the inner beliefs and outer worship. In other words, according to Eire's reading of Calvin, the Protestants should worship God with all their souls, but they had to follow the biblically defined and constructed liturgical forms with their bodies (Eire 1985, pp. 127–28). To be more specific, Calvin was against the Roman mass and other papal rituals (Pattison 2020, pp. 265–66) and affirmed that participating in the mass certainly meant that "the glory of God is obscured, his religion profaned, and his truth

corrupted" (Eire 1985, pp. 135–36). In the writings other than these letters, we see Calvin dealing with the idolatrous worship of the Roman Catholics which he condemns.

Although Calvin's anti-Nicodemite theology is significant in its own right, my contribution is quite different. The anti-Nicodemite rhetoric employed by Calvin is much more focused on an individual level. According to Calvin, when an individual believer participates in the Roman mass, they are dishonoring the glory of God because God is not to be worshipped in that manner. Conversely, what I seek to demonstrate is the communal nature of Calvin's liturgical thought. Indeed, participating in the Roman mass itself is wrong, but worshipping with the unrighteous has another acute effect of assimilation and contagion. To go back to the letter in hand, Calvin does not mention the mass. What must be acknowledged is the fact that Calvin was aware of possible censorship and surveillance, so it would have been impossible for him to mention the ritual by name. However, it is interesting to see that Calvin does not imply anywhere about that matter in this letter. Instead, Calvin talks about the danger of assimilation. For Calvin, this danger was indeed a potential and real threat for the Protestants living in France.

The contagious nature of this pollution is prevalent in many of his letters addressed to those who were living in Catholic regions, but we find a particularly clear example in a letter addressed to the Admiral de Coligny. In this letter, he begins by saying that Calvin wants him to secure the admiral's own salvation. Calvin also affirms that God has been working for the admiral so that he could indeed be fortified by the Spirit. It is also highlighted that this admiral is in some sort of difficulty which is, according to Calvin, going to work for the growth of the admiral, as God may have sent this affliction that is in fact a blessing in disguise.<sup>34</sup>

However, as soon as Calvin finishes talking about what *God* has been doing for the sake of this admiral and his salvation, he immediately adds that there is something that the admiral should do in order to participate in God's providence. He does so by stressing that corruptions prevail everywhere and that the children of God should not mingle in them, "lest they share in their pollution".<sup>35</sup> According to Calvin, because idolatrous worship, unrighteousness, and a corrupted way of living are contagious, believers should always worship with other upright brothers and sisters in Christ (cf. Shepardson 2007, p. 114).<sup>36</sup> Because the devil always seeks to tempt true believers by surrounding them with disloyal, worldly, apathetic, and decadent people so that they may stumble,<sup>37</sup> it is imperative for them to belong to a visible community that worships together. When believers worship and live with those who do not honor God properly, they will most likely face grumbles and hostility which will lead them in the wrong direction.<sup>38</sup>

One may wonder if this letter is strictly related to worship per se. Indeed, such a question is justified because Calvin does not spell out his intention. He certainly does not say "These are what I believe about worship and assimilation, and I would like you to act accordingly". What must be noted in relation to this letter and the letters which have been addressed above is that these are personal correspondence, many of which were under surveillance. In other words, we have to read between the lines and use these letters as a mirror to understand the circumstances of the recipients.<sup>39</sup> In Calvin's words to the admiral, Calvin repeatedly emphasizes keeping the honor and glory of God in purity. For Calvin, this expression is most explicitly, though not exclusively, tied with worship. When Calvin says, "you have to keep God's glory and honor in purity", it should be understood as "you should worship God properly" (Eire 1989, pp. 197–99). On the one hand, this was simply Calvin's personal jargon. On the other hand, Calvin had to be subtle, and even poetic, so that the recipients may not get into too much trouble. In that regard, in this letter, as soon as Calvin says that corruptions are everywhere and that believers should not mingle with the wicked, he quickly highlights the preeminent significance of keeping the honor of God in purity. Once he does that, he reiterates that the admiral should consider guarding and praising the honor of God to be his privilege, which again is the language Calvin uses in relation to worship.

After insisting that the admiral should stay away from the contagiously evil people, Calvin explains why the admiral should be careful not to be infected by them. First, according to Calvin, it is because believers should place God first. Rather than enjoying the company of the wicked and benefiting from worshipping with them, real Christians should seek to please God by staying away from them. This is because God is worthy to be honored above everything else. Second, Calvin reasons that believers should not worship with the unrighteous because they must hold fast to the promise of Christ. For Calvin, becoming a voluntary refugee in order to worship with the virtuous in the same location is not an easy choice. However, Calvin insists that such drawbacks are nothing compared to the true joy that a righteous life brings. In a sense, according to Calvin, there are essentially no real setbacks in giving up one's homeland. The assurance Calvin gives is that God will not make the admiral miss anything that is of true importance.<sup>40</sup>

Now that we have explored the negative kind of assimilation, we can also talk about the positive effects of worshipping with the virtuous. Calvin deals with this issue most explicitly in a letter addressed to the brothers in Poitou, who were being persecuted for being evangelicals in France and could not worship without triggering the Roman Catholics around them to give them a hard time. In this letter, Calvin immediately begins his argument with human weakness. According to Calvin, every human being is frail. Because every single person is naturally so weak on one's own, believers with the same gospel need to worship together so that they can serve each other by "stir[ring] one another up".<sup>41</sup> Calvin does not say that some are strong and thus do not need other people. Rather, every believer with no exception needs a nurturing worshipping community where positive assimilation can take place (cf. [Parsons 2014](#), p. 136).<sup>42</sup> Calvin even includes himself in this common problem of humanity by insisting that "we are but too sluggish".<sup>43</sup> This is not to say that, in this letter, he denies the importance of personal devotions such as praying and reading at home. However, for him, worshipping with the right kind of people has a profound benefit. This important perspective is most explicitly demonstrated in this letter in the following section: "do not deprive yourselves of the blessing of invoking God together with one accord, and receiving some sound doctrine and good exhortation".<sup>44</sup> In addition, Calvin affirms that what is "well-pleasing to God" is the people of God gathering together in the same location and praying to him "with one mouth".<sup>45</sup> When true and virtuous believers get together in one place and worship together with a physical proximity, they are giving the full honor to God with their souls and bodies. With this true worship, they grow in righteousness and truth. It is also Calvin's insistence that praising God along with his people is what the Scriptures themselves exhort.<sup>46</sup>

Calvin's determined emphasis on this liturgical concept, that is, the contagious nature of virtues and vices in worship communities, is also revealed by how his letter-writing scheme changes over the years. Until 1554, Calvin tended to write to individual believers urging them to exile so that they can worship with the like-minded believers and that they may be assimilated to by fellow righteous Protestants. However, after 1555, the number of Calvin's letters to (underground) churches increased significantly. As the number of Reformed churches grew exponentially between 1555 and 1562 ([Reid 2007](#), p. 105; [Higman 1998](#), p. 699), Calvin began to see less value in writing to struggling individual believers in France. For example, when he wrote to Monsieur d'Andelot, he expressly indicated that he is grateful for the people who are physically closer to him to assist him and with whom he could worship.<sup>47</sup> The fact that Calvin began to write less and less to individuals to choose exile as churches began to grow more and more in France (and other Roman Catholic regions) demonstrates that, for Calvin, a worshipping community was a strong motivation for recommending exile to individuals ([Woo 2019](#), pp. 26–68). This also explains why Calvin was more inclined to emphasize in 1561 not that "the faithful should rebel against the government but that they should continue to submit to it, while waiting patiently for God's sure deliverance", rather than telling them of the third option of fleeing ([Tuininga 2017](#), p. 345). It was because they already had a devoted community of worship in which they could influence each other in a positive way.

## 5. Practical Implications

As I have noted above, there has been little interest in the ethical and theological nature of the community with whom one worships. Contrary to this lack of attention in the liturgical academia, Calvin argues that one should choose one's fellow worshippers carefully. Indeed, the liturgical formats and rituals matter to Calvin, and he would insist that establishing them according to the biblical witness carries much weight. However, the contagious nature of virtues and vices cannot be ignored. Church communities need to work together as a community in terms of setting the right worship orders, but, if Calvin is right, they also need to work on their congregation's spiritual health.

In that sense, perhaps this idea was behind Calvin's attitude toward church discipline and liturgy. Calvin has often been understood to have considered the Lord's Supper as a ritual of community with which ministers were able to reprimand, teach, and comfort (Bouwsma 1988, pp. 218–19; Speelman 2017, p. 166). Although Calvin did not necessarily wish to use church discipline as a one-way method of eliminating evil and wickedness (Speelman 2016, pp. 193–230), this contagious nature of virtues and vices may have been related to his thoughts on church discipline. In this regard, for the congregations who are serious about keeping the spiritual health of their members, they may want to consider church discipline as a way to keep the spiritual epidemic in control.

That said, this theology of contagion may be a double-edged sword. In order to put this concept into practice, a community or an individual church needs to agree on their ethical convictions. Unless the members emphasize the same virtues to embody and vices to refrain from, it becomes difficult to see the value of this theology of Calvin. Moreover, this notion of Calvin can be used as a malicious weapon of the majority group. If a larger portion of a community dictates which moral stances are indispensable, they may unrightfully use this idea to discriminate, segregate, or expel those who disagree with them. Unjust and unjustified use of this idea would be the last thing Calvin would have recommended.

Another practical aspect to consider in light of my finding is related to standards with which one should choose one's worshipping community. If Calvin is right, perhaps believers should not simply look for churches that have appropriate liturgical formats and worship styles which promote the biblical values. Instead, they should look for communities which hold the same virtues and reject the same vices as they do. Not only should they consider the communities' ethical beliefs, but perhaps they should examine how the community walks the talk.

## 6. Conclusions

In this article, I have attempted to show that, for Calvin, whom one worships with matters a great deal. Although how one worships is as important as recent interpreters of Calvin have argued, this article has demonstrated that virtues and vices are contagious in liturgical settings.

I believe this article contributes to the scholarly debate on Calvin's liturgical understandings. As I have noted above, very little attention has been given to the significance of the ethical and theological nature of a worshipping community. In that regard, not only has it started a discussion on his theology of contagion, it also has made more room to explore his worship theology in terms of one's body. This is not to say that the physical aspect should be emphasized over his thoughts on mind and soul. However, it certainly allows other interpreters of his to address what has often been undermined by historians and liturgical scholars throughout history.

Moreover, I think this article has a pastoral value as well. The modern assumption is that, as long as one works on oneself, the environment does not matter so much. However, according to Calvin, no one is strong enough to sustain his or her character without having a community of worship which consists of the like-minded. In an age where the human weakness is often overlooked, this insight of Calvin works as a warning.

Nevertheless, as observed earlier, when it comes to practical application, it is imperative to note that his emphasis on the infectiousness can be misused. For example, it can be used as a ground for exclusion. One may also use this concept as a way to justify separation or even a form of segregation that is not in fact based on real morality.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- 1 See (Baum et al. 1863–1900). Hereafter cited as CO; (Calvin 1858). Hereafter *Letters*.
- 2 CO 10:130; *Letters*, 1:59.
- 3 CO 12:542; Calvin to Monsieur de Budé, 19 June, 1547, *Letters*, 2:106.
- 4 CO 12:542; Calvin to Monsieur de Budé, 19 June, 1547, *Letters*, 2:107.
- 5 CO 13:62; Calvin to a French Seigneur, October, 1548, *Letters*, 2:166.
- 6 CO 17:703; Calvin to Monsieur de Clervant, November, 1559, *Letters*, 4:78.
- 7 CO 14:670; Calvin to Madame de Pons, 20 November, 1553, *Letters*, 2:420.
- 8 CO 15:193–194; Calvin to Madame de Cany, 24 July, 1554, *Letters* 3:46.
- 9 CO 11:630; Calvin to Monsieur de Falais, 14 October, 1543, *Letters*, 1:397–398.
- 10 CO 11:631; Calvin to Madame de Falais, 14 October, 1543, *Letters*, 1:399.
- 11 CO 11:735; Calvin to Monsieur de Falais, June, 1544, *Letters*, 1:424–425.
- 12 One of the clearest examples would be this letter: CO 13:151; Calvin to an Anonymous Mademoiselle, 12 January, 1549, *Letters*, 2:190.
- 13 See note 9 above.
- 14 CO 11:735; Calvin to Monsieur de Falais, June, 1544, *Letters*, 1:424–425.
- 15 CO 12:453–454; Calvin to an Anonymous Madame, 1546, *Letters*, 2:77–78.
- 16 CO 13:63; Calvin to a French Seigneur, 18 October, 1548, *Letters*, 2:165–166.
- 17 CO 14:517; Calvin to Monsieur de Marolles, 12 April, 1553, *Letters*, 2:382.
- 18 CO 14:669; Calvin to Madame de Pons, 20 November, 1553, *Letters*, 2:419.
- 19 CO 20:16; Calvin to the Duchess of Ferrara, 10 May, 1563, *Letters*, 4:315.
- 20 CO 11:630; Calvin to Monsieur de Falais, 14 October, 1543, *Letters*, 1:397. Interestingly and quite naturally, Calvin stresses that exile was a sorrowful thing for Abraham in his commentary on Genesis 12 as well. “For since exile is in itself sorrowful, and the sweetness of their native soil holds nearly all men bound to itself, God strenuously persists in his command to leave the country, for the purpose of thoroughly penetrating the mind of Abram. If he had said in a single word, *Leave thy country*, this indeed would not lightly have pained his mind; but Abram is still more deeply affected, when he hears that he must renounce his kindred and his father’s house”. See (Calvin 2010). Cf. (Engammare 2010).
- 21 CO 13:296; Calvin to Madame de la Roche-Posay, 10 June, 1549, *Letters*, 2:217.
- 22 CO 17:703; Calvin to Monsieur de Clervant, November, 1559, *Letters*, 4:79.
- 23 As noted in the introduction, I am focusing on certain letters by Calvin in this piece. There are a few matters I wish to highlight in this regard. First, because very few have attempted to delve into Calvin’s liturgical theology with letters, this approach is a unique contribution to the current scholarly discussion. Calvin’s *Institutes*, theological treatises, commentaries, and even sermons have been analyzed but not letters in that regard. Second, Calvin’s letters are more beneficial for those who are interested in his liturgical thought because they show us his own *applications* for different circumstances. The other more theoretical genres tend to show Calvin’s conceptual stance, and it is up to us to infer how it can be implemented. Third, although I am dealing with a handful of letters, they offer sufficient insights for us to reason his notion of assimilation through worship. Out of every letter which mentions exile and worship directly or indirectly, these are the letters that explicitly focus on the issue of spiritual contagion. As far as I know, these are the only places where Calvin mentions this significant liturgical theme. In that sense, though the number of letters may be small, their ramifications are profound.
- 24 CO 13:151; Calvin to an Anonymous Mademoiselle, 12 January, 1549, *Letters*, 2:193.
- 25 See note 24 above.

- 26 See note 24 above.
- 27 CO 13:295; Calvin to Madame de La Roche-Posay, 10 June, 1549, *Letters*, 2:215.
- 28 John Calvin, “Letter of 1540”, as cited in Bouwsma, 36.
- 29 Calvin, “Letter of 1540”.
- 30 See note 29 above.
- 31 CO 13:295; Calvin to Madame de La Roche-Posay, 10 June, 1549, *Letters*, 2:216.
- 32 CO 13:296; Calvin to Madame de La Roche-Posay, 10 June, 1549, *Letters*, 2:216.
- 33 For an overview of the important scholarly works on this matter, see (Woo 2019), pp. 1–2.
- 34 CO 17:319; Calvin to the Admiral de Coligny, 4 September, 1558, *Letters*, 3:466.
- 35 CO 17:320; Calvin to the Admiral de Coligny, 4 September, 1558, *Letters*, 3:467.
- 36 See note 35 above.
- 37 Cf. CO 20:140; Calvin to the Comtesse de Seninghen, 28 August, 1563, *Letters*, 4:332.
- 38 See note 35 above.
- 39 There is much literature which helps us understand what is often called “mirror-reading”. I suggest one important example: See (Barclay 1987).
- 40 See note 35 above.
- 41 CO 15:222; Calvin to the Brethren of Poitou, 3 September, 1554, *Letters*, 3:68.
- 42 See note 41 above.
- 43 See note 41 above.
- 44 CO 15:222–223; Calvin to the Brethren of Poitou, 3 September, 1554, *Letters*, 3:69.
- 45 CO 15:223; Calvin to the Brethren of Poitou, 3 September, 1554, *Letters*, 3:69.
- 46 See note 45 above.
- 47 CO 17:192; Calvin to Monsieur d’Andelot, 10 May, 1558, *Letters*, 3:418.

## References

- Barclay, John M. G. 1987. Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test Case. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31: 73–93. [CrossRef]
- Baum, Guilielmus, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss. 1863–1900. *Ioannis Calvini opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*. Braunschweig: Schwetschke, vol. 10, pp. 129–30.
- Bonali-Fiquet, Françoise. 1991. *Jean Calvin, Lettres à Monsieur et Madame de Falais*. Geneva: Droz.
- Bouwsma, William J. 1988. *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Calvin, John. 1858. *Letters of John Calvin, trans. Jules Bonnet*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, vol. 1, pp. 58–59.
- Calvin, John. 2010. *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*. Translated by John King. Bellingham: Logos Bible Software, vol. 1, p. 343.
- Crespin, Jean. 1570. *Histoire de Vrays Tesmoins de la Vérité De L’Euangile, Qui de leur Sang l’ont Signée, Depuis Jean Hus Iusques Autemps Present*. Geneva: Crespin, p. 81.
- Eire, Carlos M. N. 1985. Prelude to Sedition? John Calvin’s Opposition to Nicodemism and Religious Compromise. *Archiv Für Reformationgeschichte* 79: 120–45. [CrossRef]
- Eire, Carlos M. N. 1989. *War against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Engammare, Max. 2010. Jean Calvin l’exilé: Une théologie de l’exil dans l’œuvre du Réformateur. *Dimensioni e Problemi della Ricerca Storica* 2: 31–32.
- Gordon, Bruce. 2009. *Calvin*. New York: Yale University Press.
- Heller, Henry. 1986. *The Conquest of Poverty: The Calvinist Revolt in Sixteenth Century France*. Brill: Leiden.
- Higman, Francis. 1998. L’Édit de Janvier 1562. *Bulletin de La Société de l’Histoire Du Protestantisme Français* 144: 697–705.
- Johnson, Todd E. 2020. Weed and Feed: Congregational Crabgrass and Liturgical Formation. *Liturgy* 35: 8–17. [CrossRef]
- Kelley, Donald R. 1981. *The Beginning of Ideology: Consciousness and Society in the French Reformation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Marcourt, Antoine. 1534. *Articles veritables sur les horribles, grandz et importables abuz de la messe papalle, inventee directement contre la sainte Cene de Jesus-Christ*. Neuchâtel: Pierre de Vingle.
- McKim, LindaJo H. 1992. Reflections on Liturgy and Worship in the Reformed Tradition. In *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pp. 305–10.
- Moon, Hwarang. 2015. *Engraved upon the Heart: Children, the Cognitively Challenged, and Liturgy’s Influence on Faith Formation*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.
- Parsons, Michael. 2014. ‘It Is Too Late to Think of Shrinking Back.’ Calvin’s Letters to Contemporary Martyrs. In *Reformation Faith: Exegesis and Theology in the Protestant Reformations*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, pp. 122–37.
- Pattison, Bonnie L. 2020. Worship and Calvin’s Theology of the Body in His Anti-Nicodemite Writings. *Calvin Theological Journal* 55: 255–76.

- Regule, Teva L. 2020. The Mystagogical Catecheses of Cyril of Jerusalem: Forming the Identity of a Christian. *Liturgy* 35: 42–47. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Reid, Jonathan A. 2007. French Evangelical Networks before 1555: Proto-Churches? In *La Réforme En France et En Italie: Contacts, Comparaisons et Contrastes*. Rome: Ecole française de Rome, pp. 105–24.
- Saliers, Don E. 2021. With Kindled Affections: Worship and Emotion. *Liturgy* 36: 4–10. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Shepardson, Nikki. 2007. *Burning Zeal: The Rhetoric of Martyrdom and the Protestant Community in Reformation France*. Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, pp. 1520–70.
- Speelman, Herman. 2016. *Melanchthon and Calvin on Confession and Communion: Early Modern Protestant Penitential and Eucharistic Piety*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Speelman, Herman. 2017. Weekly at the Lord's Table: Calvin's Motives for a Frequent Celebration of the Holy Communion. In *Liturgy and Ethics: New Contributions from Reformed Perspectives*. Edited by Pieter Vos. Leiden: Brill, pp. 149–74.
- Terpstra, Nicholas. 2015. *Religious Refugees in the Early Modern World*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tuininga, Matthew J. 2017. *Calvin's Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: Christ's Two Kingdoms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Witvliet, John D. 2003. *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Woo, Kenneth J. 2019. *Nicodemism and the English Calvin, 1544–1584*. Leiden: Brill.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.