

# The Humanity of Christ: John Calvin's Understanding of Christ's Vicarious Humanity

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## Abstract

There are two different hermeneutical principles between the views of the fallen and unfallen humanity of Christ. Scholars who deny Christ's assumption of corrupted human nature emphasise that, due to a fallen humanity, Christ would have inevitably committed sin in the context of the original sin. However, theologians who are in favour of Christ's fallen humanity explain the issue in the person and work of Christ himself. Here, I present John Calvin's biblical views on the body of Christ as the vicarious humanity for all of us. With regard to the biblical truth that the Word became flesh without ceasing to be the eternal of God, Calvin describes the paradoxical character of the event in scripture. Although Calvin never supports the fallen nature of Christ at a literal level, he is inclined to accept the view of Christ's fallen nature at the level of interpretation, because Calvin has no hesitation in saying that Christ assumed a mortal body like us. Calvin is in line with the views of Christ's fallen human nature, for he uses the biblical concept of Christ's mortal body and the principle of sanctification in his own body through the Holy Spirit, except in that Calvin denies Christ's assumption of the sinful nature of Adam after the Fall. Calvin's opinions not only provide us with the common biblical ground with which the two theological camps would agree, but also demonstrate that Christ assumed fallen humanity for us. In this article, I will explain how the view of Christ's unfallen humanity has logical errors and how it distorts the integrity of the Gospel. Next, in order to demonstrate how Christ's assumption of fallen humanity accords with the orthodox faith in Reformed theology, I examine Calvin's biblical arguments of Christ's assumption of our true humanity. Then, I explain that without assumption of our mortal body by Christ there is no vicarious humanity of Christ in Calvin's christology. Particularly, in order to understand the original and biblical arguments for the humanity of Christ, I will use a dialectical approach to both the *Institutes of Christian Religion* (1559) and Calvin's commentaries, as the best way to grasp the essence of Calvin's theology.

**Keywords:** Body, Calvin, Christ, fallen nature, humanity, sin.

## Introduction

Whether Christ assumed a fallen human nature or not has been one of the most controversial issues among modern systematic theologians.<sup>1</sup> There are two different hermeneutical principles between the views of the fallen and unfallen humanity of Christ. Scholars who deny Christ's assumption of corrupted human nature emphasise that, due to fallen humanity, Christ would have inevitably committed sin in the context of the original sin. They suppose that if Christ assumed our fallen humanity Christ would fail to overcome the power of total depravity so that Christ would become a sinful man. This means that even Christ might need a saviour for himself. However, theologians who are in favour of Christ's fallen humanity explain the issue in the person and work of Christ himself. T. F. Torrance, one of the most influential Reformed theologians, argues that in spite of the assumption of our fallen humanity, Christ was absolutely sinless because he sanctified the fallen nature in himself and through his intrinsic relationship to God:

Here the emphasis falls upon the fact that in death and resurrection Christ acted in entire consistence with the way in which he lived his life in unbroken fellowship with the Father and in the perfection of union with him. Although he assumed our fallen and corrupt humanity when he became flesh, in assuming it he sanctified it in himself, and all through his earthly life he overcame our sin through his purity, condemning sin in our flesh by sheer holiness of his life within it. That is why death could not hold him even when he entered into and submitted to it, for there was no sin in him.<sup>2</sup>

I firmly believe that it is more reasonable to deal with the problem of Christ's fallen humanity in christology than in the doctrine of humanity, because we can only consider the person of Christ as the incarnated Son of God in our humanity with significant qualification. Here, I present the views of the great initiator of Reformed theology, John Calvin, on the body of Christ as the vicarious humanity for all of us. My argument is that, although Calvin never supports the fallen nature of Christ at a literal level, he seems in fact to be inclined to accept the view of Christ's fallen nature at the level of interpretation, because Calvin has no hesitation in saying that Christ assumed a mortal body like us. Calvin is definitely in line with Torrance's understanding of Christ's fallen human nature in using the biblical concept of Christ's mortal body and the principle of sanctification in his

<sup>1</sup> R. Michael Allen, 'Calvin's Christ: A Dogmatic Matrix for Discussion of Christ's Human Nature', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9 (2007), p. 382.

<sup>2</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 45.

own body through the Holy Spirit, apart from the fact that Calvin denies Christ's assumption of the sinful nature of Adam after the Fall. From the standpoint of modern systematic theology, Calvin's interpretation of Christ's human nature seems to be ambiguous. Stepping back from the controversy of whether to assume the fallen humanity of Christ or not, Calvin faithfully describes who Jesus Christ is and what he had done once and for all according to the testimony of scripture by using the mortal body of Christ and the sanctification by the Holy Spirit. This is not only a third alternative, providing the common biblical ground with which the two theological camps would agree, but also demonstrates that Christ assumed fallen humanity for us. At a literal level, Calvin has an unfallen position in the *Institute of Christian Religion* (1559). Nevertheless, in his *Commentaries*, Calvin seems manifestly inclined to accept the views of Christ's fallen nature, as he explains Christ's mortal body and its sanctification in the person of Christ himself. Furthermore, Calvin interprets Christ's assumption of our mortal body as his solidarity with sinners and the whole decaying creation.

In this article, I will explain how the view of Christ's unfallen humanity has logical errors and how it distorts the integrity of the Gospel. Next, in order to demonstrate how Christ's assumption of fallen humanity accords with the orthodox faith in Reformed theology, I will examine John Calvin's biblical arguments of Christ's assumption of our true humanity. Then I will explain that, without the assumption of our mortal body by Christ, there is no vicarious humanity of Christ in Calvin's christology.<sup>3</sup> Particularly, in order to understand the original and biblical arguments for the humanity of Christ, I will primarily refer to Calvin's commentaries. Even though many theologians regard the *Institutes of Christian Religion* (1559) as the core of Calvin's theology, due to Calvin's 'anti-speculative tendency' it does not always provide us with the whole of his theological view.<sup>4</sup> Thus, a dialectical approach to both the *Institutes* and Calvin's commentaries is the best way to grasp the essence of Calvin's theology.

<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm H. Neuser, *Calvinus Ecclesiae Doctor : Die Referate Des Congrès International De Recherches Calviniennes . . . Vom 25. Bis 28. September 1978 in Amsterdam* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1980). J. B. Torrance, in his article, 'The Vicarious Humanity and Priesthood of Christ in the Theology of John Calvin', in Neuser, op. cit., pp. 69–84, correctly asserts that it is through the true humanity of Christ that we participate in worship of the Trinity, emphasising that we are priests in Christ. Nonetheless, his focus is not so much Christ's vicarious humanity *pro nobis* as our new identity in Christ.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Lindley McCormack, *For us and our Salvation : Incarnation and Atonement in the Reformed Tradition*, Studies in Reformed Theology and History (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1993), p. 6.

### A fallen or unfallen humanity?

It is regrettable that many Calvinistic and conservative theologians strive to solve the problem of Christ's fallen humanity in the context of original sin, which is a dogmatic extrapolation of human nature not of Christ's nature. Theologians who support the unfallen humanity of Christ argue that, if Christ assumed our fallen humanity, he would inevitably be a sinful human being in the context of the doctrine of original sin and total depravity seen through the lens of Reformed scholastic theology. In this article, I will summarise the argument of Oliver Crisp in order to demonstrate that his understanding of Christ's assumption of unfallen humanity has various logical defects.<sup>5</sup>

Crisp's main argument is that, if Christ took a corrupted nature, Christ would be a sinner who needed a saviour for himself.<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of refuting the opinion that Christ assumed a fallen humanity which was sinless, Crisp focuses on proving that original sin inescapably makes Christ guilty on account of his assumption of corrupt human nature. Thus, Crisp relies on the doctrine of original sin in medieval theology and the Reformed tradition. The dogma is composed of original corruption and guilt. Original corruption includes an inclination to actual sin so that people who have been corrupted cannot do otherwise than commit an actual sin.<sup>7</sup> This is an Augustinian rationalisation of fallen human nature, *Non posse non peccare*. Accordingly, Crisp asserts that, even though people under original corruption never actually commit a sin, God would not allow them to enter heaven by virtue of having a fallen human nature.<sup>8</sup> Consistently claiming that fallen humanity itself is guilty, Crisp criticises the 'fallenness' view because it causes Christ to be culpable.<sup>9</sup>

On the one hand, Crisp's approach to original sin would be useful for refuting semi-Pelagianism which obscures the depravity of all humanity. In the case of corrupted sinners, they cannot help but commit a sin because of their original corruption. As a result, there is no way to escape from the condemnation of God. Even though people struggle to live a holy life for the purpose of favour from God, it is in vain because they are miserable sinners under the absolute power of corruption. Thus, the doctrine of original sin makes us seek a saviour outside ourselves. Without self-recognition of depraved humanity, there is no faith in Christ, our redeemer. In this sense,

<sup>5</sup> Oliver Crisp, 'Did Christ have a Fallen Human Nature?', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6/3 (2004), pp. 270–88.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 282.

Crisp properly points out the seriousness of our guilt and corruption in the context of original sin.

On the other hand, the argument of Crisp has no strong logical coherence. Crisp certainly acknowledges that Christ, who took on a frail body, was influenced by original corruption and is sinless, which adheres to the Gospel of John and the view of Augustine.<sup>10</sup> Then, what is the difference between a fallen humanity in which Christ is sinless and 'a human nature affected by the Fall'?<sup>11</sup> Crisp firmly relies on scholastic reasoning throughout the whole of the article in order to argue against the view of Christ's fallen humanity. However, in the last section, Crisp seems to recognise that his dogmatic speculation regarding original sin contradicts the narrative of the Gospels in which Christ had a true human body and mind like us. Consequently, Crisp goes against the testimony of the Bible which shows that Christ, even assuming fallen nature, lived a holy life without guilt.

Furthermore, I would raise a question about the doctrine of original sin unconditionally applied to the incarnation of Christ, without taking into consideration the person and work of Christ in the Bible. It is unreasonable to presume that, if Christ assumed a fallen humanity, he would inevitably be guilty. There is no biblical basis to prove this argument. In order to prevent Christ from being contaminated by original sin, Crisp comes to deny the soteriological significance of Christ's person. In fact, Crisp is reluctant to say that Christ became a true human in a state defenceless against the power of sin. Rather Crisp sees Christ as a divine human who took on armour for the sake of his holy deity. If Christ could not experience the sufferings of all humanity such as anxiety, pain and death, the true meaning of the incarnation would disappear. If Christ assumed unfallen humanity, the intrinsic relationship between the person of Christ and his work would be broken. At best, the sole incarnate event would be the crucifixion of Christ. This discontinuity of the incarnation as the person of Christ and reconciliation as the work of Christ would be so dangerous as to distort the truth of the Gospel. In this sense, Crisp's denial of Christ's assumption of true humanity like us results in a kind of modern Apollinarianism.<sup>12</sup>

Besides, Crisp assumes that even if a human who possessed a sinful nature lived a perfect holy life, on account of original corruption God would regard

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West*, The Torrance Collection (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996). For an excellent summary of Apollinarianism see 'The Mind of Christ in Worship: Problems of Apollinarianism in the Liturgy', *ibid.*, pp. 139–214.

that person as a vile sinner. Since Christ on the cross would be the most abominable outlaw before God, the judge of all creation, Christ could not ascend to heaven due to the sins imputed to him. Thus, the presupposition of Christ's fallen humanity in the context of original sin has a fatal effect in light of biblical soteriology.

In the view of the unfallen human nature of Christ, the saving power of Christ exclusively belongs to Christ's deity in that his human nature is only the sacrifice for the sake of appeasement of God's wrath. Unfortunately, the humanity of Christ would not be the centre of redemption. If Christ did not assume our fallen human nature, for the sake of our salvation the divinised humanity of Christ would have fallen to the level of an impersonal instrument. In this sense, God seems to satisfy his wrath by exacting a cruel penalty on the innocent humanity of Christ. Thus, the unfallen view results in penal substitution on the cross, rather than personal participation in the death of Christ by faith. As a result, on this view we cannot but lose the true meaning of Christ's vicarious sacrifice.

More importantly, I claim that Christ not only took our fallen humanity but also redeemed it in the person of Christ himself. That is, Christ's assumption of sinful humanity is the manifestation of reconciliation between God and the corrupted world. However, for Crisp, the fallen humanity of Christ is nothing other than the contamination of sin. Yet, if Christ could not overcome his own sinful nature, how could he be the redeemer of the whole world? The reconciliation initiated from the incarnation of fallen humanity, so that it culminated in the cross of Christ and his resurrection.

To sum up, I argue that Crisp never attempts to describe the biblical narratives on the mystery of incarnation beyond the ken of our understanding, but strives to explain the awesome event by solely using the scholastic reasoning of his philosophical theology. With regard to the biblical truth that the Word became flesh without ceasing to be the eternal of God, we have to acknowledge the paradoxical character of the event in scripture. While Christ stepped into the darkness of our corrupted nature, he never lost the glorious light of the Saviour by sanctifying fallen nature and overcoming the power of sin and death in the person of Christ himself. The great Reformer Calvin provides us with the concrete biblical argument on the issue, not the speculative scholastic reasoning.

### Calvin's view of Christ's humanity in the Institutes (1559)

In order to clarify the meaning of Christ's fallen humanity, it is necessary to consider the view of Calvin in *The Institutes of Christian Religion* (1559). Calvin explains the true meaning of 'Immanuel, that is, God with us [Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23]' as the mutual union with the deity of Christ and our

humanity.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Calvin emphasises the Son of God's assumption of our flesh, rather than the divinity of Christ, in the person of the Mediator. Then we must inquire whether the flesh that the Word took signifies fallen human nature or an unfallen one. Calvin seems to be in favour of Christ's unfallen humanity, stating that 'He was sanctified by the Spirit that the generation might be pure and undefiled as would have been true before Adam's fall.'<sup>14</sup> However, Bruce Lindley McCormack claims that Calvin supports Christ's restored humanity rather than the unfallen humanity.<sup>15</sup> McCormack correctly describes Calvin's opinion of Christ's humanity, stating that 'It was indeed a fallen human nature in that it was taken from the substance of sinful human flesh. Christ's humanity was made to be "unfallen" - or better, a "restored" true humanity, for this was in the strictest sense not a new creation - by the sanctifying work of the Spirit.'<sup>16</sup> McCormack's argument is reasonable in that, for the sake of the sinless condition of Christ, the Holy Spirit plays a decisive role in sanctifying the humanity of Christ. Calvin emphasises the true humanity of Christ for the purpose of refuting the opinion of Menno Simons who denies the birth of Christ through the Virgin Mary.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, it should be noted that the main issue of Calvin's christology in the *Institutes* is to provide biblical grounding for the Chalcedonian Definition. We need to acknowledge that Calvin constantly deals with Christ's humanity in the frame of the Chalcedonian Definition rather than the context of original sin. Thus, Calvin forcefully argues that Christ is true human, but he is sinless.<sup>18</sup> For the sake of the perfect innocence of Christ's humanity, Calvin states that Christ has nothing to do with the depravity of sinners and denies Christ's assumption of our fallen humanity. As a result, Calvin follows the view of unfallenness of Christ's humanity by recognising the total depravity of humanity caused by original sin. McCormack explains that Calvin's view of original sin is heavily based on traditional substantialism, for Calvin regards original sin according to the concept of contagion, which corrupts the whole of human being.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, unlike those who argue that the Son assumed an unfallen human nature, Calvin never intends to avoid explaining Christ who suffered from the

<sup>13</sup> Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), II.xii.1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> McCormack, *For us and our Salvation*, p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xiii.3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, II.xiii.4.

<sup>19</sup> McCormack, *For us and our Salvation*, p. 20.

infirmity of flesh.<sup>20</sup> Rather, Calvin manifestly describes the miserable image of Christ under the power of death, as if Christ has a fallen humanity.<sup>21</sup> From a literal perspective, Calvin inevitably belongs to the camp of theologians who deny the fallen humanity of Christ by claiming the perfect humanity of Christ before Adam's fall. Yet Calvin is strongly inclined to support the fallen humanity of Christ because Calvin believes that Christ had to go through the existential situation of corrupted sinners. Moreover, Calvin focuses on the vicarious humanity of Christ *pro nobis* rather than focusing on unfallen humanity. The true humanity of Christ is the guarantee of reconciliation between the perfectly righteous God and totally depraved sinners.

Therefore, relying on this pledge, we trust that we are sons of God, for God's natural Son fashioned for himself a body from our body, flesh from our flesh, bones from our bones, that he might be one with us [Gen 2:23–4, mediated through Eph 5:29–31]. Ungrudgingly he took our nature upon himself to impart to us what was his, and to become both Son of God and Son of man in common with us . . . In this way we are assured of the inheritance of the Heavenly Kingdom.<sup>22</sup>

We can see that there is a tension in Calvin's interpretation of Christ's true humanity in the *Institutes*. In order to grasp Calvin's biblical thoughts on the issue, we need to examine the texts of Calvin's commentaries dealing with Christ's assumption of our humanity. McCormick states that 'Calvin was passionately concerned not to speak on any subject beyond the bounds set by the express warrants provided by Scripture'.<sup>23</sup> There is no doubt that Calvin tries to ground his theology on the biblical explanation. Calvin believes scripture has fundamental and divine authority to interpret theological questions, for Calvin abhors scholastic reasoning.<sup>24</sup>

### Calvin's opinions of Christ's human nature in his commentaries

Calvin asserts that Christ's true humanity is the main hinge on which our sound faith in Christ stands or falls, claiming that 'He (Christ) had, of his accord, clothed himself with a mortal nature. If, however, we make Christ's human nature so unlike ours, the main support of our faith is overturned.'<sup>25</sup> Yet Calvin shows an ambiguous attitude to the modern controversy about

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xii. 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, II.xvi.12.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, II.xii.2.

<sup>23</sup> McCormack, *For us and our Salvation*, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Jean Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, tr. J. W. Fraser, D. W. Torrance, and T. F. Torrance, *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 395.



Christ's fallen humanity. Admittedly, Calvin denies the fallen nature of Christ, but he strongly argues for Christ's mortal body instead of the unfallenness of Christ's humanity, explaining the meaning of the 'Word became flesh (John 1:14)' as follows:

The word *Flesh* expresses the meaning of the Evangelist more forcibly than if he had said that he was made man. He intended to show to what a mean and despicable condition the Son of God, on our account, descended from the height of his heavenly glory. When Scripture speaks of man contemptuously, it calls him *flesh*. Now, though there be so wide a distance between the spiritual glory of the speech of God and the abominable filth of our *flesh*, yet the Son of God stooped so low as to take upon himself that *flesh*, subject to so many miseries. The word *flesh* is not taken here for *corrupt nature*, (as it is often used by Paul), but for *mortal man*; though it marks disdainfully his frail and perishing nature.<sup>26</sup>

Calvin knows that, in the Pauline epistles, *flesh* means the total depravity or carnal nature of humanity (Rom 7:25). Consequently, Calvin does not acknowledge that Christ took our corrupted nature. Calvin intends to maintain the innocence of Christ in order to prevent readers from misunderstanding Christ as a sinner. We must inquire whether Calvin supports the idea that Christ assumed unfallen humanity, which is the body of Adam before the Fall.

The original condition of Adam before the Fall is perfect in that he has an immortal body. Calvin affirms that '[being] lost and condemned and subjected to death is both our hereditary condition, and, at the same time, a just punishment, which, God, in the person of Adam, has inflicted upon the human race'.<sup>27</sup> For Calvin, death is the result of original corruption caused by Adam. Calvin believes that, unlike Adam before the Fall, Christ assumed mortal humanity. But mortal humanity is not the glorious body of risen Christ but a frail body like ours. There is no doubt that, as a mortal man, the body of Christ should inevitably experience a physical death. According to the Bible, 'the wages of sin is death' (Rom 6:23). In this sense, the humanity of Christ is not in an unfallen but a fallen state. For Calvin, Christ did not assume unfallen humanity, in that it is a mortal body like ours, due to original sin. Yet Calvin rebuts the claim that Christ took fallen nature in order to preserve the concept of Christ's innocence. To sum it up, Calvin argues

<sup>26</sup> Jean Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), p. 45.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis*, 2 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), p. 151.

that Christ did not assume our *fallen human nature*, but lived in our *corrupted state*, without committing a sin.

Elucidating ‘likeness of the flesh of sin’ (Rom 8:3) in spite of disapproval of Christ’s fallen humanity, Calvin firmly emphasises that Christ should be overwhelmed by the power of sin and death as if he assumed our corrupted humanity. Even though Calvin literally denies the fallen humanity of Christ, he is evidently inclined to favour Christ’s assumption of our sinful humanity. Calvin recognises a coherent relationship between the vicarious humanity and Christ’s assumption of seemingly sinful human nature, in that the fallen nature of Christ confirms a solidarity with all humanity.

He became in the likeness of the flesh of sin, for though the flesh of Christ was polluted by no stains, yet it seemed apparently to be sinful, inasmuch as it sustained the punishment due to our sins, and doubtless death exercised all its power over it as though it was subject to itself. And as it behooved our High-priest to learn by his own experience how to aid the weak, Christ underwent our infirmity that he might be more inclined to sympathy, and in this respect also there appeared some resemblance of a sinful nature.<sup>28</sup>

It is certain that Calvin rejects the term *fallen nature* in order to prevent misunderstandings of Christ as a sinner. Yet Calvin firmly emphasises that Christ lived in our fallen state and assumed a mortal body, not living unfallen humanity. Christ took our frail body and encountered the temptations of Satan (Matt 4:2).<sup>29</sup> Christ was seized with unbearable sadness and extreme fear of death (Heb 4:15).<sup>30</sup> Thus, Christ’s body and emotions are distinguished from those of angels.<sup>31</sup> Calvin’s view, which argues for the sinful state of Christ’s life, is very similar to the opinion of the Roman Catholic theologian Thomas Weinandy, who is in favour of Christ’s fallen humanity. ‘He [Jesus] experienced, of necessity, many of the effects of sin which permeate the world and plague human beings – hunger and thirst, sickness and sorrow, temptation and harassment by Satan, being hated and despised, fear and loneliness, even death and separation from God.’<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Jean Calvin, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ed. John Owen, 1st American from the last London edn (Des Moines, Iowa: LBS Archival Products), p. 281.

<sup>29</sup> Jean Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1949), p. 191.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, tr. John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), p. 90.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Thomas G. Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh : An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), p. 18 .

Calvin believes that Christ is perfectly sinless according to the Chalcedonian Definition. Yet, apart from human nature corrupted by Adam's fall, Calvin seems to accept the view of the fallen humanity of Christ, for Calvin forcefully affirms that Christ lived in our existential situation. Karl Barth, who is in favour of Christ's assumption of our fallen human nature, focuses on the existential position of Christ's nature for us rather than on fallen human nature itself. Barth claims that 'the Word assumes our human existence, assumes flesh, i.e., He exists in the state and position, amid the conditions, under the curse of sinful man. He exists in the place where we are, in all the remoteness not merely of the creature from the Creator, but of the sinful creature from the Holy Creator. Otherwise His action would not be a revealing, a reconciling action.'<sup>33</sup> Like Barth, Calvin underlines the vicarious humanity of Christ because Christ stands with us and lives for all of us.<sup>34</sup> Calvin places the nature of Christ in Adam before the Fall, but puts the vicarious humanity of Christ in the position of corrupted Adam. In this sense, Calvin's view of Christ's humanity shares common ground with the opinion of Christ's fallen human nature from the perspective of the vicarious humanity of Christ.

Furthermore, for Calvin, it is through the person of the incarnate Christ that our fallen humanity has union with the divinity of God, in spite of an unlimited chasm between God and sinners. Calvin states that, 'There is also great emphasis in the contrast of two words, God in flesh. How wide is the difference between God and man! And yet in Christ we behold the infinite glory of God united to our polluted flesh in such a manner that they become one' (1 Tim 3:16).<sup>35</sup> In Calvin's understanding of God manifested in our flesh, we can suppose that, just as our fallen human nature is united to God's holy divinity, Christ's fallen human nature is joined to Christ's divine nature through the hypostatic union of Christ's two natures. Calvin affirms that Christ as God manifested in our flesh is the manifestation of reconciliation between God and corrupted sinners. In Christ, our fallen humanity is taken up and united to the eternal Son, who is *homousios* with the Father.<sup>36</sup> Trevor Hart interprets Calvin's view of Christ's humanity as the centre of salvation in view of his intrinsic relation to the triune God, claiming that 'the Son of God has taken our humanity and has "joined" it to his eternal divinity,

<sup>33</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (New York: Harper, 1962), I/2, p. 155.

<sup>34</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 95.

<sup>35</sup> Jean Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, *Calvin's Commentaries* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1964), p. 93.

<sup>36</sup> Trevor Hart, 'Humankind in Christ and Christ in Humankind: Salvation as Participation in our Substitute in the Theology of John Calvin', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 42 (1989), p. 83.

healing it from its broken state, and conforming it to his creative will. He has put to death the old sinful humanity and has raised up a “new man” in its place, living out a life of fellowship and sonship in his humanity, in relation to the Father and the Spirit.<sup>37</sup> Since Calvin consistently argues for the vicarious humanity of Christ, he believes that the true human nature of Christ is the power of salvation for us.

More importantly, Calvin emphasised the sanctified body of Christ, which I believe to be the fallen and vicarious human nature of Christ, as the centre of our salvation. Here, we should recall the two important doctrinal views of Torrance who favours Christ’s assumption of fallen humanity. First, although Christ took the corrupted nature of a human being, Christ himself sanctified it in his own person. Second, Christ lived a perfectly holy life, as he had maintained an unbroken relationship with God the Father, so that Christ himself is the living sacrifice to God and reconciliation with God. Calvin satisfies the two points. Like Torrance, Calvin also places a heavy emphasis on the fact that Christ sanctified himself in his own body, for Christ proclaimed his body to be the true Temple of God. It is absurd to claim that, apart from the fallenness, Calvin argues for sanctification of Christ’s body. The vicarious humanity of Christ is the holy contact by which our humanity meets God because Christ as the representative of all humanity completely obeyed the will of God who determined to save the whole world and sinners.

He should appear before God as a Mediator for us . . . the word sanctuary is fitly and suitably applied to the body of Christ, for it is the temple in which the whole majesty of God dwells. He is further said to have *made a way for us by his body* to ascend into heaven, because in that body he consecrated himself to God, *he became in it sanctified* to be our true righteousness, he prepared himself in it to offer a sacrifice . . . suffered the death of cross . . . He then entered into heaven *through his own body*, because on this account it is that he now sits at the Father’s right hand; he for this reason intercedes for us in heaven, because he had put on our flesh.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, the reconciliation between God and sinner is not merely attributed to the cross of Christ. From the incarnation to crucifixion: Christ himself with vicarious humanity is for us the living atonement for reconciliation.<sup>39</sup> Calvin’s understanding of original sin is based on the principle of representative individuals. Adam as the head of the whole human race committed a sin of disobedience to the commandment of God,

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 202.

<sup>39</sup> Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection*, p. 69.

and so all people are deprived of eternal life and spiritual gifts.<sup>40</sup> Adam lost the inheritance of the blessings and eternal life from God, whereas Christ overcame the alienation from God through ‘the whole course of his obedience’ for us.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, Calvin believes that it is the obedience of Christ as the representative of our humanity throughout his whole life on earth that redeemed us from the curse of law.<sup>42</sup> The holy life of Christ consists of our perfect salvation in that, from the incarnation to the crucifixion, Christ fulfilled all righteousness by obeying God’s commandments.<sup>43</sup> ‘He became then cause of salvation, because he obtained righteousness for us before God, having removed the disobedience of Adam by an act of an opposite kind, even obedience.’<sup>44</sup> Even though Christ assumed our mortal body, he continually sanctified himself by his holy life through the Holy Spirit. Thus, he could maintain the holy priesthood of God, atoning for the sins of all people. ‘This sanctification belongs to the whole life of Christ . . . it was given in the sacrifice of his death; for then he showed himself to be the true High Priest, by consecrating the temple, the altar, all the vessels, and the people, by the power of his Spirit.’<sup>45</sup>

All this demonstrates that, even though Calvin belongs to those who argue for the unfallen human nature of Christ, he obviously places the person of Christ in the position of fallen Adam. In fact, Calvin is implicitly inclined to be in favour of Christ’s assumption of fallen humanity because Calvin asserts that Christ had to live in our existential sinful state for the sake of the integrity of the Gospel. As a result, the mortal human nature which Christ assumed demonstrates his solidarity with sinners and the vicarious humanity of Christ *pro nobis*.

## Conclusion

It is unreasonable for some theologians to argue for Christ’s unfallen humanity in the context of the doctrine of original sin because Christ himself overcame the power of sin and death in his fallen humanity. In the case of Calvin’s understanding of Christ’s humanity, we see that there is a tension between the nature and the state of Christ’s person. Calvin believes that Christ assumed our true humanity, lived a perfect life, and was sinless according to the Chalcedonian Definition. Thus, Calvin denies the fallenness of Christ’s

<sup>40</sup> Jean Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, tr. John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), p. 200.

<sup>41</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xvi.5.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, II.xvi.5.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, II.xvi.5.

<sup>44</sup> Jean Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 124.

<sup>45</sup> Jean Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, p. 181.

humanity in order to preserve the doctrine of Christ's perfect innocence. However, unlike others who are in favour of Christ's unfallen humanity, Calvin forcefully affirms the vicarious humanity of Christ in our corrupted state. Calvin affirms that Christ had to suffer from our existential problems according to the narratives of the Gospels. Moreover, the mortal human nature which Christ assumed shows solidarity with sinners and the vicarious humanity of Christ *pro nobis*. If Calvin were to accept the idea of the fallen nature of Christ, his thoughts on Christ's humanity for us would be more persuasive. Yet it is noted that Calvin's theological logic is 'anti-speculative' in that he focuses on what Christ has done for us in his true humanity.<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, Calvin argues that the body of Christ himself is the temple of God through which we can come to the throne of God's grace. Although Christ assumed our mortal body controlled by the power of sin and death after the Fall, Christ sanctified the body in his own person as the Mediator between God and all the fallen humanity and decaying creation. Furthermore, the reconciliation with God is not just attributed to the crucifixion of Christ in an external and forensic way but to the perfectly holy life of Christ who assumed our mortal body as a saviour in an internal and ontological perspective. Calvin's biblical views on the mortal body and its sanctification through the whole life fully describes the paradoxical character of Christ's mystical incarnation in which Christ became a true human being like one of us without becoming a fallen sinner. I conclude that, according to Calvin, the vicarious humanity of Christ means that for the sake of our salvation Christ assumed a mortal body like ours and lived a perfect life in our miserable state. Therefore, Christ's fallen humanity for us is the guarantee of reconciliation.

<sup>46</sup> McCormack, *For us and our Salvation*, p. 6.