

## **The Process of Becoming** by Dr Alex Tang (Feb 2014)

Spiritual formation is often described by the metaphor of a journey or pilgrimage. Some think of it as a series of stages. The impression is that, in spiritual growth, one must move from one stage to a successively higher level. John Calvin points out the fallacy in the metaphor of stages. From the point of view of justification and regeneration, a new believer's (or convert's) Christian spiritual formation does not start from scratch. Christian spiritual formation is NOT the process of a new spiritual being's growing into its mature or perfect state. Instead, it is the process of a mature or perfected being's discovering its real identity (1960, 686-87).

Thus, Calvin regards sanctification as a journey of working out one's adoption by God. His emphasis is participation in Christ, which is an operation of divine grace. It is God with believers irrespective of their journey to or away from Him. Reformed theologian William Edgar (2008) finds that Calvin is consistent in his teaching that, "in the Christian life, we are paradoxically becoming what we are, and Christians strive from this identity and not unto it." He also notes that Calvin argues that "the Christian life (regeneration) is a striving to conform increasingly to the image of Christ after having corrupted our natures in Adam" (2008, 323) This process is restoration of the *imago Dei*.

In **Colossians 3:8-14**, Paul uses the metaphor of removing the old self and exchanging it for the new one in his teaching on the spiritual life. There is no conflict here with Calvin's understanding of the Christian life. Calvin's perspective is that spiritual formation is a process of becoming through rediscovery of a person's true nature in God. It is a progressive process that moves toward full restoration. In putting on the new self, Paul does not have in mind a magical, instantaneous transformation, but rather a slow process of becoming the new self. These are simply two ways of describing the same process.