

# Protestant **Theological** Reformed Journal

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## Editor's Notes

You have in hand the first of two special issues of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*. This issue and, God willing, the April 2010 issue will be devoted to John Calvin. In commemoration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the great Reformer from Geneva, the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary sponsored a Calvin Conference. The theme of the conference was: "After 500 Years: John Calvin for Reformed Churches Today." The conference convened on Thursday, September 3, 2009 and concluded on Saturday, September 5, 2009. The venue of the conference was the First Christian Reformed Church of Byron Center, Michigan—a spacious and very serviceable facility. Turnout was better than anticipated. The sanctuary, at times, was filled to capacity, with over 1,000 people from around the United States and a number of foreign countries.

The conference included so much more than the seven speeches that were delivered. There was good, sweet fellowship. There were displays from various Protestant Reformed high schools. There was an essay contest. There were featured special numbers. There was a question and answer session. There were book tables containing both new and used titles. There was lusty audience singing. And so much more that made for a fine conference and fond memories. But the heart of the conference was the seven speeches. These speeches covered many different aspects of the career of Calvin and his enduring contribution to Reformed churches. The speeches were well received and our faculty was encouraged to publish them.

Four of the seven conference speeches appear in this issue of *PRTJ*. The remaining three speeches will appear in the April 2010 issue. Writing out the text of the speeches has undoubtedly allowed the conference speakers to expand their speeches a bit. Additionally, the publication of the speeches provides the opportunity for documentation of quotations and listing of references and sources in a way not possible in a speech. All of this makes the work of preparing the speeches that much more worthwhile, as well as the benefit of making the speeches available to a wider audience than those who were able to attend the conference.

Our plans for the April 2010 issue are to put into print the remaining three conference speeches. In addition we hope to include an extended book review section. Our intention is to devote this extended book review section to books by and on John Calvin. Many publishers have taken advantage of the interest in Calvin that has been sparked by his 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. A good number of worthwhile titles bearing the name of John Calvin, including some new biographies, as well as analysis of his theology, have been released. We hope to call attention to the best of these new books in our next issue.

I take this opportunity to express thanks to those of our readers who have contributed to our support. We continue to send the *PRTJ* to our subscribers free of charge. Your assistance in defraying the costs of publishing and mailing the journal are appreciated.

May our readers find this issue both instructive and edifying. And may the published speeches serve the same purpose on the pages of *PRTJ* as they did when spoken, namely, to motivate Reformed officebearers and church members to treasure the heritage that God has given to us through the Reformation in general, and through the Reformer John Calvin in particular. ●

# Calvin as Model for Reformed Ministers Today

Prof. Barrett Gritters

Reading the life and work of John Calvin is intimidating. It can also be invigorating and motivating for a Reformed pastor. Few will ever attain the stature of such a giant servant of Jesus Christ, but all can pray that Christ will use them as He used Calvin.

If Reformed ministers today in their 50-year pastorates did half of what Calvin did in his 27, preached a quarter as often per week as Calvin preached, worked with a tenth as much energy as did this man of God, reached even to Calvin's knees in theological stature, were devoted to the people's care with a fraction of his devotion, were willing to suffer for only one year what Calvin suffered most of his ministry, and had hearts of love for God a quarter of the size of this man's heart, their congregations would be healthy. Reformed churches would be prospering. Under the good providence and grace of God they would be able to survive in these evil days, and be good and strong witnesses of the Lord.

When a Reformed minister today reads about Calvin's devotion to his work because of Calvin's devotion to his God, he might be tempted to respond with shame: "What have I done with my gifts? How have I served my Lord with my time?" Or with such a sense of smallness that he despairs of ever accomplishing anything this giant of a man accomplished.

But he might respond differently. Understanding, first, that God gives men of Calvin's stature and strength, capacity and caliber, very *infrequently*; and, second, that each man is to work with the gifts that God gave to *him*; he might instead be spurred on to more faithful labor so that, following Calvin's "pattern of good works" (Tit. 2:7), he too can be a blessing to the church in his corner of the kingdom as Calvin was in his.

Calvin, a model? One modern preacher's judgment was that "He

caused untold millions of souls to be damned.”<sup>1</sup> David Hunt’s more recent salvo against Calvin and Calvinism is similar.<sup>2</sup> And the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* contends he was the “vindictive” and “unopposed dictator of Geneva.”<sup>3</sup> A pattern for Reformed ministers today? This reformer, writer, theologian, scholar, a model for Reformed *pastors*?

Like the apostle Paul in Philippians 3:17 (“as ye have us for an ensample”), Calvin can be a model for Reformed ministers.

### **First, John Calvin was *personally upright*.**

His enemies in Geneva testified otherwise. Some of his detractors quipped: “Better with Beza in hell than Calvin in heaven”<sup>4</sup> His contemporaries slandered him with the kinds of accusations that today would make a man file defamation lawsuits. One of the first biographies of Calvin, by Jerome Bolsec, was a vile piece filled with accusations of ambition, “filthy lucre,” womanizing, even homosexuality. Such evil accusations spurred Calvin’s colleague Theodore Beza to write the first biography that spoke truth about this man of God.

I have been a witness of him for sixteen years and I think that I am fully entitled to say that in this man there was exhibited to all an example of the life and death of the Christian, such as it will not be easy to depreciate, and it will be difficult to imitate.<sup>5</sup>

Not without faults, Calvin was upright in so many ways. If there is any truth to the contention that the great temptations for pastors are the quartet of **sloth, self, sex, and silver**, this was not learned from observing John Calvin.

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1 *Christian History*, 5, no. 4 (1986): 3 (quoted in the introductory pages of the special issue on Calvin; no citation given).

2 *What Love is This? Calvinism’s Misrepresentation of God* (2002, Sisters, Oregon, Loyal Publishing).

3 Ed. F.L. Cross (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 222, 223.

4 *Christian History*, *ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, 4.

First, Calvin was **selfless**. Although God thrust him into the limelight, he did not seek publicity and acclaim. Before he died, he left clear instructions that his grave-site not be marked, lest people venerate him instead of his God. Likely he would have shuddered to think that the doctrines of grace and the true system of the Christian faith would be named *Calvinism*. Unlike some of God's servants, his ego did not match his abilities.

Because he was conscious of the danger of pride and self-seeking, he taught: "The only true dignity of a Christian is indignity."<sup>6</sup> "A man who knows himself has little self-esteem."<sup>7</sup>

When someone asked him what were the basic precepts of the Christian religion, he illustrated by telling the story of the great Greek orator Demosthenes, who, when asked what were the first principles of *eloquence*, answered: "Pronunciation, pronunciation, pronunciation." (And we thought the realtors were original with their "Location, location, location.") Then, Calvin said, quoting Augustine, "If you ask me about the precepts of the Christian religion, I will answer that the first, the second, and the third are humility."<sup>8</sup> He confirmed these teachings in his dying words, "God had pity upon me."<sup>9</sup>

**Sexually** he was upright. Before he married he was hesitant to take a wife. "I shall not belong to those who are accused of attacking Rome, like the Greeks fought Troy, only to be able to take a wife." When finally he began looking for a wife he made it known to his friends who were looking for him: "Always keep in mind what I seek to find in her, for I am none of those insane lovers who embrace also the vices of those with whom they are in love, where they are smitten at first sight with a fine figure. This only is the beauty that allures me: if she is chaste, if not too fussy or fastidious, if economical, if patient, if there is hope that she will be interested about

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6 Pierre Marcel, "The Humility of the Prophet," in *John Calvin: Contemporary Prophet: A Symposium*, Jacob T. Hoogstra, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), 26.

7 *Institutes*, 3.3.16.

8 *Institutes*, 2.2.1.

9 Marcel, "The Humility of the Prophet," 36.



my health.” After his wife died when he was only 40, and he was reflecting on the unique blessing she was to him, he pledged that he would from then on “lead a solitary life.” He did, chastely, for 14 more years.<sup>10</sup>

He was an upright family man, devoted to his wife and children, a “one-woman-man” (I Tim. 3:2), not a womanizer. He could bear it when the people of Geneva assaulted him, but not when they assailed his Idelette. Idelette, he wrote to his friend Viret after she died, was “the best companion of my life.”<sup>11</sup>

As to **silver**, some of his enemies accused him of filthy lucre. Most knew better. He was not rich, nor interested in riches. Calvin was embarrassed at the recommendation of one prospective wife because she was rich and he thought her riches might be an offense to the congregation.<sup>12</sup> Fighting off the hurtful accusations of filthy lucre, Calvin said: “If some will not be persuaded while I am alive, my death at all events will show that I have not been a money-making man.”<sup>13</sup> Who has not heard the pope’s jealous praise of Calvin: “The strength of that heretic consisted in this, that money never had the slightest charm for him. If I had such servants, my dominion would extend from sea to sea.”<sup>14</sup>

But Calvin felt hurt by the accusations of avarice.

Neither the table at which we eat, nor the bed on which we sleep, is our own.... Where, then, do these rumors come from? My acquaintances

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10 William J. Petersen, “Idelette: John Calvin’s Search for the Right Wife,” *Christian History*, 5, no. 4 (1986): 12.

11 In a letter to Viret on April 7, 1549, cited in Philip Schaaf, *History of the Christian Church*, v. 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 419.

12 Ibid., 13.

13 Theodore Beza, *Life of John Calvin* (contained in John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958], vol. 1), cxxxiii.

14 Quoted in Gary Sanseri, “John Calvin on the Love of Money” (Appendix 5 in Theodore Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*, Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844; reprint, Milwaukie, OR: Back Home Industries, 1996), 145.

well know... that I do not possess a foot of land... I never had money sufficient to purchase an acre.<sup>15</sup>

One year when he needed to meet the expenses of his own sickness, he asked the council to lend him a few dollars. When he was ready to repay the council and they refused repayment, Calvin threatened never again to enter the pulpit if he could not repay. When his colleagues needed a raise and asked Calvin to bring the request to the city council, he proposed lowering his own salary and splitting the amount evenly among the pastors.<sup>16</sup>

And any accusation of **sloth** would be reckless. What man today could go stride for stride with this man in his tireless devotion to the work? He slept very little and probably did not know what a vacation was. A workhorse, Calvin usually preached twenty sermons per month, lectured to seminarians, composed catechisms, wrote letters in the thousands, authored books, visited sick, led consistory meetings, met with troubled refugees, established schools and advised their faculty, wrote church orders and city ordinances, counseled deacons and hospital directors, and more. Even on his deathbed, his almost obsessive drive to work manifested itself. He asked to work on dictation. When one of his friends urged him to rest, Calvin responded, to the effect: “What, would you have the Lord find me idle when He comes?”

Immediately after Calvin died, Nicolas Des Gallars, one of the pastors in Geneva’s company of pastors, wrote:

What labors, what long waking hours, what worries he bore;...with what faithfulness and intelligence he took an interest in everyone; with what kindness and good will he received those who turned to him; with what rapidity and openness he answered those who questioned him on the most serious of questions; with what wisdom he received, both privately and publicly, the difficulties and problems brought to him; with what gentleness he comforted the afflicted...with what firmness he resisted the enemy; with what zeal he brought low the proud and

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15 Thea B. VanHalsema, *This Was John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: I.D.E.A. Ministries, 1959), 164.

16 VanHalsema, *This Was John Calvin*, 166.

stubborn; with what greatness of soul he endured misfortune; with what moderation he behaved in prosperity; with what skill and enthusiasm. . . he acquitted himself of all the duties of a true and faithful servant of God, words of mine could never express.<sup>17</sup>

### **Second, Calvin was a willing and patient sufferer.**

Calvin taught others that the Christian life is a life of suffering—each bears his own cross—and he himself lived that life, without complaint.

He endured great physical pain and sorrow of heart, although these are not cross-bearing. Calvin suffered such physical and emotional hardships you might be inclined to call him the “Genevan Job.” Headaches kept him awake nights. Stomach cramps forced him to eat but once per day. He had asthma—a preacher with asthma! And the knifing pain of kidney stones on top of hemorrhoids. First one smiles, then he winces, when he hears that Calvin’s doctor recommended that he ride a horse to jar loose the painful kidney stones, but that Calvin’s hemorrhoids were too painful for him to sit on the horse.<sup>18</sup> The pastor worked through physical ailments that would have made most strong men today apply for early emeritation.

His grief of heart was unparalleled. His very first son lived only two weeks. Three years later a precious little daughter died at birth. Two years after that, another child was born prematurely, and died. When his dear help meet of only nine years contracted TB at age 40, he lost her, too, and lived a widower for the rest of his ministry—almost 15 years.

Just as heavy was his “cross-bearing.” Because they despised his stand for the gospel, many of the common people in Geneva treated him poorly. They named their dogs after him and composed songs to mock him. They abbreviated his last name by removing the “L” and the “V” so that it read C-A-I-N. On his deathbed speech to his colleagues, Calvin reminded the young preachers that when he first arrived to preach in Geneva: “I was welcomed with mockery one

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17 *Opera Calvini* XXXVI, 15-16 (cited in *Christian History*, 5, no. 4 [1986]: 10).

18 VanHalsema, *This Was John Calvin*, 184.

evening in front of my door by 50 or 60 rifle shots. Do you think that could disturb a poor, timid student as I am....?”<sup>19</sup> The rabble shouted at him while he was preaching; and when the police silenced them, they continued their provocations with rude gestures and crude sounds. Because church was so closely related to state, Calvin had political enemies who tried more than once to banish him from the city. His love for David’s Psalms may be explained by his David-like opposition—for Christ’s sake.

Calvin endured all these troubles, willingly. Before Calvin became Geneva’s pastor, and when Rev. Farel was thundering at him to stay, Calvin said: “If I had the choice, I would rather do anything than comply with your wishes in this matter. But when I remember that I am not my own, I offer my heart as a burnt sacrifice to the Lord.”<sup>20</sup> When, after he had been banished from Geneva, the authorities changed their minds and asked him to return, he said, “I’d rather go to the executioner,” and wrote, “I prefer a hundred deaths to this cross.”<sup>21</sup> His friend and neighboring pastor, Peter Viret, encouraged him to take the call because, among other things, Geneva’s mountain air would be good for his health. Calvin responded, “I read that passage of your letter certainly not without a smile, where you show so much concern about my health.... It would have been far preferable to perish once for all than to be tormented in that place of torture.”<sup>22</sup> But Calvin went anyway, because he did not pastor where he would be most comfortable, but where he would be most useful.

Doing this, Calvin was indeed practicing what he preached and becoming a pattern of good works for Reformed ministers:

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19 Cited in David W. Hall, “John Calvin: A Life Worth Knowing,” in *A Heart Promptly Offered: The Revolutionary Leadership of John Calvin*, (Cumberland House, 2006), accessed 5 October 2009, available from <http://www.calvin500.org/Bio3.html>.

20 Richard Stauffer, *The Humanness of John Calvin*, trans. George Shriver (Abingdon Press, 1971; reprint, Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2008), 96.

21 Ibid., 76.

22 VanHalsema, 128.

Each must bear his own cross. For whomever the Lord has adopted and deemed worthy of his fellowship ought to prepare themselves for a hard, toilsome, and unquiet life, crammed with very many and various kinds of evil. It is the heavenly Father's will thus to exercise them.... Beginning with Christ, his firstborn, he follows this plan with all his children.... Why should we exempt ourselves, therefore, from the condition to which Christ our Head had to suffer?<sup>23</sup>

But Calvin knew the crosses were not without purpose:

The apostle teaches that God has destined all his children to the end that they be conformed to Christ. Hence... a great comfort comes to us: we share Christ's sufferings in order that, as he has passed from the labyrinth of all evils into heavenly glory, we may in like manner be led through various tribulations to the same glory.... By communion with him the very sufferings themselves not only become blessed to us but also help much in promoting our salvation.<sup>24</sup>

When they were evicted by the angry crowd in Geneva, 1538, Calvin wrote Farel: "If we had been serving man, we had been badly rewarded! However, we serve the One who never withholds from his servants that which he has promised them. Beyond measure, the Lord cares for us his servants."<sup>25</sup>

Calvin would have put it something like this: By these sufferings, God trains our eyes (ministers, too) on home and makes our hearts pant for the coming day of Christ.

### **Third, Calvin was a wise and sympathetic pastor.**

To describe (or think of) Calvin as a scholar, theologian, church reformer, disciplinarian (in the good sense), liturgist, catechist, organizer of schools, hospital and orphanage builder, or anything else, without describing him first of all as a pastor of the church in Geneva, would be like writing the biography of my dear wife and describing

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23 *Institutes*, 3.1.8.

24 *Ibid.*

25 In Dale Cooper, "A Sort of Perpetual Cross," *The Banner*, August 2009, 37 (no reference is cited by Cooper).

her first of all as a marvelous cook, excellent seamstress, counselor of younger women, and tireless homemaker, without giving her the greatest honor—calling her a devoted wife, mother, and grandmother. Likewise, Calvin was all these other things; but to do justice and be accurate we must describe him as “The Pastor of Geneva.”

Although originally reluctant to be a pastor, far preferring the life of a secluded scholar, once God impressed upon him the call to serve the church pastorally, Calvin became a determined pastor. He was no longer of the mind that some pastors have today, happy and even eager to leave their flock for a year’s study on a scholar’s grant.

He was a **sympathetic** pastor, with a heart that longed for the people’s good. Calvin yearned to deliver the people from suffering. He suffered with them.

I was so struck, in all my studies for this conference, by the deep sympathy of this man of God that I took enough notes to make an entire article on that subject alone. So I must be selective and give the best sampling that I can.

Geneva’s poor, orphans, widows, sick—all found an advocate in Pastor Calvin. Most of those who have only cursory knowledge of Calvin would never describe him as an activist for the destitute. But under his influence the office of deacon was restored in the church, with two branches—one for the poor, the other for the sick and elderly. He was so influential in his mercy for the poor that some Calvin scholars contend that his mercy ministry had as much influence in European *society* as his theology did in the *church*. He was so determined to make known his love for the poor that he wrote, exaggerating if only so slightly:

Do we want to show that there is reformation among us? We must begin at this point, that is, there must be pastors who bear purely the doctrine of salvation, and then deacons who have the care of the poor.<sup>26</sup>

And more emphatically, but with no hyperbole:

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26 In David W. Hall, “Ten Ways Modern Culture is Different Because of John Calvin,” *Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth*, July/August 2009, 159.

If we want to be considered Christians and want it to be believed that there is some church among us, *this* organization must be demonstrated and maintained.<sup>27</sup>

He risked his life for the suffering under his care. He ministered face to face to those from whom he could have contracted the plague. From his own small store of personal possessions he gave to help orphans. Nothing could stop him from this God-given care: I am prepared “to pawn my head and feet, that it (money) will be found forthcoming here.”<sup>28</sup> When he wrote his will, he allocated much of what little he had for the Boy’s School and the poor.

Calvin’s Christian pastoral compassion also led him to minister to those who were persecuted for their faith.

The time of the Reformation was a time of great persecution. By letter, Calvin advised many that their options were either to endure the suffering, even death, or flee. Many fled. They went to Geneva, where they knew they would be cared for. So many refugees came to Geneva that some of the locals became resentful of their burgeoning influence.

Calvin wrote letters to prisoners who could not flee—touching letters that make one cry to read. One must read the story of the five young men sentenced to death in a Roman Catholic crack-down on the reformation in Lyons, France. Calvin personally tried to gain their release; wrote letters to the young men themselves; wrote a letter of encouragement to a local pastor who had visited them; and then wrote the most touching letter when the young men knew, after many appeals, there was no hope for their lives being spared.

Since it pleases God to employ you to the death in maintaining his quarrel, he will strengthen your hands in the fight, and will not suffer a single drop of your blood to be spent in vain. And though the fruit may not all at once appear, yet in time it shall spring up more abundantly than we can express. But as he has vouchsafed you this privilege, that your bonds have been renowned, and that the noise of

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27 Ibid.

28 Stauffer, 83-85.

them has been everywhere spread abroad, it must need be, in spite of Satan, that your death should resound far more powerfully, so that the name of our Lord be magnified thereby.<sup>29</sup>

And with that encouragement from Calvin they went to the stake to be burned, likely singing Psalm 68, a favorite of the Reformers. Reflect on the wording of this 1539 (!) versification of the Psalm, which Reformed believers still sing today:

Let God be praised with reverence deep;  
He daily comes our lives to steep  
In bounties freely given.  
God cares for us, our God is He;  
Who would not fear His majesty  
In earth as well as heaven?  
Our God upholds us in the strife;  
To us He grants eternal life,  
And saves from desolation.  
He hears the needy when they cry,  
He saves their souls when death draws nigh,  
This God is our salvation.<sup>30</sup>

Then read, if you will, the form prayer “For All the Needs of Christendom” and be aware of the great influence of Calvin on that beautiful prayer designed for a Reformed worship service.<sup>31</sup>

Calvin *personally* cared for so many individuals who were in need, for believers who would never be able to repay his “favors.”

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29 In W. Robert Godfrey, *John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2009), 161. (The story, with the quotations, are given without citation of source).

30 *The Psalter*, rev. ed., produced by special arrangement for the Protestant Reformed Churches (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), #420, stanza 5. The 1539 versification was by Matthaëus Greiter; the English is the version of Rev. B. Essenburg, 1931.

31 The prayer may be found in *The Psalter*, rev. ed., produced by special arrangement for Reformation Heritage Books (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), Liturgy section, 170-171.



He wrote letters to women whose husbands had been unfaithful, to parents whose children had died (“I found myself so distracted and confused in spirit that for several days I could do nothing but cry”<sup>32</sup>), to a husband who had lost his wife (assuring him that he would be reunited with her in heaven<sup>33</sup>). He asked Viret to find lodging for an old woman, took personal responsibility for the care of orphans, even set himself to playing “matchmaker” for a young member of his congregation, a practice of questionable wisdom for pastors today!

Calvin cared for the lovely. He also ministered to the unlovely. He pastored Servetus, the impenitent heretic Michael Servetus. Twenty years before Servetus was finally burned at the stake, Calvin risked his own life by traveling to Paris to meet and teach Servetus, who, although he expressed willingness to meet, did not show up. At Servetus’s trial, where Calvin was the “chief witness for the prosecution,” Servetus threw vicious denunciations at him. Calvin still visited him in jail and pleaded with him to repent. Servetus laughed at him. When Servetus finally was sentenced to death, Calvin petitioned the authorities to grant the more humane death of beheading rather than burning, although the request was denied. And though there are different versions of the events of the day of execution (some historians having Farel accompanying him to the stake), it is not unlikely that Calvin accompanied the condemned Servetus, pleading with him to confess Jesus as “God, the eternal Son,” rather than merely, “son of the eternal God.”

Reformed pastors grow in their appreciation for the pastoral heart of this giant theologian.

It is one thing to be a pastor, but quite another to be wise and balanced. Calvin served with a rare wisdom.

Those who have read any of his commentaries are familiar with his magnanimous approach when the proper exegesis is questionable: “You may hold your interpretation; here is why I hold mine.”

He refused to support radicals (the “200 percenters”) in the city,

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32 In Stauffer, 88.

33 *Selected Works*, vol. 6, 1551, ed. H. Beveridge and J. Bonnet (Grand Rapids: 1983), 236, in Godfrey, 148.

resisting at times even his own colleagues in order to keep balance. When he gave counsel to a church torn by strife, he spoke first to the people: “some of you are impelled by a zeal not tempered by moderation”; and: be patient with your less-than-satisfactory pastor. Second, he counseled the consistory: “It will be your duty to bring [the people] to reason with all meekness and humanity... (and) you know the rule which the Holy Spirit lays down... that each should yield and give up his right.”<sup>34</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, but certainly instructive for pastors today, he was willing to interpret the evils in the congregation as God’s judgment upon them. Then, in a private response to one of the magistrates in the vicinity, he admitted that the situation was probably worse than he let on to the church, that the pastor was probably largely to blame, and that it was not only the “perverse and peevish” but also the “honest and simple” who despised the pastor. Calvin’s wisdom even anticipated Article 11: “Sometimes, for the good of the congregation, ministers must go even if they are innocent.”<sup>35</sup>

His pastoral wisdom and prudence warned against judging a man’s eternal destiny, a man who persecuted the Reformed: “To pronounce that he is damned... is to go too far, unless one had some certain and infallible mark of his reprobation.”<sup>36</sup> He called the people to seek the salvation even of their enemies; he cautioned the “hyper-Calvinists” of his day. (“We cannot yet,” he said, “distinguish the elect from the reprobate.”<sup>37</sup>)

And in his deathbed speech to the city’s leaders, Calvin gave counsel that every young minister ought to frame in his study. They

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34 Godfrey, 163.

35 Godfrey, 165. The church order of many Reformed churches today is largely the church order of Dordt, which speaks of “dismissing the minister from service.” The article is used to separate a pastor and congregation when their relationship becomes so strained that consistory and classis judge separation to be the only remedy.

36 *Selected Works*, vol. 7, 1551 ed. H. Beveridge and J. Bonnet (Grand Rapids: 1983), 354, in Godfrey, 150.

37 *Commentary on John*, vol. 2, 172.

ought “not to innovate—we often ask for novelties—...because all change is hazardous, and sometimes harmful.”<sup>38</sup>

**Fourth, Calvin was a teacher of the church’s children.**

As faithful ministers today know, Calvin recognized that the church would not last another generation if the children did not receive catechetical instruction, plus thorough parental Christian education. He saw the urgent need not only for training in the faith, but for secular education from good teachers.

So he instituted catechism.<sup>39</sup> After he was banished from Geneva, he would not return except under four conditions, one of which was catechism. Already in his first pastorate, Geneva’s “Ecclesiastical Articles” included a demand for catechism. After his return, the requirements were even more thorough. He and the consistory demanded that parents send their children, beginning already at age 7, and that they be disciplined if they refused. They required the children to memorize answers, sing the Scripture to commit it to memory, and attend classes until they made confession of their faith. And officebearers who were qualified for the work must teach.

With a pastor’s heart, he also drew up ordinances for Christian schools.<sup>40</sup> Calvin understood that the *church* had responsibility to promote the Christian education of the children. So Geneva established not only the Academy to train preachers, magistrates, lawyers, etc., but also a school for the children, beginning also at age 7.

Children learned theology, but also the arts and sciences, because “Calvin was convinced that the Reformation could grow and increase

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38 Cited in David W. Hall, “John Calvin: A Life Worth Knowing,” in *A Heart Promptly Offered: The Revolutionary Leadership of John Calvin* (Cumberland House, 2006), accessed 5 October 2009, available from <http://www.calvin500.org/Bio3.html>. No reference is given by Hall.

39 In an upcoming *Journal* article I plan to publish my recent study of Calvin’s and Geneva’s catechetical instruction of the church’s covenant youth.

40 The information in this section comes primarily from J. Chris Coetzee, “Calvin and the School,” in *John Calvin: Contemporary Prophet: A Symposium*, Jacob T. Hoogstra, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), 197-225.

only through a study of the arts and sciences as well as that of theology.” They had “grammatical drills, memorization, reciting, reviewing....” The school must have a capable headmaster, and it must be well-funded so that all the poor could attend. Just as with catechism, parents were to be punished if they refused or neglected to send their children to the school. Very clearly, Calvin saw that, although the education of the children was the duty of the parents, both church and state had part in it.

Passionately interested in the welfare of the lambs!

### **Fifth, Calvin was a zealous missionary.**

If Calvin were alive today, one can hardly imagine that he would not have been a member of the denomination’s mission committee, on the local church’s evangelism committee, or be begging the elders not to forbid him on the ground that “There is other more important work to be done.”

Calvin did not take a call to a mission field, become ordained as a missionary, or travel to the ends of the earth. Nevertheless, he may be described as a missionary. He was as involved as any man could be in the worldwide spread of the gospel.

What many scholars of missions say about Calvin is untrue. One mission historian wrote: “We miss in the Reformers not only mission action, but even the idea of missions...because fundamental theological views hindered them from giving their activity and even their thoughts a missionary direction.”<sup>41</sup> Even Alister McGrath, popular writer on Christian history and doctrine, argued that Protestantism had little interest in missions and that “neither John Calvin nor Martin Luther had any particular interest to reach beyond the borders of Christendom.”<sup>42</sup> Of course, McGrath does not consider Roman Catholicism to be the ripe field for missions that it was. How many thousands and millions were dying spiritually in that fold?

From 1555 to 1562, Geneva’s consistory minutes (the “Register of the Company of Pastors”) show that Geneva sent out 88 mission-

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41 D. McKay, “The Missionary Zeal of Calvin,” *Lux Mundi*, December 2008, 83.

42 Cited in McKay, 83.

aries, mostly to France, Calvin's homeland. Likely the number was far higher, since to record the names of the missionaries would be to risk their lives. Some sources show as many as over 100, in just one year, were sent out. "...An army of missionaries (were sent) to Italy, Germany, Scotland, England, and especially to France."<sup>43</sup>

The young, newly trained ministers went out under the cover of night and hid in attics and in false rooms behind chimneys. They gathered in barns, open fields, or secluded caves. As a result, small churches were organized. And with Calvin's good counsel by letter, signed often with a pseudonym, the churches multiplied! By his efforts, there were over 1,000 underground "church plants"<sup>44</sup> in France by 1560. Like the Israelites in Egypt, "the more they were afflicted, the more they multiplied and grew." In 20 years, the number of Reformed churches in France increased by 800, from 1,200 to 2,000!

It was *dangerous* for these missionaries. Many were arrested and sentenced to death. The Academy of Geneva (Calvin's "seminary") became known as "Calvin's school of death" because so many graduates went out to martyrdom in France.

And critics say Calvin did not promote or engage in missions? They call attention only to the aborted effort to evangelize Brazil as evidence that Calvin and his Reformed friends were not missionaries?

Contrary to the claims of his critics, Calvin's doctrines of predestination and the sovereignty of God in salvation did not hinder him from being a zealous proponent of missions. In fact, these doctrines were the grounds for his mission efforts. In his *Institutes*, Calvin quotes Augustine with approval that, because the number of the elect is unknown to us, our attitude in missions must be determined by the desire that all may be saved. "For as we know not who belongs to the number of the predestinated or who does not belong, we ought to be so minded as to wish that all men be saved." So far Augustine.

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43 *Christian History*, 5, no. 4 (1986): 23.

44 This is the language the Reformers used. An *eglise plantee* might be no more than an unorganized group, meeting for prayer and Bible study; the goal, ultimately, was an *eglise dresse*, an organized church with its own officebearers (cf. D. McKay, 85).

Then Calvin comments: “So shall it come about that we try to make everyone we meet a sharer in our peace.”<sup>45</sup> Predestination, the reason Calvin did not engage in missions? Wrong, on both accounts.

Calvin’s motives for missions are a warning to the Reformed pastor today who may be tempted to misapply the doctrine of predestination. A personal desire, welling up within those who have experienced God’s grace, that also others should have this great blessing, drives a man to missions.

By these words [Is. 2:3] he first declares that the godly will be filled with such an ardent desire to spread the doctrines of religion, that every one not satisfied [*carnally* satisfied, BG] with his own calling and his personal knowledge will desire to draw others along with him. And indeed nothing could be more inconsistent with the nature of faith than that deadness which would lead a man to disregard his brethren, and to keep the light of knowledge (of God) choked up within his own breast. The greater the eminence above others which any man has received from his calling, so much the more diligently ought he to labor to enlighten others.<sup>46</sup>

Meditate, for a little while, on the implications of that.

### **Sixth, Calvin was a preacher.**

An exegetical, doctrinal, polemical, passionate, and practical preacher.<sup>47</sup>

Calvin was nothing if not a preacher. Calvin is preeminently a model for Reformed pastors today insofar as Calvin was a preacher. He knew what fed the flock, kept the wolves at bay, ministered to the lambs, gave muscle to the bones of the warriors...and skill to their hands. He preached with the unshakable conviction that the mouth of the minister was the mouth of God, as Bullinger put it, “The preaching of the Word of God is the word of God,” and that

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45 *Institutes*, 3.23.14.

46 *Commentary on Isaiah*, cited in McKay, 89.

47 For fuller treatment of Calvin as preacher, see Steven Key’s article in this issue.

“Wherever the gospel is preached, it is as if God himself came into the midst of us.”<sup>48</sup>

So, besides preaching many times per week, he trained preachers, and warned them: “May the souls so dearly purchased by the blood of our Lord not perish by our carelessness.”<sup>49</sup> This pastor wanted to be sure the new pastors could train more preachers until the Lord returned. He knew that “it pleases God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe” (I Cor. 1:21).

He was **exegetical**: “Let those who desire to teach others well, appoint themselves these bounds, that they utter nothing but out of the pure fountain of the word.”<sup>50</sup>

His preaching was **doctrinal**. The Scriptures are profitable for doctrine! “An assembly in which the preaching of heavenly doctrine is not heard does not deserve to be reckoned a Church.”<sup>51</sup>

He was not hesitant to be **polemical**: “The pastor ought to have two voices; one, for gathering the sheep, and another for warding off...wolves.”<sup>52</sup>

Calvin modeled **passion**: “It appears to me that there is very little preaching of a lively kind in the Kingdom, but that the greater part deliver it by way of reading from a written discourse.” Commenting on Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, and Paul’s “jealousy” for the church, Calvin rebuked the preachers of his and our day: “Away with indolence and coldness in [preaching], for one that is cold will never be qualified for this office.”<sup>53</sup> Passion on the pulpit was one of the reasons that, although he did not require this of others, Calvin

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48 Cited in *Calvin’s Wisdom: An Anthology Arranged Alphabetically*, Graham Miller (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 225.

49 Jean-Daniel Benoit, “Pastoral Care of the Prophet,” in *John Calvin: Contemporary Prophet: A Symposium*, Jacob T. Hoogstra, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), 53.

50 Cited in *Calvin’s Wisdom*, 254.

51 *Ibid.*, 254.

52 *Ibid.*, 253.

53 *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 340.

preached without notes. He wanted to speak to the hearts of the people, and from his heart.

And how **practical** his sermons were! No one who has read the sermons of Calvin will deny that the preaching of Calvin was also eminently practical, addressed and applied concretely to the *practice* of Christianity. Even his doctrinal treatise, the *Institutes*, at times had more application than explanation.<sup>54</sup> That was the mind and heart of this Minister of Geneva.

### **Seventh, John Calvin loved God.**

Calvin was everything that he was because he was devoted in love to his God.

Consider the other topics of our conference papers. Why was Calvin a reformer? Why an expositor and preacher of Holy Scripture? Why a defender of church discipline? A teacher of justification, predestination, the covenant? Then consider the areas I have mentioned. Why personally upright, a willing sufferer, a wise and sympathetic pastor, a teacher of covenant children, a zealous missionary and faithful preacher?

Because he was a man fully devoted in love to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing else explains him. Nothing else would drive him to such lengths. A man's love for God will enable him to do everything.

Everything he did manifested his love for God. Read his sermons, but do not fail to read the prayers that come after every sermon, and hear the devotion to the One who saved his eyes from tears, his feet from falling, who had set him free. Hear him cry out for mercy, plead with God to use the word to bless the flock, glorify Him. See his dedication to the exposition of the Psalms, because, of all things, the child of God is called to worship and prayer.

*Cor Meum Tibi, Offero Domine, Prompte et Sincere.*

If I ever had the privilege to write a biography of John Calvin and say in it what most impressed me about this man, I would say

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. Calvin's treatment of the doctrine of providence, both in his *Institutes* and his *Calvin's Calvinism*.



what every minister of Christ would want said about himself after his death: He loved God. Higher praise than that I cannot give to a man. He loved God.

Nearing death, Calvin said (and every believer with even a hint of a tender heart chokes to read it):

In the name of God, I, John Calvin, servant of the Word of God in the church of Geneva...thank God that He has shown not only mercy toward me, His poor creature, and ...has suffered me in all sins and weaknesses, but what is much more, that He has made me a partaker of His grace to serve Him through my work.... I confess to live and die in this faith which He has given me, inasmuch as I have no other hope or refuge than His predestination upon which my entire salvation is grounded. I embrace the grace which He has offered me in our Lord Jesus Christ and accept the merits of His suffering and dying, that through them all my sins are buried; and I humbly beg Him to wash me and cleanse me with the blood of our great Redeemer...so that I, when I shall appear before His face, may bear His likeness. Moreover, I declare that I endeavored to teach His Word undefiled and to expound Holy Scripture faithfully, according to the measure of grace which He has given me.

After Calvin died, his old friend Farel said: “Oh, how happily he has run a noble race. Let us run like him, according to the measure of grace given us.” ●

# Calvin the Preacher

Steven R. Key

Considering that the inspired apostle Paul was compelled to speak of “the foolishness of preaching,” men of the world would certainly find it astounding that so many should be gathered together to consider John Calvin as a preacher. Calvin’s contributions were many. Even the world recognizes the impression he left upon many aspects of life not only in Geneva, but in Europe and from there spreading to North America. But the one thing that Calvin himself would be remembered for—I have no doubt—is that he stood before God a faithful preacher of the gospel.

While the focus of this conference is on John Calvin, we must be careful not to attribute to Calvin more than what is proper. John Calvin was not the “father of preaching.” He was not the father of preaching even in the context of the great Reformation of the sixteenth century. He was a second-generation reformer following the path marked out by Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and other reformers who had brought to the church a renewed emphasis upon expository preaching and who had witnessed the powerful divine effects of that preaching. Calvin’s contribution to preaching is most significant particularly in the theology upon which his preaching was founded and the brilliance of his exegetical gifts, the gifts of Bible interpretation.

In the course of this speech on Calvin the preacher, I intend to call your attention, first of all, to John Calvin’s preaching. Secondly, I would have you notice the theological foundation and focus of that preaching and, therefore, why his preaching was so powerful. Finally — to make it applicable to more than just the seminary students and my colleagues in the ministry — I will direct your attention to what Calvin had to say about the attitude and duty of the congregation in regard to preaching.

## Calvin’s Preaching

What was Calvin’s preaching like?

Let's go back to Calvin's Geneva. The first day of each new week in Geneva began with a sermon at daybreak: six A.M. from Easter to the first of October, and seven A.M. in the winter months.<sup>1</sup> Another service was held at nine A.M. and a third service at three in the afternoon. During the week, preaching services were held on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings, until in October 1549 the Council ordered the sermons increased from every other day to once every day.<sup>2</sup> John Calvin himself preached every day, every other week, as well as twice on Sundays, for a total of ten sermons every two weeks.<sup>3</sup> Given all his other responsibilities, such a rigorous preaching schedule would not seem to leave much time for careful preparation. Yet the strength of his preaching began in his study.

Preparation for the faithful preacher requires ardent self-discipline, a commitment to rigorous study, and careful preparation. Calvin's understanding of that was expressed by him this way in a sermon on Deuteronomy 6:13-16 as he explained the exhortation, "Ye shall not tempt the LORD your God." He said, "...if I should climb up into the pulpit without having deigned to look at a book and frivolously imagine 'Ah well! When I get there God will give me enough to talk about,' and I do not condescend to read, or to think about what I ought to declare, and I come here without carefully pondering how I must apply the Holy Scripture to the edification of the people—well, then I should be a cock-sure charlatan and God would put me to confusion in my audaciousness."<sup>4</sup> So Calvin applied his brilliant mind to the study of God's word, working with the original languages, drawing on his extensive knowledge of the Scriptures, and often taking into account what others also had written concerning the passage he was studying.

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1 T.H.L. Parker, *The Oracles of God: An Introduction to the Preaching of John Calvin*, London and Redhill, England: Lutterworth Press, 1947, p. 33.

2 T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, p. 59.

3 Parker, *Oracles*, p. 39.

4 John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy, Facsimile of 1583 Edition*, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, p. 292. (The translation is taken from Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, p. 81.)

Calvin came to the pulpit without manuscript or notes. We know very little, therefore, about the early years of his preaching, and have little basis on which to make any evaluation of his development as a preacher. It is only after his return to Geneva in 1541 that a more definite picture of his preaching is formed, although another eight years of his career pass with limited information. We may be thankful that beginning in 1549 a society of French immigrants in the church saw to the recording and cataloging of the sermons by a professional stenographer.<sup>5</sup> We consider, therefore, the Calvin who had several years of pulpit experience by this time. The sermons available to us today in the English language are sermons preached during this final 15-year period of Calvin's ministry, from 1549 to 1564.

Calvin's approach in preaching was to preach systematically through entire books of the Bible. His text, depending on the nature of the book from which he was preaching, would consist of two or three verses, or an entire section of the chapter. He would not let his personal feelings shape what texts he might select, nor could he ever be accused of treating only subjects he deemed important. The congregation in Geneva knew from week to week and day to day what section of Scripture they would hear expounded when they went to the house of God.

By these continuous expositions of Scripture, "difficult and controversial subjects were unavoidable. Hard sayings could not be skipped. Difficult doctrines could not be overlooked. The full counsel of God could be heard."<sup>6</sup> So committed was Calvin to this kind of series preaching that on his return to Geneva in September 1541, after having been banned from the city three years earlier, he did not climb the pulpit again with a special sermon for the occasion, but he

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5 *La compagnie des étrangers* (the Company of Strangers) hired Denis Raguénier for half a pastor's salary. Raguénier would take down the sermon in shorthand and afterward dictate his shorthand to a team of secretaries who wrote out the text in full. John Calvin directed that the profits of any sermons sold be given to the fund to support French refugees. (Cf. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, pp. 65ff.; Selderhuis, *John Calvin, A Pilgrim's Life*, p. 131.)

6 Steven J. Lawson, *The Expository Genius of John Calvin*, Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2007, p. 32.

opened the Scriptures and began to preach exactly where he left off three years before. Calvin would interrupt these series only for certain occasions, generally related to the church calendar, at which times he would preach from appropriate texts for the occasion.<sup>7</sup>

Because he was of the conviction that Scripture was a unity and that the whole Bible belonged to the people of God, he balanced preaching from the Old Testament with preaching from the New. He did so recognizing that all Scripture is amazingly relevant to God's people in every moment of history. He understood that the urgency with which Peter sent his first epistle to the church scattered throughout the various regions of Asia Minor pressed upon the congregation in Geneva with the same weight. The Psalms, which so often express the deep spiritual thoughts and experiences of those who wrote them under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, also express our *own* thoughts and experiences. *All* God's word speaks to the needs of God's people.

This commitment to series preaching tells us something else about Calvin's perspective of preaching and its relationship to the health of the church. He understood that the spiritual growth of God's people is not something sudden. We do not grow from childhood to adulthood overnight. We must be faithfully fed and nourished, growing slowly but surely over a long period of time. The preacher must have a long view of the church's spiritual growth. The blessed fruits of preaching that are seen in the salvation and spiritual growth of God's people are fruits slow in developing. But even though slow, those fruits are also sure—when a minister faithfully and consistently proclaims God's Word in the midst of the congregation. For that reason, for however long it took, sometimes a year or more, Calvin would steep the congregation in the gospel set forth in a particular book or section of Scripture.

British scholar T.H.L. Parker, who has written two books on Calvin's preaching, presents a list of Calvin's sermons from various books of the Bible.<sup>8</sup> Just to give you an example of the extensive nature of Calvin's sermon series, he preached 123 sermons from Genesis, 200 from Deuteronomy, 159 from Job, 342 or 343 from Isaiah, and 189

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7 Parker, *Oracles*, p. 70.

8 Parker, *Oracles*, p. 163; *Calvin's Preaching*, pp. 150-171.

from the Book of Acts. A shorter series from John Calvin would be a 43-sermon series from Galatians, a 28-sermon series from the prophecy of Micah, or 25 from the book of Lamentations. Although there are no records of his sermons prior to 1549, from that year to the end of his life in 1564 Calvin preached 2,040 sermons. Compare that to the roughly 1,500 sermons a Protestant Reformed minister would preach over a similar 15-year period! Considering that, during much of that time, he preached ten sermons every two weeks, not a few ministers today might think, “No wonder he died young!”

But Calvin understood the tremendous calling and privilege God had given him to preach the gospel. To that preaching he would give himself, in health as well as in sickness—and the occasions were often when he preached in ill health and in pain, let alone in the face of much opposition. His infirmities also apparently affected his sermon delivery. His delivery is said to have been rather slow and deliberate, partly because of his chronic affliction with asthma.<sup>9</sup> From the reading of Scripture to the amen of his closing prayer, the people of God would give Calvin their attention for an hour. He would not tax them longer. Nor would he overburden them with excessive sermon content in that hour. His sermons were able to be taken down word for word by those who recorded them. In reading Calvin’s sermon orally at the pace at which I would normally preach, I found that what Calvin preached in an hour takes me approximately 35 minutes.

A convincing case has been made for Calvin having used the Hebrew and Greek text not merely in his preparation for preaching, but in expounding the text from the pulpit.<sup>10</sup> Though he would not mention Hebrew or Greek words from the pulpit, careful to avoid drawing attention to his own knowledge, as well as being careful to speak on the level of the common person’s understanding, Calvin

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9 Parker, *Oracles*, p. 40.

10 This is the assertion not only of T.H.L. Parker, but also of Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 4: *The Age of the Reformation*: “The text on which Calvin preaches is the Greek text, and the translation he offers his congregation is often a free translation, as we find here” (pp. 99-100).

translated his text directly from the original language. Parker puts it this way:

He had, then, a Hebrew Old Testament or Greek New Testament before him and preached without any notes (or so we assume from the fact that he had no notes when he lectured). This was not from any notion that extemporaneous preaching was superior to a written sermon or notes, but no doubt because he knew he could trust his memory.<sup>11</sup>

The strength of Calvin's preaching is not to be found in his sermon outlines. He did not follow a stated outline with a theme and recognizable divisions taken from the logical structure of the text. He expounded the text sentence by sentence, phrase by phrase, and occasionally even word by word. That is not to say that his sermons were bare commentaries. There is clearly a difference when you compare his sermons to his commentaries. While both involve careful interpretation of the passage, Calvin's sermons carried much greater emphasis on the practical application of the teachings of the text, showing a concern to apply the meaning of the text to the congregation and to exhort them to submit to the word of God. The weakness of this

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11 Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, p. 81. The accuracy of Parker's assumption could be called into question by what Calvin wrote to the Protector Somerset, October 22, 1548 in Calvin's *Selected Works*, vol. 5, p. 202-203: "What I have thus suggested as to the manner of instruction, is only that the people be so taught as to be touched to the quick, and that they may feel that what the Apostle says is true (Hebrews 4), that 'the word of God is a two-edged sword, piercing even through the thoughts and affections to the very marrow of the bones.' I speak thus, Monseigneur, because it appears to me that there is very little preaching of a lively kind in the kingdom, but that the greater part deliver it by way of reading from a written discourse. I see very well the necessity which constrains you to that; for in the first place you have not, as I believe, such well-approved and competent pastors as you desire. Wherefore, you need forthwith to supply this want." I realize, however, that this quote could refer as much to those who were neglecting faithful sermon preparation and simply reading written sermons from other preachers, as to those who were taking manuscripts to the pulpit and giving a lifeless reading from their manuscripts.

form of Calvin's sermon making was that the thread of a main theme, let alone a logical structure, was not always evident in his sermons. That said, Calvin was not so interested in style as in substance, and was content to let the contents of the text bear the weight of carrying the minds of the congregation. And so it did.

Parker, in what I consider a brilliant description of Calvin's preaching, put it this way: "The sermons are like rivers, moving strongly in one direction, alive with eddies and cross-currents, now thundering in cataracts, now a calm mirror of the banks and the sky; but never still, never stagnant."<sup>12</sup>

Hughes Oliphant Old points out that John Calvin did have some important gifts for speaking, not the least of which was his brilliant memory and the ability to focus attention on the text with such intensity that he drew his hearers into the text with him.<sup>13</sup> He also had an outstanding grasp of language, the ability to use words with greatest precision. In thought and expression Calvin was characterized by clarity. But it wasn't gifts of oratory that made his preaching exemplary. It was the content—the solid exegesis and the constant concern for the application of the text to the hearts and lives of God's people, himself included.

Believing that the Holy Spirit inspired Holy Scripture word for word, Calvin gave careful attention to the grammatical construct of the text. There is purpose in the grammatical form of the words used by the Holy Spirit. In addition, Calvin gave diligent and faithful attention to the historical context of every passage, recognizing that the weight of each passage is founded on a particular historical setting and circumstance. Yet each historical setting bore an application to the church throughout the ages. "Calvin drew out of the Scriptures aspects of Christian teaching which the Church had not heard for centuries."<sup>14</sup> He preached with the goal of leading the congregation into the power-

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12 Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, p. 132.

13 Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 4: *The Age of the Reformation*, Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, England: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002, pp. 128-132.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 130.



ful realities of the application of God's Holy Word. Calvin understood that by the work of the Holy Spirit, "The lives of those who believed the Word of God would be transformed by that Word.... To believe the Word was to live by the Word."<sup>15</sup> The thoughts and affections of the hearts of God's people, when shaped by the power of the word preached, would bear fruit to the glory of God. Of that Calvin was sure.

Various men have spoken of Calvin's style of preaching as *familiar*.<sup>16</sup> By that they speak of preaching that could be understood by the common person. It was a term used by Calvin himself quite frequently. Preaching on Ephesians 5:15-18, he pointed out that "God has stooped in such a way that all of us from the greatest to the least may be taught in familiar fashion by his Word."<sup>17</sup> In a sermon on I Timothy 1:3, he said, "We always try to make Scripture familiar."<sup>18</sup> By that expression Calvin had reference not only to the personal nature of his preaching. That was part of it. He sought to make the gospel message *personal*, so that the congregation knew that God was speaking to *them*. But Calvin also had in mind the *language* he used, language that could be understood by the common people. Of preaching, Calvin said, "... let them not be dazzled by men, but let them show that the Word that they carry, that is committed to them, is like the royal scepter of God, under which all creatures bow their heads and bend their knees."<sup>19</sup>

In this context of holding forth his efforts to make Scripture *familiar*, he censured preachers who "babble in refined language."<sup>20</sup> Pointedly he addressed this matter when he wrote: "...good and faithful ministers of God...must not make a parade of rhetoric, only to gain esteem for themselves."<sup>21</sup> He spoke of this as a biblical standard, al-

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15 Ibid.

16 Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, p. 139.

17 John Calvin, *Sermons on The Epistle to the Ephesians*, Edinburgh, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973, p. 542.

18 Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, p. 139.

19 Leroy Nixon, *John Calvin, Expository Preacher*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950, p. 58.

20 Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, p. 139.

21 John Calvin, *Selected Works*, vol. 5, p. 203.

luding to I Corinthians 2:4, where Paul wrote, “And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.” Calvin’s pulpit speech, therefore, different from his other writings, was quite simple. His mastery of language and vocabulary, quite evident in his theological writings, was adapted in preaching to the ignorance of those to whom he preached. His language, while careful, was not so polished; but it was full of life. Theodore Beza, Calvin’s contemporary and successor at Geneva, said of him, “Every word weighed a pound.”<sup>22</sup>

While his language was kept quite simple, he did not hesitate to use the theological terms of Scripture. If people today have difficulty with the language of Calvin’s sermons, perhaps it is more indicative of a general ignorance of the Bible than of a failure on Calvin’s part. Calvin did not, nor may we, avoid the language of Scripture. But he attempted to make even the weightier terms understandable. He used illustrations and figures that would be easily understood. Here is an example that Parker refers to: “When women who put on make-up come out into the sun and get hot, the make-up comes off and one sees the wrinkles—so it is with hypocrites.”<sup>23</sup>

The preaching of John Calvin was also marked by intensity. Sometimes, in fact, the earnestness with which he preached came to expression in anger, which in turn drew the complaints of some. In 1548, during a time of rather intense controversy in Geneva, Calvin was censured by the City Council for a sermon in which, it was charged, “Today, with great wrath, he preached that the magistrates permit several insolences.” He was then ordered to appear before the Council “to explain why he preached thus.”<sup>24</sup> But if Calvin were asked to explain the intensity with which he preached, his answer was this: “How then can we see a mortal and feeble creature raise himself against the majesty of God, to trample all true doctrine under his feet, and bear it patiently? We should certainly show by that that there was

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22 Nixon, pp. 31, 34 (which quote comes from Broadus, *History of Preaching*, p. 120).

23 Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, p. 148.

24 Parker, *Oracles*, p. 38.

no zeal for God in us.”<sup>25</sup> When he saw the need, Calvin could speak in a way that would shock most people today. But such a tone in his preaching was rare. Rather, as Parker noted, “the tenor of his preaching is an urgent and high-minded seriousness.”<sup>26</sup>

His approach in his pulpit ministry was not only evident to those who sat under his preaching, it was also clearly expressed by him a number of times as particular texts gave him opportunity.

In a sermon on Deuteronomy 5:23-27, Calvin pointed out that “no man shall ever be a good minister of God’s word, unless he be a scholar first.”<sup>27</sup> But belonging to that scholarship is also the wisdom of being able properly to apply the word of God to His people. It is not enough, in expounding the word, “to discourse upon it as if it were mere history.... The office of a good and faithful shepherd is not barely to expound the Scripture, but he must use earnestness and sharpness, to give force and virtue to the Word of God.”<sup>28</sup>

So insistent was Calvin upon applying the word of God to the congregation, even in the way of warnings and rebukes, admonitions and calls to repentance, that in a sermon on II Timothy 2:14-15, after pointing out the folly of a physician simply telling a sick man what the man *wants* to hear and treating him accordingly, he asks, Does he not then become his patient’s butcher? “...we forsake the service of God by this means. And therefore that we do not offend our Master, whom we must serve, let us not be ashamed, that is to say, let us not be grieved, if we see we are not esteemed, and men fawn not upon us, but cast us off...”<sup>29</sup>

Such is the responsibility of the minister of the word. Calvin realized that “the majority of teachers, in desiring to yield to the corrupt

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25 Ibid., p. 76.

26 Ibid.

27 John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, p. 258.

28 Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1953, p. 120.

29 John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistles to Timothy and Titus, Facsimile of 1579 Edition*, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1983, p. 802.

wishes of the world, adulterate the word of God.” But he would not be one of them.<sup>30</sup>

In a sermon on Job 33:1-7, in which Calvin had much to say not only about preaching, but about hearing the preaching, he spoke as if addressing ministers:

...when God grants us the grace to speak in His name, it behooves us to yield all the authority to His Word, and to advance the estimation of that Word. But if we are so turned aside by looking unto creatures, that we speak not freely as we ought to do, is it not a dishonoring of God? If a man is sent from an earthly prince, and suffers other men to scorn him, and he plays the goof and dares not bring the message that is committed to him: it is such a reckless wastefulness as is not to be pardoned. Behold, God receives us to His service, even us who are but dust before Him, even us who are altogether unprofitable. He puts us in honorable commission to bear abroad His Word; and He will have it carried abroad with authority and reverence.<sup>31</sup>

Of himself Calvin said in another place,

When I expound Holy Scripture, I must always make this my rule: That those who hear me may receive profit from the teaching I put forward and be edified unto salvation. If I have not that affection, if I do not procure the edification of those who hear me, I am a sacrilege, profaning God’s Word.... Teaching on its own is not sufficient, for we are cold and indifferent to God’s truth. We need to be pierced. The preacher has to use vehemence, so that we may know that this is not a game.<sup>32</sup>

And the people must not say, “Ho! that is too hard to be borne. You ought not to go on like that.” Those who cannot bear to be reproved had better look for another school-master than God. There are many who will not stand it: “What! is this the way to teach? Ho! we want to

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30 Wallace, p. 121.

31 John Calvin, *Sermons on Job, Facsimile of 1574 Edition*, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1993, p. 574. (Modernization of the language is mine. sk.)

32 Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, pp. 11-12.

be won by sweetness.” “You do? Then go and teach God his lessons!” These are our sensitive folk who cannot bear a single reproof to be offered to them. And why? “Ho! we want to be taught in another style.” “Well then, go to the devil’s school! he will flatter you enough — and destroy you.” But believers humble themselves and are willing to be treated severely so that they may profit in God’s school.<sup>33</sup>

As is evident especially from those sermons recorded during the years of intense controversy in Geneva, Calvin was at times very sharp in the application of his sermons—when the text gave opportunity for such application. But as Parker points out, even in the stormy years, such outbursts were not very frequent; much less during the more settled years of his ministry in Geneva.<sup>34</sup>

References to current events in Calvin’s sermons are rare. Much more frequent are polemics against the false teachings prevalent in his day. But whether polemics or the occasional sharp rebukes of those who were licentious, these recede beneath the gospel tenor of his preaching. In expounding Holy Scripture Calvin preached the gospel, good news aimed to build up believers in the true knowledge of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. That being said, John Calvin made rich application in his preaching to the lives of God’s people in the congregation in Geneva. He strove always to show the relevance of Scripture to the present time. He did so primarily because he understood that human nature is the same in every age, and therefore the struggles that we face today are the struggles faced by God’s people during the times when the various books of the Bible were written.

Calvin could preach the way he did, with such pointed application, because he understood so well the appalling sinfulness of our human nature. Calvin describes this depravity in his sermon on Genesis 3:4-6:

...there is no place, search as we may, where we are not tempted by a number of wicked desires. Some will be tempted by adultery when looking at a woman. What is the source of this wanton gaze? Others

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33 Ibid., p. 14.

34 Ibid., p. 118.

will not be able to look at something beautiful, at meadows, or lands, or fields, or possessions, without immediately being tempted to say, “I wish that were mine,” or “Why does that not belong to me?” That is how our eyes offend us, some by sensual lust, others by greed. In short, all our gazes are infected and we cannot look here or there without sinning. The same is true for our ears. Whatever we hear will draw us toward evil and entice us and provide some opportunity to offend God. That is how all our senses are perverted.

Let us now consider how that happens. Does the evil lie in the eyes and the ears? Not at all! Its source is more remote. That is because the heart is infected and corrupted so that all our senses are only messengers of what is hidden inside until it manifests itself. In this way, because we are too liable to be deceived and allured by the world’s and Satan’s enticements to every iniquity, let us know that that happens because our souls are perverted and so unclean that they necessarily and clearly show their fruits and effects in everything and everywhere.<sup>35</sup>

Calvin never withheld what he saw as pertinent and necessary applications of God’s word. But the one man in the congregation to which all his sermons were directed was himself. Rarely did he speak to the congregation with the second person pronoun, *you*. Almost always did he say *we* or *us*, including himself in the congregation to whom the preaching was directed.

Moreover, Calvin showed in his sermons by his continual use of the pronoun *we* that he placed himself under the authority of the word of God as much as he did the congregation. So strongly did Calvin consider the necessity of the minister leading by example in his submission to the word of God, that he declared with passion, “It were better for him to break his neck going up into the pulpit, if he does not take pains to be the first to follow God.”<sup>36</sup>

### **The Theological Foundation of Calvin’s Preaching**

The foundation of Calvin’s preaching was its decidedly God-

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35 John Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis, Chapters 1:1 - 11:4*, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009, pp. 240-241.

36 Parker, *Oracles*, p. 60.

centered focus. In many circles today, preaching is defined by storytelling and entertainment. In our day, the charge given to many preachers goes something like this: “When you can get people to attend church, keep them comfortable; keep them entertained; keep them interested; and don’t keep them long.” To compare such a conception of preaching to that of John Calvin will mark the sharpest antithesis. The God-centered focus of Calvin’s preaching is far from the man-centered focus of entertainment and human pleasure. The translator’s preface to the recently published *Sermons on Genesis* points out that in the 49 sermons of that book the *fear of God* is mentioned 226 times in one form or another, with *sin* mentioned some 229 times.<sup>37</sup> Dominant thoughts those are in Calvin! They are not matters for entertainment.

The preaching of John Calvin was the preaching of a man who lived in the consciousness of the majestic holiness of God, who speaks to us in the preaching of the gospel. That is to say, the importance John Calvin gave preaching was determined by his theology of preaching. Calvin recognized from Scripture that the Spirit of God so works in the preaching of the gospel that Christ, as it were, stands in the midst of His people speaking to them. Ronald S. Wallace, in *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, summarizes Calvin’s view this way: “Through the preaching of the Word by His ministers, Christ therefore gives His sacramental presence in the midst of His Church, imparts to men the grace which the Word promises, and establishes His Kingdom over the hearts of His hearers. The preaching of the Word by a minister is the gracious form behind which God in coming near to men veils that in Himself which man cannot bear to behold directly.”<sup>38</sup>

That is the case, of course, only insofar as the preacher proclaims the holy and authoritative word of God. That makes the calling of the preacher a weighty calling indeed! The preacher must faithfully expound God’s word! That being established, however, the power of preaching is not to be ascribed to the minister, nor to the word itself. No matter that the sermon be a most faithful exposition of

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37 John Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis*, p. x.

38 Wallace, p. 84.

Holy Scripture proclaimed *most* eloquently, preaching itself remains powerless — except by the sovereign and free work of the Holy Spirit, by whose power alone the preaching is made effective.

No wonder, then, that John Calvin could preach with such boldness! No wonder such fervency marked his preaching! He spoke not his own, but God's word. He came not in his own power, but with the power of the Holy Spirit. He came with the confidence of Paul's confession in II Corinthians 10:4-5: "For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds; Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."

Calvin entered the pulpit therefore with singular focus: to proclaim God's word in all its authority. He was a messenger with a message from the King of kings. As a messenger, he himself stood under the authority of that word. The very fact that his ministry was to expound God's word filled him with a profound reverence for the task before him.<sup>39</sup> That came to expression in his preaching. There is nothing wishy-washy about Calvin's sermons. He doesn't dare stand before the congregation with his own opinions, saying, "I think; I think." He didn't stand before them as a beggar, pleading with them to hear him. He proclaimed, "Thus saith the Lord!" He did so with the full authority of the office he bore and particularly of the word he preached.

In consideration of Hebrews 4:12, Calvin said, "If anyone thinks that when the Word of God is preached the air is being beaten with an empty sound, he is quite wrong. It is a living reality and full of hidden energy which leaves no part of man untouched."<sup>40</sup> This is true not because of any power in the preacher himself, but because the same Spirit of God who gave the message assures that the message accomplishes the purpose whereunto God sent it. Calvin explained in a sermon on II Timothy 1:1-2: "...God works by His word preached unto us, that it is not a bare voice that sounds only in the air, and so vanishes away: but God puts to it the virtue of His Holy Spirit.... No doubt, if we come to the temple, we shall not only hear a mortal

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39 Old, p. 132.

40 Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, p. 30



man speak, but we shall feel that God speaks to our souls, that He is Master, and that by His secret power. He touches us in such a way, that the voice of man enters into us, and profits us in such a way that we are restored and nourished.”<sup>41</sup>

Preaching is the means by which God takes us into His own fellowship. Thus Calvin’s view of preaching fits his covenantal theology of worship, a matter emphasized by Dr. Old.<sup>42</sup> Worship is the expression of the covenant relationship between God and His people. “It is in worship that the covenant is established, maintained, nourished, and renewed. In worship we experience God as our God and ourselves as His people.... In the reading and preaching of the Scriptures...we are nourished in the covenant relationship.”<sup>43</sup>

Because God receives into His covenant fellowship only those who are in Christ Jesus, preaching has a twofold effect. It either softens or hardens the heart. The hearer is either saved by that preaching, or brought under condemnation. “The Gospel is never preached in vain, but has invariably an effect, either for life or death.”<sup>44</sup> “Since the Word is the sceptre of Christ’s Kingdom ‘it cannot be rejected without treating Him with open contempt.... No crime is more offensive to God than contempt of His Word.’”<sup>45</sup> “When we do not take His Word seriously, it is a sign that we attribute no more importance to God than to a barking dog.”<sup>46</sup> For that reason Calvin also carefully and repeatedly called the congregation’s attention to their calling before that word preached.

### **The Congregation and the Preaching**

What did Calvin have to say about the attitude and duty of the congregation in regard to preaching?

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41 Calvin, *Sermons on Timothy*, p. 665. (Modernization of the language is mine. sk.)

42 Old, p. 133.

43 Old, pp. 133-134.

44 Wallace, p. 93.

45 Wallace, p. 94.

46 Jean Calvin, *Sermons on Jeremiah*, Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990, p. 201.

For one thing, God's people seek that preaching, desire it, and attend to it at every opportunity. "Calvin, in one of his sermons, appeals to those who think the minister too long if he preaches for half an hour, and are yet willing to soak their ears night and day in 'fables, lies, and things of no profit,' to consider how necessary and glorious a thing it is to listen to the word that proclaims the length and breadth and height and depth of the love of Christ."<sup>47</sup>

In a sermon on Job 29:18-25, he spoke of the fact that no one needs to be taught to covet the things necessary for the body. Every man desires to eat and drink. What is to be said, then, about those who despise food for their souls? "But we see so many wretches," Calvin said, "as they pass not to hear anything: and we see others that cannot be satisfied with despising the doctrine, but they also hate it and utterly absent themselves from it, as much as they can. And do such folk deserve to be counted men?" His answer is: No, they are worse than beasts.<sup>48</sup>

God's people know that they cannot live without the word of their Savior. Thus they approach that word with attentiveness. Calvin did not always observe that in the congregation. He addressed also that weakness in the sermon to which I just referred. He said,

...in the gospel we have infinite treasures of wisdom and knowledge. God shows Himself familiarly unto us; He will have us to be filled, even thoroughly filled with all perfection of His doctrine; and He gives us so clear and certain understanding as can be possible. And yet, for all this, where is the reverence that Job speaks of? where is the desire? where is the amiable obedience? Nay to the contrary, we see scornfulness, as I have touched already. Again, when the doctrine is preached, how many are there that give attentive ear unto it? ...there are very few folk in which the reverence is to be found that is spoken of here. And as for conforming themselves fully unto it, that is a very rare virtue.<sup>49</sup>

Let God's people hear with attentiveness the word of their Al-

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47 Wallace, p. 119.

48 Calvin, *Job*, p. 504. (Modernization of the language is mine. sk.)

49 *Ibid.*, p. 505. (Modernization of the language is mine. sk.)

mighty King. Indeed, “all the pious truly feel how much this familiar sort of teaching is needed.”<sup>50</sup>

Secondly, their calling begins with proper preparation. In order for one to be in the proper physical condition, it is important that he observe carefully the Saturday night curfew and get the necessary sleep to come before the preaching with clear mind and full attention.

Calvin frequently advised the people not to eat too much breakfast before coming to the sermon. But most of the difficulties with respect to the physical condition of the congregation came at the afternoon sermon. “Those three drunkards back there,” said Calvin upon one occasion, “might just as well have stayed in the tavern, for all the good they are getting from listening to the Word of God.” Sunday afternoon dinners were also a frequent cause of indifference to the Word. “How can any man profit from the Word when his belly is so full of wine and meat that it takes all of his effort just to stay awake?”<sup>51</sup>

Thirdly, the congregation has a calling to receive that preaching with humble submission to the authority of God’s word, carefully discerning the application of God’s truth to their own lives.

When we come to hear the sermon or take up the Bible, we must not have the foolish arrogance of thinking that we shall easily understand everything we hear or read. But we must come with reverence; we must wait entirely upon God, knowing that we need to be taught by His Holy Spirit, and that without Him we cannot understand anything that is shown us in His Word.<sup>52</sup>

In a sermon on II Timothy 3:16-17, Calvin said, “...God’s Word deserves such reverence that each person shall range himself beneath it and listen to it peaceably and without contradicting.” He goes on. “To sum it up, St. Paul here pronounces that men must not take out

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50 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960, vol. 2, IV.1.5, p. 1018.

51 Nixon, pp. 65-66.

52 Wallace, p. 103.

parts and bits that they approve of and what meets their fancy in Holy Scripture. Without exception they should conclude that, since God has spoken in his Law and in his Prophets, they must keep to the whole.”<sup>53</sup>

Yet, even though the authority of the word of God is absolute, the preaching does not demand a blind, unreasoning obedience. God’s people are always to put to the test the sermons they hear. The criterion by which they judge those sermons is not their own opinion of what those sermons ought to include or not. But they are to be like the believers in Berea, of whom the apostle wrote in Acts 17:11 that “they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” The congregation has a sure testimony that what they hear in the preaching is the word of God when it is found in harmony with Scripture itself. When such is the case, the preacher himself “may be the least important of men, a man ‘contemptible as to the flesh,’ yet if he is preaching pure doctrine, his words must be received with reverence and obedience.”<sup>54</sup> For he is an ambassador, speaking in God’s name and declaring God’s will.

Upon such preaching the salvation and safety of the church depend. Calvin wrote to the Protector Somerset on October 22, 1548: “For there is some danger that you may see no great profit from all the reformation which you shall have brought about, however sound and godly it may have been, unless this powerful instrument of preaching be developed more and more. It is not said without a meaning, that Jesus Christ shalt smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked (Isaiah 11:4).”<sup>55</sup>

John Calvin stood before the daunting task of seeing to it that the Reformation was not merely a movement against the Roman Catholic Church and her errors, still less a political or social movement. The Reformation stood for the glory of God and the cause of His gospel. So with his understanding of the word of God and the power of preaching, Calvin was compelled to see that the children of the Reformation

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53 Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, p. 9.

54 Parker, *Oracles*, p. 62.

55 Calvin, *Selected Works*, vol. 5, p. 204.

understood their foundation in the truth of God's word, and also saw what it means to live as Reformed Christians.

How great is the need for such preaching in our day! May the Holy Spirit prosper us in this! ●

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# Calvin on Justification: Considering the Judgment Day with Singular Delight

Rev. Angus Stewart

## Approach and Orientation

Right from the very first time that I read John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I was deeply struck by especially one thing in his treatment of justification: his repeated and forceful call to consider ourselves before the heavenly judgment seat of Almighty God.

All are, or should be, aware of the theological issues. Does justification mean "make righteous" or "reckon righteous"? Is justification the infusion of righteousness or the imputation of righteousness? Is justification by faith and works or by faith alone? As Calvin puts it, these things are not "frivolous word battles," but this is a "serious matter," for we do not stand before a "human court" but before the "heavenly tribunal."<sup>1</sup>

This puts into proper perspective our controversy over justification with Rome, with ecumenically-minded Protestants who would bring us back to Rome, with the New Perspective on Paul, with the Federal Vision, and with those who claim that Calvin's doctrine of justification is not that of Martin Luther.<sup>2</sup>

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1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 3.12.1, pp. 754, 755.

2 These five groups are, of course, not mutually exclusive. Works advocating these heretical views are too many to list here, but it may be worth mentioning at least one influential and recent book that seeks to drive a wedge between Calvin and Luther on justification: Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

Listen to Calvin's sharp warnings against playing intellectual games with justification!

In the shady cloisters of the schools anyone can easily and readily prattle about the value of works in justifying men. But when we come before the presence of God we must put away such amusements!<sup>3</sup>

... these leisured rabbis...dispute these matters under the shade in easy chairs. But when that supreme Judge sits in his judgment seat such windy opinions will have to vanish. It is this that we had to seek: what confidence we can bring to his judgment seat in our defense, not what we can talk about in the schools and corners.<sup>4</sup>

What an eloquent and powerful appeal, calling us to focus on God's majestic justice! We must not, and do not, merely "talk" or "prattle" about justification in this article.

To this question, I insist, we must apply our mind if we would profitably inquire concerning true righteousness [i.e., justification]: How shall we [i.e., Calvin, you, and I] reply to the Heavenly Judge when he calls us to account? Let us envisage for ourselves that Judge, not as our minds naturally imagine him, but as he is depicted for us in Scripture: by whose brightness the stars are darkened [Job 3:9]; by whose strength the mountains are melted; by whose wrath the earth is shaken [cf. Job 9:5-6]; whose wisdom catches the wise in their craftiness [Job 5:13]; beside whose purity all things are defiled [cf. Job 25:5]; whose righteousness not even the angels can bear [cf. Job 4:18]; who makes not the guilty man innocent [cf. Job 9:20]; whose vengeance when once kindled penetrates to the depths of hell [Deut. 32:22; cf. Job 26:6]. Let us behold him, I say, sitting in judgment to examine the deeds of men: Who will stand confident before his throne? "Who...can dwell with the devouring fire?" asks the prophet. "Who...can dwell with everlasting burnings? He who walks righteously and speaks the truth" [Is. 33:14-15 p.], etc. But let such a one, whoever he is, come forward. Nay, that response causes no one to come forward. For, on the contrary, a terrible voice

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3 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.12.1, p. 754.

4 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.14.15, p. 782.



resounds: “If thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who shall stand?” [Ps. 130:3; 129:3, Vg.].<sup>5</sup>

This alone gives us the right approach and orientation to the truth of justification. All of us, of ourselves, stand naked and exposed before the holy God. “Not one spark of good” is found in us “from the top of [our] head to the soles of our feet,” writes Calvin, echoing Isaiah 1:6.<sup>6</sup> How can we possibly stand in God’s sight? You and I?

The answer, the only answer, is justification by faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone, to the glory of God alone, according to Scripture alone. This is the Bible’s teaching; this is Calvin’s doctrine; this is the united testimony of the Reformation and all of its creeds, and this is the only true gospel that saves us miserable offenders. This is the gospel we believe, confess, and suffer for as children of the Reformation, as Calvinists, and as followers of our Lord Jesus Christ. We witness to the truth of justification for the edification and reformation of the church and for the conversion of unbelievers.

Further to underscore the significance of justification for Calvin, we shall consider statements from four of his most influential writings, arranged here in chronological order.

### **Reply to Sadoleto**

In Strasburg in September 1539, Calvin’s reply to the Roman Catholic Cardinal Jacopo Sadoleto, Bishop of Carpentras, was published. Calvin, along with William Farel and Elie Courault (an old, blind preacher), had been expelled from Geneva the year before. This left something of a religious vacuum in Geneva. Cardinal Sadoleto, upon the urging of his co-religionists, sought to exploit

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5 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.12.1, p. 755. At the start of his magnum opus, the French Reformer states that each man must “raise [his] thoughts to God” in heaven and His judgment, in order to gain a “clear knowledge of himself” and so be “convinced of [his] own unrighteousness, foulness, folly, and impurity.” Otherwise, as totally depraved sinners, “being quite content with our own righteousness, wisdom, and virtue, we flatter ourselves most sweetly, and fancy ourselves all but demigods” (1.1.2, pp. 37-38).

6 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.14.1, p. 769.

this by writing the Genevans a cunning letter in order to win them back to Rome.

Calvin's response includes the following very significant lines:

You [i.e., Cardinal Sadoletto], in the first place, touch upon justification by faith, the first and keenest subject of controversy between us. Is this a knotty and useless question? Wherever the knowledge of it is taken away, the glory of Christ is extinguished, religion abolished, the Church destroyed, and the hope of salvation utterly overthrown. That doctrine, then, though of the highest moment, we maintain that you [i.e., Sadoletto and the Roman Catholics] have nefariously effaced from the memory of men.<sup>7</sup>

Notice several things from this quotation. Justification was the first doctrine that Sadoletto attacked; likewise, it was the first doctrine that Calvin defended. No wonder the Genevan Reformer calls it "the first and keenest subject of controversy between us." Instead of it being merely "a knotty and useless question," Calvin declares that it is "of the highest moment," for without it, four things necessarily follow: Christ's glory is extinguished, religion is abolished, the church is destroyed, and the hope of salvation is utterly overthrown. This, charges the Reformer, is precisely what the Roman church has done by "nefariously effac[ing] [the truth of justification] from the memory of men."<sup>8</sup>

Rather than "enter upon a full discussion" of justification, Calvin points the Roman cardinal to "the Catechism which I myself drew up for the Genevese, when I held the office of Pastor among them." This manual for instruction for the children of the Genevan church, Calvin avers, "would silence you."<sup>9</sup>

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7 John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoletto, *A Reformation Debate: Sadoletto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply*, ed. John C. Olin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), p. 66.

8 Elsewhere, Calvin traces Rome's opposition to its diabolical source (cf. Eph. 6:12): "Satan has laboured at nothing more assiduously than to extinguish, or to smother, the gratuitous justification of faith" (*Commentary on Genesis 15:6*).

9 Calvin, *A Reformation Debate*, p. 66. We will consider some of the rich teaching of the Genevan catechism at the end of this article.

In his next paragraph, however, Reformed apologist Calvin does “briefly explain...how we speak on this subject.”

[1] First, we bid a man begin by examining himself, and this not in a superficial and perfunctory manner, but to cite his conscience before the tribunal of God, and when sufficiently convinced of his iniquity, to reflect on the strictness of the sentence pronounced upon all sinners. Thus confounded and amazed at his misery, he is prostrated and humbled before God; and, casting away all self-confidence, groans as if given up to final perdition. [2] Then we show that the only haven of safety is in the mercy of God, as manifested in Christ, in whom every part of our salvation is complete. As all mankind are, in the sight of God, lost sinners, we hold that Christ is their only righteousness, since, by His obedience, He has wiped off our transgressions; by His sacrifice, appeased the divine anger; by His blood, washed away our sins; by His cross, borne our curse; and by His death, made satisfaction for us. We maintain that in this way man is reconciled in Christ to God the Father, by no merit of his own, by no value of works, but by gratuitous mercy. When we embrace Christ by faith, and come, as it were, into communion with Him, this we term, after the manner of Scripture, the *righteousness of faith*.<sup>10</sup>

What a powerful and moving presentation of justification in Christ alone, by grace alone, and through faith alone [2]! We also note that it begins with what is something of a hallmark of Calvin’s treatment of justification: the call to examine one’s “conscience before the tribunal of God” [1].

### Commentary on Romans

The next year in Strasburg in March 1540, Calvin published his first biblical commentary, significantly on that key book of the Reformation, Romans.

On the very first page of “The Argument” (an introduction to the book), Calvin states, “The main subject of the whole epistle [of Romans is] justification by faith.”<sup>11</sup> In Calvin’s fine overview of the

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10 Calvin, *A Reformation Debate*, pp. 66-67.

11 John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, p. xxix. All citations of Calvin’s commentaries are from the 22-volume Baker edition (repr. 1993).

sixteen chapters of Romans, justification is prominent.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Calvin declares, “When anyone gains a knowledge of this epistle [and remember, he has just affirmed that justification by faith is its ‘main subject’], he has an entrance opened to him to all the most hidden treasures of Scripture.”<sup>13</sup>

In other words, with a grasp of Romans, including its key subject of justification, the “most hidden treasures” of the whole of Scripture lie open. Therefore, without a grasp of Romans and justification, the Bible is a closed book. This certainly underscores the significance of this biblical book and this fundamental doctrine!

Moving from “The Argument” to the commentary proper, Calvin identifies “justif[ication] by faith through the mercy of God alone” as “the principal point or the main hinge of the first part of this Epistle.”<sup>14</sup>

This is how the French Reformer summarizes Romans 1:1-3:8: “Now the Apostle had summoned all mankind universally [i.e., Jews and Gentiles] before the tribunal of God, that he might include all under the same condemnation.”<sup>15</sup>

After many Old Testament quotations proving man’s “unrighteousness” (Rom. 3:10-18),<sup>16</sup> Calvin comments on Paul’s purpose:

*That every mouth may be stopped, &c.;* that is, that every evasion may be cut off, and every occasion for excuse. It is a metaphor taken from courts of law, where the accused, if he has anything to plead as a lawful defence, demands leave to speak, that he might clear himself from the things laid to his charge; but if he is convicted by his own conscience, he is silent, and without saying a word waits for his condemnation, being even already by his own silence condemned.<sup>17</sup>

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12 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, pp. xxix-xxxvii.

13 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, p. xxix. Calvin makes a very similar remark in his “Epistle Dedicatory” to his German friend Simon Grynaeus (p. xxiv).

14 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (1:17). By “the first part of this Epistle,” Calvin seems to be thinking of Romans 1-5 (cf. pp. xxix-xxx).

15 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (3:9).

16 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (3:10).

17 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (3:19).

This paves the way for Paul's great statement on justification in Romans 3:21-28. Calvin provides a summary, using the four Aristotelian "causes":

There is, perhaps, no passage in the whole Scripture which illustrates in a more striking manner the efficacy of his [i.e., Christ's] righteousness; for it shows that God's mercy is the efficient cause, that Christ with his blood is the meritorious cause, that the formal or the instrumental cause is faith in the word, and that moreover, the final cause is the glory of the divine justice and goodness.<sup>18</sup>

After developing the subject of righteousness by faith in his exposition of apostolic teaching in Romans 4,<sup>19</sup> Calvin notes that Paul "begins to illustrate" justification by its "effects" (Rom. 5:1-11); indeed "the whole of this chapter [i.e., Romans 5] is taken up with amplifications, which are no less calculated to explain than to confirm" this fundamental Christian truth.

"Peace with God" or "tranquillity of conscience" is impossible without justification, for it is "the peculiar fruit of the righteousness of faith."<sup>20</sup> Other "effects" and "amplifications," which "explain" and "confirm" justification, include "access" to God, "final perseverance," and the beatific vision ("when we shall see God face to face [and] shall be like him"),<sup>21</sup> as well as "glorying" in tribulations and growing in "patience," "hope," and "love."<sup>22</sup>

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18 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (3:24); cf. *Institutes* 3.14.17, pp. 783-784; 3.14.21, p. 787. Sometimes, Calvin gives only three of the "causes," omitting the "final cause" (*Commentary on Romans* 3:22).

19 In his exposition of Romans 4, Calvin notes that Christian baptism, which is "a sign instituted" in the "place" of circumcision, "had the office of sealing, and as it were of ratifying, the righteousness of faith." Indeed, justification and sanctification are "the general benefits of [both] sacraments" as "sacred symbols," "instruments" and "testimonies" which "confirm" "the elect" in this "twofold grace" (*Commentary on Romans* 4:11).

20 Calvin continues, "No one can stand boldly before God, but he who relies on a gratuitous reconciliation" (*Commentary on Romans* 5:1).

21 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (5:2).

22 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (5:3, 4, 5). Also, for Calvin, "life

Calvin summarizes Paul's argument for God's certain preservation of all His reconciled people in Romans 5:6-11: "The import of the whole is—since Christ has attained righteousness for sinners by his death, much more shall he protect them, being now justified, from destruction."<sup>23</sup>

The second half of Romans 5—verses 12-21, on the parallel between Adam's sin and Christ's righteousness—contains more "amplifications" explaining and confirming justification:

He [i.e., Paul] now begins to enlarge on the same doctrine, by comparing with it what is of an opposite character. For since Christ came to redeem us from the calamity into which Adam had fallen, and had precipitated all his posterity with him, we cannot see with so much clearness what we have in Christ, as by having what we have lost in Adam set before us, though all things on both sides are not similar.<sup>24</sup>

In his commentary on Romans 6-7, which chapters deal with sanctification, the French Reformer is at pains to stress that "they who imagine that gratuitous righteousness is given us by him, apart from newness of life, shamefully rend Christ asunder" "for these two things [i.e., justification and sanctification] are connected together by an indissoluble knot."<sup>25</sup> "The state of the case is really this,—that the faithful are never reconciled to God without the gift of regeneration [i.e., sanctification]; nay, we are for this end justified,—that we may afterwards serve God in holiness of life."<sup>26</sup>

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proceeds from justification" (*Commentary on Romans* 5:18) and Christ's "cloth[ing] us with his own righteousness" is the "necessary" legal ground for the holy God to "love" us (*Commentary on Romans* 4:3). In his *Institutes*, Calvin states that the Lord's people "have their sins buried and are justified before God because, as he hates sin, he can love only those whom he has justified" (3.11.11, p. 740). Justification is the way in which we are "received into friendship" and "fellowship" with God (3.14.6, p. 773).

23 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (5:8, 9).

24 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (5:12).

25 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (6:1, 4).

26 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (6:2).

It will suffice simply to mention a few other passages in the remainder of Calvin's commentary on Romans that highlight the significance of justification.

In his exposition of Romans 8, Calvin affirms, "The first and the chief consolation of the godly in adversities, is to be fully persuaded of the paternal kindness of God." We have this confidence because "God justifies" us and "Christ is our advocate." Thus "the faithful are very far from being involved in the danger of condemnation, since Christ by expiating their sins has anticipated the judgment of God, and by his intercession not only abolishes death, but also covers our sins in oblivion, so that they come not to an account."<sup>27</sup> Calvin continues:

It hence follows, that when any one seeks to condemn us, he not only seeks to render void the death of Christ, but also contends with that unequalled power with which the Father has honoured him, and who with that power conferred on him supreme authority. This so great an assurance, which dares to triumph over the devil, death, sin, and the gates of hell, ought to lodge deep in the hearts of all the godly; for our faith is nothing, except we feel assured that Christ is ours, and that the Father is in him propitious to us.<sup>28</sup>

Despising Christ and justification in Him alone was the grounds upon which Israel, God's ancient covenant people, was "deservedly rejected."<sup>29</sup> This supports Luther's contention that justification is "the article of a standing or a falling church" (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*). It is this serious!

When Israel sought "to be justified by...works," it "shamefully mutilated the law of God." This "false interpret[ation]" and "wicked abuse of the law was justly reprehended in the Jews" who "rejected [the] soul [of the Mosaic law] and seized on the dead body of the letter." This is the case, avers Calvin,

because the law had been given for this end,—to lead us as by the hand to another righteousness: nay, whatever the law teaches, whatever it

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27 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (8:33).

28 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (8:34).

29 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (9:32).

commands, whatever it promises, has always a reference to Christ as its main object; and hence all its parts ought to be applied to him. But this cannot be done, except we, being stripped of all righteousness, and confounded with the knowledge of our sin, seek gratuitous righteousness from him alone.<sup>30</sup>

Calvin's remarks at the great turning point in this epistle— chapters 1-11 being doctrinal and chapters 12-16 being doctrinal—are significant. At the very start of his comments before those on Romans 12:1, he writes,

After having handled those things necessary for the erection of the kingdom of God,—that righteousness is to be sought from God alone, that salvation is to come to us alone from his mercy, that all blessings are laid up and daily offered to us in Christ only [Rom. 1-11],—Paul now passes on, according to the best order, to show how the life is to be formed [Rom. 12:16].<sup>31</sup>

Notice that justification comes first of the three things listed as “necessary for the erection of the kingdom of God” and covered in Romans 1:11. Furthermore, the other two further explain or flow from this (imputed) righteousness!

Later, Calvin underscores the fact that righteousness is vital in the kingdom of heaven (and not only essential in understanding Israel's rejection and the right interpretation of the Mosaic law):

[The apostle has] no doubt included in few words a summary of what [the kingdom of God] is; namely, that we, being well assured [of our justification], have peace with God, and possess real joy of heart through the Holy Spirit dwelling in us.... He indeed who is become partaker of true righteousness, enjoys a great and an invaluable good, even a calm joy of conscience; and he who has peace with God, what can he desire more?<sup>32</sup>

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30 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (10:4).

31 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (12).

32 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (14:17).



### *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*

In 1543, Calvin's *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* was published, a work addressed to Emperor Charles V in view of the approaching Diet of Spires.

In this historic Reformation manifesto, Calvin declares, "There is no point which is more keenly contested, none which our adversaries are more inveterate in their opposition, than that of justification: namely, as to whether we obtain it by faith or by works."<sup>33</sup>

The Reformation doctrine of justification, Calvin avers, "is the clear and uniform doctrine of Scripture, 'witnessed,' as Paul says, 'by the law and the prophets [i.e., the Old Testament]' (Rom. 3:21); and so explained by the gospel [i.e., the New Testament]...."<sup>34</sup> Thus, although the book of Romans contains the most detailed and systematic treatment of justification, it is taught consistently and perspicuously in both testaments and in the writings of Moses, the prophets, and the apostles.

The Genevan Reformer makes the striking remark: "when we tell a man to seek righteousness and life out of himself (i.e., in Christ only, because he has nothing in himself but sin and death), a controversy immediately arises with reference to the freedom and powers of the will."<sup>35</sup>

Do you see what Calvin is saying? The orthodox doctrine of justification not only clashes with justification by faith and works; it opposes free will as well! This is necessarily so because justification is in Christ alone (and not man) and by grace alone (and not works) and by faith alone (and not the alleged free will of the sinner).

In the two sentences immediately following the last citation, our Reformer proves his case against man's so-called free will:

For, if man has any ability of his own to serve God, he does not obtain salvation entirely by the grace of Christ, but in part bestows it on himself. On the other hand, if the whole of salvation is attributed to

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33 Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Dallas, TX: Protestant Heritage Press, 1995), p. 26.

34 Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, p. 60.

35 Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, p. 57.

the grace of Christ, man has nothing left, has no virtue of his own by which he can assist himself to procure salvation.<sup>36</sup>

Calvin's teaching means, in today's terminology, that not only do we have a life-and-death doctrinal battle regarding justification with Rome, but also with Arminianism. This is the case because, for Arminians, justification by *faith* means justification by *man's free will*, since for Arminians faith is practically synonymous with man's free will.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Institutes of the Christian Religion***

Moving from Calvin's reply to Cardinal Sadoletto (1539), his commentary on Romans (1540), and his *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (1543), we come to his magnum opus, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the final, 1559 edition. Here we shall consider four ways that this work underscores the importance of justification.

First, the significance of justification for Calvin is most obviously seen in the large number of chapters devoted to this subject in Book 3 of the *Institutes*. Though entitled "The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us from It, and What Effects Follow," it is sufficient for our purposes here that we consider it as dealing with soteriology, the doctrine of salvation.

Book 3 contains twenty-five chapters. Chapters 1-5 are on faith

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36 Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, p. 57.

37 There is a massive difference between faith and free will; the two are antithetical. The apostle Paul not only teaches salvation by faith alone and not works (Eph. 2:8-9); he also affirms that "it [i.e., salvation] is not of him that willeth [i.e., man's supposed free will], nor of him that runneth [i.e., man's strenuous exertions], but of God that sheweth mercy" (Rom. 9:16). Thus the Canons of Dordt declare, "Faith is therefore to be considered as the gift of God, not on account of its being offered by God to man, to be accepted or rejected at his pleasure; but because it is in reality conferred, breathed, and infused into him; or even because God bestows the power or ability to believe, and then expects that man should by the exercise of his own free will, consent to the terms of that salvation, and actually believe in Christ; but because he who works in man both to will and to do, and indeed all things in all, produces both the will to believe, and the act of believing also" (III/IV:14).

and salvation, chapters 6-10 on the Christian life, and chapters 11-18 on justification. Christian liberty is considered in chapter 19, and prayer in chapter 20. Then the source of our salvation is traced to eternal election (with its necessary concomitant, reprobation) in chapters 21-24. Finally, Calvin turns to glorification in a chapter entitled, in the Battles edition, “The Final Resurrection,” which treats the goal or “crowning act” of our salvation (chapter 25).<sup>38</sup> Thus, eight of the twenty-five chapters of Book 3, almost a third, are devoted to justification. It is more than this if one includes chapter 19 on Christian freedom, which Calvin reckons is “especially an appendage of justification.”<sup>39</sup>

Second, the importance of justification in Calvin’s *Institutes* is evident from his apologetic placement of it. In the *Institutes*, Calvin treats justification *after* sanctification, whereas sanctification comes after justification in the *ordo salutis* or order of salvation. Why does the Reformer do this? Calvin states that “when this topic [i.e., our new life in Christ] is rightly understood it will better appear how man is justified by faith alone, and simple pardon; nevertheless actual holiness of life, so to speak, is not separated from free imputation of righteousness.”<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Calvin inverts the more natural order (justification then sanctification) because justification is so crucial to him that he wants to “forestall Romanist objections,” as editor John T. McNeill puts it.<sup>41</sup> In

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38 François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Wm. Collins, 1965), p. 284.

39 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.1, p. 833. E.g., David J. Engelsma’s treatment of the Reformer’s doctrine of justification contains Calvin’s chapter on Christian freedom (*The Reformed Faith of John Calvin* [Jenison, MI: RFP, 2009], pp. 222-246).

40 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.1, p. 593; cf. 3.11.1, pp. 725-726.

41 Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 593, n. 2. However, Engelsma writes, “I suggest another, more substantial reason for Calvin’s treatment of sanctification before justification. Calvin recognizes that in the work of salvation there is a sense in which sanctification, or newness of life, does precede justification. Regeneration in the narrow sense, or newness of life that comes about by union with Christ, makes us new creatures in Christ, and thus holy. And this does precede the activity of faith and conscious justification by faith. To put it very simply: we are united to Christ and in principle made new

so doing, Calvin proclaims loudly that justification by faith alone does not deny or mitigate the power of, or the call to, holiness.

Third, the imagery at the very start of his treatment of justification highlights its worth to Calvin. There are two metaphors used by the Reformer in Book 3, chapter 11, section 1 of the *Institutes*. He calls justification a “hinge” and a “foundation.” Justification is “the main hinge, on which religion turns” or is “supported” or “sustained,” as Richard Gaffin more accurately renders it.<sup>42</sup> Lose the hinge, and the door of religion falls. Justification is also “the foundation” on which you “establish your salvation” and “build piety toward God.”<sup>43</sup> Without this foundation, the house of salvation is built on sand and all piety collapses to the ground.<sup>44</sup>

In the next section of this chapter, Calvin teaches that justification is a legal declaration by the Most High, the heavenly judge. Being “reckoned righteous in God’s judgment,” the justified man or woman “stands firm before God’s judgment seat.”<sup>45</sup> Justification is received by faith alone without any works and it consists in two things: negatively, the remission or forgiveness of sins and, positively, the imputation of Christ’s righteousness—His obedience reckoned to our account.<sup>46</sup>

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creatures in Christ before consciously believing in Christ and thus enjoying righteousness” (*The Reformed Faith of John Calvin*, p. 226).

42 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1, p. 726; Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “Justification and Union with Christ (3.11-18),” in David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (eds.), *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), p. 257.

43 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1, p. 726. Later, Calvin calls justification by faith “this utterly incomparable good” (3.11.10, p. 737) and “the sum of all piety” (3.15.7, p. 794). Elsewhere, he extols it as “the principal blessing of the everlasting covenant” (*Commentary on the Psalms* 143:2).

44 Calvin also uses the “foundation” image in a sermon on Luke 1:5-10, in which he describes justification as “the principle of the whole doctrine of salvation and of the foundation of all religion” (quoted in Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, p. 256).

45 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.2, p. 726.

46 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.2, pp. 726-727.

Calvin proves this by looking at several biblical texts in the next two sections.<sup>47</sup>

This scriptural explanation of justification must be given at the very start, Calvin maintains, lest “we stumble at the very threshold” and so never get into the house.<sup>48</sup> That is precisely what the Church of Rome, the New Perspective on Paul, and the Federal Vision have done: they stumble on the very threshold with their heretical definitions of justification and so do not enter the household of faith and the Father’s mansions. To return to one of the two images used earlier, they are not building on the true “foundation” at all—and so they are building some other house—and their piety, though they may vaunt it to the skies, is built on sand.

Along with the length, position, and imagery of Calvin’s treatment of justification, there is a fourth way in which its significance comes through in the *Institutes*: his detailed elaboration and defense of it. Book 3, chapter 11 defines and explains justification by faith alone. Chapter 12 recognizes that words and arguments are not enough to convince us of free justification; we must reckon with God’s heavenly judgment seat—a peculiar emphasis of Calvin’s. Chapter 13 treats two things to be noted in free justification: Jehovah’s glory and our peace of conscience. Thus the Reformed doctrine of justification preserves God’s honor and ensures our comfort, thereby manifesting itself, in contrast to justification by faith and works, as the true gospel. Chapter 14 evaluates the works of idolaters, hypocrites, nominal Christians, and the regenerate. In chapter 15, Calvin assails the doctrine of man’s meritorious works, for it destroys both the praise of God and our assurance of salvation. Chapters 16, 17, and 18 refute Rome’s attack on justification based on its wrong views of good works (ch. 16), the promises of the law and of the gospel (ch. 17), and the idea of reward (ch. 18).

Even in this necessarily cursory summary of his instruction on justification in Book 3, chapters 11-18, we see something, at least, of Calvin as a theological craftsman defining, declaring, and defending the gospel truth of justification. Remember, too, that Calvin was never

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47 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.3-4, pp. 727-728.

48 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.2, p. 726.

content with his arrangement of the *Institutes* (including, presumably, his arrangement of justification) until this final edition of 1559.

### Driving Us Out of Ourselves

Having considered the significance of justification in what are arguably Calvin's greatest polemical letter, biblical commentary, Reformation manifesto, and theological treatise, we are now in a position to ask: What is Calvin doing in all his writings on justification in his *Institutes*, commentaries, sermons, and other theological works? The answer can be reduced to one sentence: *He is driving us out of ourselves (and our supposed righteousness) so that we seek all of our justification in Jesus Christ crucified alone.*<sup>49</sup> How does he do this?

The French Reformer presents fallen man as he is: a totally depraved sinner. All of unbelieving man's works are only evil, even—and Calvin is particularly sharp and clear on this at this point—the apparently good deeds of the “virtuous heathen.”<sup>50</sup> This is so, as ethicist Calvin explains, because the “motive” or “end” or “goal” of such works is only ever selfishness and never the glory of God.<sup>51</sup> Throughout his writings, Calvin hastens to add that even the good deeds of true believers are imperfect and need forgiveness. Whatever good is in us, it is wrought in us by the Spirit of Christ alone.

Calvin also exalts the law. He explains that it is spiritual and inward, that it includes our heart and not merely externals, that it covers our thoughts and words as well as what we do, and that it requires one-hundred-percent obedience and never anything less. Calvin uses the law with the same purpose as Paul in Romans 3:19: “that every

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49 This is how the Reformer describes Paul's method in Romans 1-3: “Having wholly deprived all mankind of their confidence in their own virtue and of their boast of righteousness, and laid them prostrate by the severity of God's judgment, he returns to what he had before laid down as his subject—that we are justified by faith; and he explains what faith is, and how the righteousness of Christ is by it attained by us” (Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, p. xxxi).

50 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.14.3-4, pp. 770-771.

51 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.14.3, p. 770. Likewise, the Heidelberg Catechism states that good works must be “to his [i.e., God's] glory” (A. 91).

mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.” In this way, the law is “our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Gal. 3:24).<sup>52</sup>

The Genevan Reformer forcefully appeals to James 2:10: “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.”<sup>53</sup> In the very last section of Calvin’s treatment of justification in the *Institutes*, hammering the final nail in unbelieving man’s coffin, the Reformer returns to this text:

These Sophists of ours stumble because they do not pay attention to James’ statement, “Whoever sins in one point is already made guilty of all, for he who forbade killing also forbade stealing” [James 2:10-11 p.], etc. Accordingly, it ought not to seem absurd when we say that death is the just punishment for each several sin, for each one deserves God’s just wrath and vengeance.<sup>54</sup>

As if this is not enough, Calvin even appeals to “a righteousness higher than the observance of the law”:

Indeed, I admit that in The Book of Job mention is made of a righteousness higher than the observance of the law, and it is worth-while to maintain this distinction. For even if someone satisfied the law, not even then could he stand the test of that righteousness which surpasses all understanding. Therefore, even though Job has a good conscience, he is stricken dumb with astonishment, for he sees that not even the holiness of angels can please God if he should weigh their works in his heavenly scales.<sup>55</sup>

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52 Calvin complains about the folly of Rome’s sixteenth-century council: “But so preposterous are the Fathers of Trent, that while it is the office of Moses to lead us by the hand to Christ (Gal. 3:24), they lead us away from the grace of Christ to Moses” (“Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote,” in John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958], vol. 3, p. 120).

53 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.14.10, p. 777.

54 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.18.10, p. 833.

55 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.12.1, pp. 755-756. As Derek W.H. Thomas observes, “[This] raises the issue of double justice—that there exists a standard of justice (righteousness) over and above that which is revealed in the law.”

Calvin reminds us forcibly, time and time again, of God's terrible curse due to us for breaking His statutes: "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them" (Gal. 3:10; Deut. 27:26).<sup>56</sup>

Here are two striking quotations, both from Calvin's sermons, first on the tenth commandment (Deut. 5:21), and, second, on "righteous" Noah (Gen. 7:1-5), in which the French Reformer reminds us of God's curse upon our disobedience:

When Saint Paul wants to prove that men, as sinners, are cursed and that not a one of them is just, what argument does he use? He cites this passage from Moses: "Cursed are they who do not fulfil the contents of the Law."<sup>57</sup>

...we are empty of every good thing...we are already condemned and totally lost before God, as the sentence has already been pronounced: "Cursed is the one who does not fulfil all the things which are written in the law" (cf. Gal. 3:10). Who fulfils them? Who even begins to?<sup>58</sup>

### **Merit and Works of Supererogation**

From all this, it is readily understood why the Reformer of Geneva resolutely refuses any place for human merit or so-called works of supererogation (i.e., works beyond the law) in man's justification.

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Calvin not only speaks of "double justice" in his *Institutes*; it also "receives fairly extensive treatment in Calvin's sermons on Job" ("The Mediator of the Covenant [2.12-15]," in Hall and Lillback [eds.], *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes*, p. 208). Later in the *Institutes*, Calvin affirms, "Christ alone, who *surpasses all perfection of the law*, must be set forth as righteous" (3.19.2, p. 835).

56 E.g., Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming*, p. 60; *Institutes*, 3.12.1, p. 756. Our Heidelberg Catechism quotes Galatians 3:10 in Q. & A. 10.

57 John Calvin, *John Calvin's Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, ed. and trans. Benjamin Wirt Farley (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), p. 229.

58 John Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis: Chapters 1-11*, trans. Rob Roy McGregor (Edinburgh: Banner, 2009), p. 618. Notice, especially, the two haunting, rhetorical questions with which the citation ends: "Who fulfils them [i.e., God's laws]? Who even begins to?"



He attacks the notion that man may “merit” with God, calling it a “proud” and “offensive” word, which has done “great damage...to the world.”<sup>59</sup> The notion that good works may proceed from man’s flesh is “vicious.”<sup>60</sup> It is even “execrable blasphemy”:

[Rome’s] idea of meriting reconciliation with God by satisfactions, and buying off the penalties due to his [i.e., God’s] justice, is execrable blasphemy, inasmuch as it destroys the doctrine which Isaiah delivers concerning Christ—that “the chastisement of our peace was upon him” (Isa. 53:5).<sup>61</sup>

Calvin questions the spiritual sanity of those who “suppose that they can procure eternal life by the merit of their works.” He reckons, they are “laboring under a kind of delirium.”<sup>62</sup>

The French Reformer rightly sees that works of supererogation are impossible because God is entitled to all that we are and have and do. The divine law encompasses all of life, so we can never go beyond it. And if we did, God would ask with Isaiah of old, “‘Who has required this of your hands?’ [Is. 1:12, cf. Vg.]”<sup>63</sup> Calvin asks how “works of supererogation...square with the [scriptural] injunction”: “when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do” (Luke 17:10).<sup>64</sup>

### “Without Works”

Calvin refutes the “ingenious subterfuge” of Rome that twists Scriptures that speak of justification “without the works of the law” to refer only to the ceremonial law and not the moral law. He quotes

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59 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.15.2, p. 789.

60 John Calvin, “Catechism of the Church of Geneva,” in John Calvin, *Treatises on the Sacraments: Catechism of the Church of Geneva, Forms of Prayer, and Confessions of Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Scotland: Christian Heritage, 2002), p. 54.

61 Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, p. 63.

62 Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, p. 101.

63 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.14.15, p. 782.

64 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.14.14, p. 781.

various texts (from Romans and Galatians), one after another, and ridicules those who say that these oracles speak only of “ceremonies”:

Do they think that the apostle was raving when he brought forward these passages to prove his opinion? “The man who does these things will live in them” [Gal. 3:12], and, “Cursed be every one who does not fulfill all things written in the book of the law” [Gal. 3:10 p.]. Unless they have gone mad they will not say that life was promised to keepers of ceremonies or the curse announced only to those who transgress the ceremonies. If these passages are to be understood of the moral law, there is no doubt that moral works are also excluded from the power of justifying. These arguments which Paul uses look to the same end: “Since through the law comes knowledge of sin” [Rom. 3:20], therefore not righteousness. Because “the law works wrath” [Rom. 4:15], hence not righteousness. Because the law does not make conscience certain, it cannot confer righteousness either. Because faith is imputed as righteousness, righteousness is therefore not the reward of works but is given unearned [Rom. 4:4-5]. Because we are justified by faith, our boasting is cut off [Rom. 3:27 p.]. “If a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But God consigned all things to sin that the promise might be given to those who believe” [Gal. 3:21-22 p.]. Let them now babble, if they dare, that these statements apply to ceremonies, not to morals. Even schoolboys would hoot at such impudence. Therefore let us hold as certain that when the ability to justify is denied to the law, these words refer to the whole law.<sup>65</sup>

The exegesis of the Federal Vision men is slightly different but just as foolish. When the Bible says that we are justified without works (e.g., Rom. 3:28; 4:5-6; Gal. 2:16), they claim it refers to works that are *done out of a desire to merit*. Calvin would “hoot” at them too and declare their views “utterly silly.”<sup>66</sup>

Moreover, if all this has not stopped the mouths of all rendering them guilty before God, Calvin drags us before the judgment seat of God. Take

65 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.19, p. 749. Elsewhere, Calvin states that it is “quite absurd” to “confine” “the works of the law” to “ceremonies” (*Commentary on Romans* 3:28).

66 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.19, p. 749.

time earnestly to consider yourself and your works in the light of that heavenly tribunal! *Institutes*, 3.12, headed in the Battles edition, “We Must Lift Up Our Minds to God’s Judgment Seat that We May Be Firmly Convinced of His Free Justification,” is the chapter in Calvin’s magnum opus that especially calls us to this holy consideration, but this is a theme to which Calvin returns frequently in his preaching and writing.

### **Sermon on Micah 6:1-5**

One of Calvin’s sermons, that on Micah 6:1-5, will have to suffice as a sample of his direct and powerful preaching of the divine “lawsuit” to the Genevan congregation.<sup>67</sup>

He [i.e., God] declares his intention to enter into a lawsuit against us. Indeed, he acts as both judge and criminal prosecutor. Yet, we sleep on! We think nothing of it! But God will make us feel the full scope of his indictment against us.<sup>68</sup>

One can hear prosecuting attorney Calvin put his legal training to good effect as he insists upon “two reasons why...we cannot win our case”:

First, we do not have it within our ability to triumph against so powerful an adversary as God. And second, because there is nothing we can cite that would justify ourselves. In truth, mankind pretend to believe that there is much in their favor, but in the end, it all crumbles. For God need speak only a word to repudiate it all. “In truth,” God says, “in the eyes of men you appear as grand and noble, but when you come before my presence, I charge you with being a traitor and with being guilty of disloyalty...”<sup>69</sup>

Calvin presses home his point by appealing to the cases of two godly men, Job and David:

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67 The Hebrew word *riḇ*, referring to a legal dispute or lawsuit or case at law, is used three times in Micah 6:1-3.

68 John Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah*, trans. and ed. Benjamin Wirt Farley (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003), p. 313.

69 Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah*, pp. 314-315.

In order to comprehend this better, let us consider what Job said, following the numerous protestations of his innocence and purity of conscience. “Nevertheless,” he says, “when I come before my judge, I will be without excuse. And I will be more than guilty. Even if I could cite just one instance that might justify me, God would be able to list a thousand that would condemn me” [Job 9:3]. That is Job, who acknowledged that he was as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame, as a father to orphans, as a haven to animals; that his hand was never closed to the poor; that he never wronged a single soul; and that he never rebelled against God [see Job 29:12-17]. He acknowledged all that, yet when it came to himself, he knew that we are all sinners, full of filth and corruption. For in comparison to God, we ourselves know that we are worthy of a thousand deaths! Consequently, my only recourse is to confess my sins and to acknowledge the truth about myself. That is how he speaks. Even David, though God found him to be a man after his own heart, says: “O Lord, enter not into judgment.” And with whom? “With your servant” [Psalm 143:2]. He called himself God’s servant, yet he knew himself to be guilty in every way.

Thus we have two saints, as sound as the angels of paradise; nevertheless, they knew that if God had entered into judgment with them, they would have been damned. What does this say about us?<sup>70</sup>

To those lying prostrate in dust and ashes before the dread majesty of the Holy One of Israel, Calvin brings the comfort of the gospel of free justification. He heralds the righteousness of Christ alone; He proclaims the merits and love of One who is the incarnate Son of God. He suffered on the cross for our sins! His life, His atoning death, His burial, His victorious resurrection, His ascension, and His heavenly intercession—that is all we will ever need. This is held out to, and conferred upon, all who believe the faithful promise. Pastor Calvin encourages us that it is all of grace, rooted in eternal election, for all who receive it by faith alone.

“We have been redeemed from God’s judgment,” writes Calvin, through Christ’s “descent into hell,” the “beginning” of which occurred in the Garden of Gethsemane: “what harsh and dreadful torments he

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70 Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah*, p. 315.

suffered, when he knew that he stood accused before God's judgment seat *for our sake*.<sup>71</sup> Centrally, the article of the Apostles' Creed speaks of the hellish agonies Christ endured at the cross, according to Calvin: "that invisible and incomprehensible judgment which he underwent in the sight of God...suffering in his soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man."<sup>72</sup> This Messiah is our only—and all-sufficient—hope!

## James 2

There are especially two texts, both in the sixteenth century and in the twenty-first, that Romanists use against justification by faith alone. The number one passage to which they appeal is, as one would expect, James 2, for verses 14-26 might appear at first to deny the Bible's (and especially Paul's) doctrine of justification by faith alone.<sup>73</sup>

Calvin treats James 2 in his 1540 commentary on Romans 3:28. He refers to the "context," or "the drift of the argument pursued by James":

For the question with him is not, how men obtain righteousness before God [as with Paul], but how they prove to others that they are justified; for his object was to confute hypocrites, who vainly boasted that they had faith [James 2:18].<sup>74</sup>

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71 Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.12, p. 519.

72 Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.10, p. 516; cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 44.

73 A significant, recent Roman Catholic attack on justification that leans heavily on flawed exegesis of James 2 is Robert A. Sungenis, *Not by Faith Alone: The Biblical Evidence for the Catholic Doctrine of Justification* (Santa Barbara, CA: Queenship Publishing, 1997), esp. pp. 117-175.

74 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* 3:28. Calvin's Romans commentary (1540) reveals how important he saw this issue of the apparent discrepancy between Paul and James, for he refers his readers to a more detailed treatment of it in his *Institutes (Commentary on Romans 3:28)*. He also remarks, "[I] intend to explain [James 2] more fully, when I come, if the Lord will permit, to expound that Epistle" (*Commentary on Romans* 4:3). God did so will, for eleven years later Calvin published his commentary on James (1551).

Over a decade later, in his commentary on James 2, our Reformer gives a full treatment of these verses. Again Calvin—fine exegete that he is—especially considers the context: “the general drift of the whole passage.” James and Calvin teach that good works “make known” or provide “the proof” or “the manifestation of [imputed] righteousness” “and that *before men*, as we may gather from the preceding words, ‘*Shew to me thy faith*’ [James 2:18].”<sup>75</sup>

In his *Institutes* (1559), Calvin makes at least three points on James 2.<sup>76</sup> First, those who interpret James as teaching justification by faith *and* works “drag Paul into conflict with James,” which, of course, given the unity of Scripture, exposes their exegesis as wrong.<sup>77</sup> Second, Calvin points out that James is dealing with hypocrites, those who only claimed to have faith but did not in reality (and this showed by their failure to live holily and do good works).<sup>78</sup> Third, Calvin exposes the “double fallacy” of his opponents who wrongly reckon that James uses the words “faith” and “justify” in the same sense as Paul.<sup>79</sup>

In 1560, the year after the publication of the final edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin’s four, recently-delivered sermons on justification on Genesis 15:4-7 were printed in French along with another fourteen sermons by the Genevan Reformer.<sup>80</sup> These Genesis 15 sermons, claims Richard Muller, “present what, with little hyperbole, can be called Calvin’s final testament to the Reformed teachings of justification by grace alone through faith and of the right relationship between faith and the obedience of Christians.”<sup>81</sup> Calvin devotes

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75 Calvin, *Commentary on James* (2:21).

76 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.17.11-12, pp. 814-817.

77 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.17.11, p. 814.

78 Calvin describes those James is exhorting as false brethren who have “abandoned themselves to a wholly licentious life,” yet they live in a “stupid assurance,” for they “boast of the false name of faith” though they possess only “the empty image of it” (*Institutes*, 3.17.11, p. 814).

79 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.17.11-12, pp. 815-817.

80 Richard A. Muller, “Foreword” to John Calvin, *Sermons on Melchizedek and Abraham* (Willow Street, PA: Old Paths, 2000), p. xv.

81 Muller, “Foreword,” p. ix.

over a third of the last of these four sermons to proving that James 2 harmonizes with Genesis 15:6 and justification by faith alone.<sup>82</sup>

Calvin's treatment of this subject in this fourth sermon adds nothing new to his earlier writings. But he does use a striking analogy when arguing that James 2 speaks of "faith" improperly, only referring to the (false) claim of ungodly hypocrites to be true believers: "the frivolous vaunting which was in the mouth of those scoffers that would be taken for good Christians."<sup>83</sup> Calvin says this is similar to his using the word "church" with respect to Roman Catholicism:

But when we speak of the Papists, we never yield unto them in truth that they have any church which is to be obeyed: For indeed they have nothing but some ruins of a Church, and a certain canvassing and tossing of service of their own devising, and (as they thought) to serve God withal.<sup>84</sup>

It is highly revealing that in our day not only Rome but also the advocates of the Federal Vision appeal to James 2, which they misread and twist. These purported Protestant churchmen corrupt, and so deny, the truth of justification, "the article of a standing or a falling church," thus raising the question if we should refer to their churches as "churches" in the proper sense!<sup>85</sup>

## Romans 2:13

Immediately after treating James 2 in the *Institutes*, Calvin, who believes in covering all the bases, turns to Romans 2:13: "For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be

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82 Calvin, *Sermons on Melchizedek and Abraham*, pp. 179-188.

83 Calvin, *Sermons on Melchizedek and Abraham*, p. 183.

84 Calvin, *Sermons on Melchizedek and Abraham*, p. 182. Instead of Rome being "the spouse of our Savior Jesus Christ," Calvin declares, "surely it is a very harlot" that "begot nothing but bastards" (p. 183).

85 For a couple of recent Protestant treatments of James 2's teaching on justification, see James R. White, *The God Who Justifies* (USA: Bethany House, 2001), pp. 329-354; Brian M. Schwertley, *Auburn Avenue Theology: A Biblical Analysis* (USA: American Presbyterian Press and Covenantal Reformation Press, 2005), pp. 78-97.

justified.” Calvin explains, positively, the meaning of the text: there is no one who can keep the law and therefore no one can be justified this way.<sup>86</sup> Any man taught in the slightest by the Spirit knows this and casts himself before Almighty God in repentance.

In his commentary on Romans 2:13, he is sharp in his criticism of the heretics:

They who pervert this passage for the purpose of building up justification by works deserve most fully to be laughed at, even by children. It is therefore improper and beyond what is needful, to introduce here a long discussion on the subject, with the view of exposing so futile a sophistry....<sup>87</sup>

This is the proper way, Calvin’s own way, to deal with the men of the Federal Vision and the advocates of the New Perspective on Paul. People should not endorse, or enthuse about, their books; Christians ought not stand up after their speeches to give them an ovation; they should laugh at them. If they brought any of their children to such lectures, the children should laugh at them too. So said Calvin, who did not even bother to expose “so futile a sophistry”; he reckoned it was almost beneath him.

Guy Prentiss Waters’ evaluation is correct: “All expressions of Christianity are on the path to one of two destinations, Rome or Geneva. What the NPP [i.e., New Perspective on Paul] offers us is decidedly not ‘Genevan.’”<sup>88</sup> Nor is the Federal Vision. “If we examine their arguments carefully, we see that what they are *really and increasingly* saying is that Luther and Calvin were mistaken, and that [the Roman Catholic Council of] Trent was right.”<sup>89</sup>

Besides these two main texts, James 2 and Romans 2:13, Calvin deals with many others in his *Institutes*. One has to scratch one’s head

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86 Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.17.13, pp. 817-818.

87 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (2:13).

88 Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), p. 211.

89 Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul*, p. 212; italics Waters’.



at points, marveling at the forced interpretations that Rome foisted upon many passages of Holy Scripture: “That’s ingenious! How they twist these biblical texts to overthrow justification!” Calvin, patient theologian that he is, pursues the Roman Catholic sophists into every hiding hole and refutes all their evasions. This leaves them totally without excuse and makes the truth of justification stand clear and firm for all who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

### **Perversion of Orthodox Phrases**

There is another ploy of false teachers in the sixteenth and twenty-first centuries (and, indeed, in every age): using orthodox phrases but perverting them to another meaning. Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto, Bishop of Carpentras, in his letter to the Genevans spoke of salvation by “faith alone.” These are his words: “Moreover, we obtain this blessing of complete and perpetual salvation by *faith alone* in God and in Jesus Christ.”<sup>90</sup>

“Faith alone,” says the Roman cardinal! But he adds, “we must also bring a mind full of piety towards Almighty God,” before speaking of preparing ourselves and doing good works, and concluding that faith includes “hope and desire of obeying God, together with love.”<sup>91</sup> That is some “faith alone!” “Faith alone”—and then he adds half a dozen things to it!

James Henley Thornwell, a nineteenth-century Southern Presbyterian theologian, stated it well in this epigram: “To be justified by graces [plural] is not to be justified by grace [singular].”<sup>92</sup> Calvin did not even deem Sadoletto’s perverse redefinition of “faith alone” as deserving an answer. The Federal Vision men also prattle about “faith alone,” but then, like the crafty cardinal, they include “covenant faithfulness” and “the obedience of faith” in “faith alone.”

Sadoletto also uses the phrase “Christ alone”: “we, being aided in *Christ alone*, with all divine and human counsels, helps, and virtues might present our souls to God in safety.”<sup>93</sup> The Bishop of Carpentras

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90 Calvin, *Reformation Debate*, p. 35.

91 Calvin, *Reformation Debate*, pp. 35-36.

92 James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* (Edinburgh: Banner, 1974), vol. 3, p. 353.

93 Calvin, *Reformation Debate*, p. 34.

uses the words “Christ alone,” but even within that very sentence he perverts it into our works, because, through “all divine and human” aids, we have a decisive role in saving ourselves.

### **Osiander, the Lutheran**

All know that Rome is Calvin’s main enemy concerning justification, so it is surprising that the first opponent he mentions in his treatment of justification in *Institutes*, 3.11-18 is a Lutheran called Andreas Osiander.<sup>94</sup> After dealing with Osiander the Genevan Reformer turns the sword of the Spirit against Rome.

Calvin does not criticize Osiander *because* he is a Lutheran. This might be what you would expect if the Federal Vision men were right and that Calvin and Luther, and therefore Luther’s followers, differed on justification. Instead, Calvin rebukes Osiander because Osiander was not faithful to the biblical doctrine of justification, which was jointly held by the Lutherans and the Reformed. Osiander’s many heresies included the notion that the divine essence is transfused into us and that this infusion *and* the imputation of Christ’s righteousness combine in our justification.<sup>95</sup> Calvin rightly calls Osiander’s “speculation” a “strange monster” and a “wild dream” “bordering on Manichaeism.”<sup>96</sup>

### **Catechism of the Church of Geneva**

Finally, we shall build upon the truth of justification by faith alone by setting forth six aspects of Calvin’s teaching on this doctrine that are perhaps less well known and understood, but which are, nevertheless, important for a full confession of, and greater comfort in, this glorious gospel jewel. Here we shall take our lead from Calvin’s Catechism of the Church of Geneva (1545), which he wrote for children as a form of instruction in the doctrine of Christ.

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94 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.5-12, pp. 729-743.

95 Against all confusion of imputed and infused righteousness, Calvin rightly maintains, “it is false to say that any part of righteousness (justification) consists in quality, or in the habit which resides in us” (“Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote,” p. 117).

96 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.5, pp. 729, 730.

What does Calvin's Genevan Catechism say about justification? What did Calvin want the children of the church to know about it? What great truths of the gospel of justification did he reckon Christ's lambs (and not only His sheep) should and must grasp in order to mature as prospering and profitable members of the congregation?

### *1. Justification and Sanctification*

Calvin is especially clear that justification and sanctification are distinct but inseparably joined.

**Master.** But can this [imputed] righteousness be separated from good works, so that he who has it may be void of them?

**Scholar.** That cannot be. For when by faith we receive Christ as he is offered to us, he not only promises us deliverance from death and reconciliation with God [i.e., justification], but also the gift of the Holy Spirit, by which we are regenerated to newness of life [i.e., sanctification]; these things must necessarily be conjoined so as not to divide Christ from himself.<sup>97</sup>

Justification and sanctification are in Christ—both of them, together, inseparably—just as justification and sanctification are the two distinct, cardinal blessings of the new covenant in Christ, as Calvin teaches repeatedly in his various writings.<sup>98</sup>

In his commentary on Hebrews 8:8-12, which Scripture passage is a quotation of Jeremiah 31:31-34, Calvin declares, “There are two main parts in this covenant; the first regards the gratuitous remission of sins [i.e., justification]; and the other, the inward renovation of the heart [i.e., sanctification].”<sup>99</sup>

Preaching on Galatians 2:17-18, Calvin refers to “the two principal graces of our Lord Jesus Christ”:

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97 Calvin, “Catechism of the Church of Geneva,” p. 55.

98 Cf. Angus Stewart, “John Calvin’s Integrated Covenant Theology (3): The Blessings of the Covenant,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, vol. 42, no. 1 (November 2008), pp. 3-16, esp. pp. 6-14. A longer, more developed version of this article may be found on-line ([www.cprf.co.uk/articles/calvincovenanttheology3.htm](http://www.cprf.co.uk/articles/calvincovenanttheology3.htm)).

99 Calvin, *Commentary on Hebrews* (8:10).

The one is the forgiveness of our sins, whereby we are assured of our salvation, and have our consciences quieted [i.e., justification].... The second is, that whereas we be forward of our own nature...when we have once tasted the inestimable love of our God, and perceived what our Lord Jesus Christ is: then we be so touched by his [H]oly [S]pirit, that we condemn the evil, and desire to draw near unto God, and to frame ourselves to his holy will [i.e., sanctification].<sup>100</sup>

This being the case, there is no room for loose living or antinomianism in Calvin's teaching on justification. Those who are truly justified by faith alone will, and must, live new and godly lives and so do good works. Covenant children—and adults—need to know and practice this.

## 2. *Justification and Assurance*

Calvin emphatically teaches that justification includes assurance of salvation. Calvin wanted the Genevan catechumens to know this, as this dialogue between the Master (M) and the Scholar (S) shows:

**M.** What advantage accrues to us from this forgiveness [which is, of course, included in justification]?

**S.** We are accepted, just as if we were righteous and innocent, and at the same time our consciences are confirmed in a full reliance on his paternal favour, assuring us of salvation.<sup>101</sup>

This is necessarily the case because justification is itself a declaration of God to us in our consciousness that we are righteous and, hence, recipients of Jehovah's fatherly care and salvation. Thus justification itself carries with it the truth of assurance.

Calvin's definition of faith, which he puts into the mouths of the lambs in Geneva, also includes assurance. In answer to the Master's request for a "true definition of faith," the child replies, "It may be defined [as] a sure and steadfast knowledge of the paternal goodwill of

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100 John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians* (Audubon, NJ: Old Paths, 1995), pp. 277-278.

101 Calvin, "Catechism of the Church of Geneva," p. 79.

God toward us, as he declares in the gospel that for the sake of Christ he will be our Father and Saviour.”<sup>102</sup>

Assurance is also included in the definition of faith given in Calvin’s *Institutes*:

Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.<sup>103</sup>

That assurance is of the essence of faith is a point Calvin makes repeatedly in his various works. For instance, in *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, immediately after speaking of justification, Calvin castigates Rome for its grievous heresy in this regard:

Lastly, there was another most pestilential error, which not only occupied the minds of men, but was regarded as one of the principal articles of faith, of which it was impious to doubt: that is, that believers ought to be perpetually in suspense and uncertainty as to their interest in the divine favor. By this suggestion of the devil, the power of faith was completely extinguished, the benefits of Christ’s purchase destroyed, and the salvation of men overthrown. For, as Paul declares, that faith only is Christian faith which inspires our hearts with confidence, and emboldens us to appear in the presence of God (Rom. 5:2). On no other view could his doctrine in another place be maintained: that is,

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102 Calvin, “Catechism of the Church of Geneva,” p. 53. Likewise, Calvin states that faith “a sure knowledge of God’s mercy, which is received from the gospel, and brings peace of conscience with regard to God, and rest to the mind” (*Commentary on Romans* 4:14).

103 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.7, p. 551. For a fine treatment of Calvin on assurance in his *Institutes*, see Engelsma, *The Reformed Faith of John Calvin*, pp. 194-199. The Heidelberg Catechism faithfully reflects the biblical teaching of the French Reformer: “What is true faith? True faith is not only a certain knowledge, whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in His word, but also an assured confidence, which the Holy Ghost works by the gospel, in my heart; that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sin, everlasting righteousness and salvation, are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ’s merits” (Q&A. 21).

that “we have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father” (Rom. 8:15).<sup>104</sup>

Thus the Genevan Reformer not only sees justification and sanctification as inseparably joined; Pastor Calvin also rightly teaches that justification includes assurance of salvation. The youngest catechumens in Calvin’s Geneva were left in no doubt concerning this. Yet many Reformed theologians even in our day have not got this straight.<sup>105</sup>

### 3. *Justification and Continual Forgiveness*

Justification includes the *continual* forgiveness of sins. It is not only received once and for all at the very start of the Christian life, as many in fundamentalist and evangelical circles believe and teach. Calvin teaches, in the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer (“forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”), that we who are already believers continually ask God to remit our sins:

**M.** What does the fifth petition contain?

**S.** That the Lord would pardon our sins.... When Christ gave this form of prayer, he designed it for the whole Church.<sup>106</sup>

Calvin explains that, because of his continual imperfection and sin, the believer requires “continual forgiveness”:

For since no perfection can come to us so long as we are clothed in this flesh, and the law moreover announces death and judgment to all who do not maintain perfect righteousness in works, it will always have grounds for accusing and condemning us unless, on the contrary, God’s mercy counters it, and by continual forgiveness of sins repeatedly acquits us.<sup>107</sup>

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104 Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, p. 27.

105 For more on assurance, see this on-line Assurance Resources page ([www.cprf.co.uk/assuranceresources.htm](http://www.cprf.co.uk/assuranceresources.htm)).

106 Calvin, “Catechism of the Church of Geneva,” p. 79.

107 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.14.10, p. 777.

In the quotation below, we see the Genevan Reformer prove his point from Scripture by appealing to the history of David and Abraham, noting that statements of their justification (Psalm 32:1 and Genesis 15:6, respectively) are given long after they first believed and were justified in their consciences for the first time [1]. Calvin also appeals to the testimony of the conscience of the (continually sinning) believer as to the need for continual forgiveness [2].

[1] Nor can this indeed be confined to the commencement of justification, as they dream; for this definition—“Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven”—was applicable to David, after he had long exercised himself in the service of God; and Abraham, thirty years after his call, though a remarkable example of holiness, had yet no works for which he could glory before God, and hence his faith in the promise was imputed to him for righteousness; and when Paul teaches us that God justifies men by not imputing their sins, he quotes a passage, which is daily repeated in the Church. [2] Still more the conscience, by which we are disturbed on the score of works, performs its office, not for one day only, but continues to do so through life.<sup>108</sup>

Remember too that Calvin rightly sees man’s conscience as God’s witness to us, already in this life, of His righteous verdict upon our sins.

...when men have an awareness of divine judgment adjoined to them as a witness which does not let them hide their sins but arraigns them as guilty before the judgment seat—this awareness is called “conscience”...this feeling, which draws men to God’s judgment, is like a keeper assigned to man, that watches and observes all his secrets so that nothing may remain buried in darkness. Hence that ancient proverb: conscience is a thousand witnesses.<sup>109</sup>

No wonder Calvin affirms in his *Institutes*,

...we must have this blessedness [of justification] not just once but

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108 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (3:21).

109 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.10.3, pp. 1181, 1182.

must hold to it throughout life...the embassy of free reconciliation is published [i.e., preached] not just for one day or another but is attested as perpetual in the church.<sup>110</sup>

Justification is not increased, for it is always 100% complete, based on the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to us. But we who are just are also sinners (to borrow Luther's phraseology), and so we continually need to hear the assuring declaration of pardon in our consciousness, especially through the preaching of the Word.<sup>111</sup> This is Reformed and biblical Christianity for young and old.

#### 4. *Justification and Our Good Works*

Calvin instructs us that God justifies the good works of all those to whom He imputes Christ's righteousness.

**M.** Whence then or how can it be that they [i.e., the believer's good works] please God?

**S.** It is faith alone which procures favour for them, as we rest with assured confidence on this—that God wills not to try them by his strict rule, but covering their defects and impurities as buried in the purity of Christ, he regards them in the same light as if they were absolutely perfect.<sup>112</sup>

This is what is referred to as “double justification”: God's justi-

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110 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.14.11, pp. 778-779. For other references to the believer's receiving continual forgiveness of sins, see, e.g., Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis* (15:6); *Commentary on Romans* (4:6-8); “Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote,” pp. 114, 122-123.

111 Cf. Cornelis P. Venema: “Calvin conceives of justification as a definitive judgment accomplished once-for-all in Christ. Yet faith continually appeals to and appropriates this judgment throughout the whole course of life, since at no point is the believer without the need for God's forgiveness and Christ's righteousness” (*Accepted and Renewed in Christ: The “Two-fold Grace of God” and the Interpretation of Calvin's Theology* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007], p. 108, n. 78).

112 Calvin, “Catechism of the Church of Geneva,” p. 55.



fication of both the believer's person and his works.<sup>113</sup> The former is treated in the first paragraph and the latter in the second, in this fuller explanation in the *Institutes*:

But we define justification as follows: the sinner, received into communion with Christ, is reconciled to God by his grace, while, cleansed by Christ's blood, he obtains forgiveness of sins, and clothed with Christ's righteousness as if it were his own, he stands confident before the heavenly judgment seat.

After forgiveness of sins is set forth, the good works that now follow are appraised otherwise than on their own merit. For everything imperfect in them is covered by Christ's perfection, every blemish or spot is cleansed away by his purity in order not to be brought in question at the divine judgment. Therefore, after the guilt of all transgressions that hinder man from bringing forth anything pleasing to God has been blotted out, and after the fault of imperfection, which habitually defiles even good works, is buried, the good works done by believers are accounted righteous, or, what is the same thing, are reckoned as righteousness [Rom. 4:22].<sup>114</sup>

As in the previous quotation, here Calvin also makes clear that "double justification" is through union with Christ and by faith alone:

A work begins to be acceptable only when it is undertaken with pardon. Now whence does this pardon arise, save that God contemplates us

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113 Calvinists not only believe in double predestination (unconditional election and reprobation); we also believe in double justification. For Calvin on double predestination, see especially, John Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism*, trans. Henry Cole (Jenison, MI: RFPA, 2009) and *Institutes* 3.21-24. The most detailed creedal statement of double predestination is, of course, Head I of the Canons of Dordt.

114 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.17.8, pp. 811-812. Here again we notice the Reformer's references to justification (both of us and our works) in terms of confidence "before the heavenly judgment seat" and "the divine judgment"—and this too in Calvin's "single fullest definition [of justification], at least within the *Institutes*" (Gaffin, "Justification and Union with Christ," p. 260).

and our all in Christ? Therefore, as we ourselves, when we have been engrafted into Christ, are righteous in God's sight because our iniquities are covered by Christ's sinlessness, so our works are righteous and are thus regarded because whatever fault is otherwise in them is buried in Christ's purity, and is not charged to our account. Accordingly, we can deservedly say that by faith alone not only we ourselves but our works as well are justified.<sup>115</sup>

The Genevan Reformer is clear that the justification of the believer's works are "subordinate" and "not contrary" to the justification of his person:

I say that it is owing to free imputation that we are considered righteous before God; I say that from this also another benefit proceeds, viz., that our works have the name of righteousness, though they are far from having the reality of righteousness. In short, I affirm, that not by our own merit but by faith alone, are both our persons and works justified; and that the justification of works depends on the justification of the person, as the effect on the cause.<sup>116</sup>

Calvin affirms that God "not only loves the faithful, but also their works," before adding, "We must again observe, that since some fault always adheres to our works, it is not possible that they can be approved, except as a matter of indulgence."<sup>117</sup>

Heinrich Quistorp presents Calvin's teaching in this regard:

[The] good works...of believers...are not good in themselves but they become so through justification by grace flowing from faith in Christ,

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115 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.17.10, p. 813.; cf. *Commentary on Romans* (4:6-8).

116 Calvin, "Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote," p. 128. Elsewhere, the righteousness of the believer's good works is also said to be "subordinate" to his justification by faith alone (*Commentary on Psalms* 106:31). Sometimes Calvin describes the justification of our works as an "effect" that "proceeds from" the justification of our persons (*Commentary on Romans* 4:6-8).

117 Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis* 7:1; cf. *Commentary on Genesis* 15:6; *Commentary on Psalms* (106:31); *Commentary on Hebrews* (6:10).

and this has its eternal ground in the election of God. Justification and the recompense of works do not therefore in the last resort contradict each other.... It is in fact a pure reward of grace which He gives us in the judgment of Christ. Thus God crowns in His children the work which He began in them.<sup>118</sup>

Ronald Wallace summarizes Calvin's view of our fatherly God as He justifies His children's works:

God does not examine our works according to the "severe rule of the Law." His attitude to our works is rather like that of the father who is pleased to watch and accept what his little child tries to do even though it be of no practical value.<sup>119</sup>

What a comforting truth for the children in Geneva and all the children of God of whatever age throughout the world!<sup>120</sup>

### 5. *Justification and the Church*

Calvin teaches that the gift of imputed righteousness—which is inseparably joined to sanctification and includes assurance, the continual forgiveness of sins, and the justification of our works—is received and enjoyed only in a true church. This is how the Catechism

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118 Heinrich Quistorp, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Last Things*, trans. Harold Knight (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1955), p. 149. Belgic Confession, Art. 24 states, "We do not deny that God rewards our good works, but it is through His grace that He crowns His gifts." Likewise, the Heidelberg Catechism declares, "The reward [for good works] comes not out of merit, but of grace" (A. 63).

119 Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), p. 302. In proof of his two statements, Wallace appeals, respectively, to Calvin's commentary on Romans 6:14 and sermon on Job 10:16-17.

120 However, Cornelis Venema observes, "It is unfortunate that interpreters of Calvin's doctrine of the 'twofold grace of God' [in justification and sanctification] have given insufficient attention to his particular doctrine of double justification, or the believer's 'twofold acceptance' by God [i.e., both of him and his works]" (*Accepted and Renewed in Christ*, p. 163).

of the Church of Geneva relates two articles of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe an holy, catholic church" and "the forgiveness of sins":

**M.** Why do you subjoin forgiveness of sins to the Church?

**S.** Because no man obtains it without being previously united to the people of God, maintaining unity with the body of Christ perseveringly to the end, and thereby attesting that he is a true member of the Church.<sup>121</sup>

The master's next question draws forth an emphatic confirmation:

**M.** In this way you conclude that out of the Church is naught but ruin and damnation?

**S.** Certainly. Those who make a departure from the body of Christ, and rend its unity by faction, are cut off from all hope of salvation during the time they remain in schism, be it however short.<sup>122</sup>

In his Isaiah commentary, the French Reformer also unites justification and living church membership, and refers to the same two articles of the Apostles' Creed:

It is also worthy of observation, that none but the citizens of the Church enjoy this privilege; for, apart from the body of Christ and the fellowship of the godly, there can be no hope of reconciliation with God. Hence, in the Creed we profess to believe in "The Catholic Church and the forgiveness of sins;" for God does not include among the objects of his love any but those whom he reckons among the members of his only-begotten Son, and, in like manner, does not extend to any who do not belong to his body the free imputation of righteousness [i.e., justification]. Hence it follows, that strangers who separate themselves from the Church have nothing left for them but to rot amidst their curse. Hence, also, a departure from the Church is an open renouncement of eternal salvation.<sup>123</sup>

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121 Calvin, "Catechism of the Church of Geneva," p. 52.

122 Calvin, "Catechism of the Church of Geneva," p. 52.

123 Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah* (33:24). Ronald S. Wallace states, "To refuse the gracious ministry of the Church [according to Calvin] is to refuse to come to the one sure source of the grace of Christ" (*Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957], p. 234).

All this fits perfectly with Calvin's teaching throughout his writings on the necessity of joining, or laboring to establish, a true church,<sup>124</sup> as well as with articles 28 and 29 of our Belgic Confession, written chiefly by Guido De Brès. Both the Confession and its author were influenced and approved by Calvin.<sup>125</sup>

The Genevan Reformer's view is *not* justification by faith *and works*! Nor is it even a mitigation of justification by faith alone! Calvin is teaching that the church is the only sphere in which the blessing of justification by faith alone is enjoyed. This is another good reason why young and old saints must "join and unite themselves" with a true church, "submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ."<sup>126</sup>

#### 6. *Justification and the Judgment Day*

Justification for John Calvin brings "singular delight" in considering the judgment day.

**M.** Does it give any delight to our conscience that Christ one day will be judge of the world?

**S.** Indeed, singular delight. For we know assuredly that he will come only for our salvation.

**M.** We should not then tremble at this judgment, so as to let it fill us with dismay?

**S.** No, indeed; since we shall only stand at the tribunal of a judge who is also our advocate, and who has taken us under his faith and protection.<sup>127</sup>

What insightful questions and perceptive answers the Genevan catechism contains! Only the true gospel can enable us to contemplate the coming judgment day without our running away in dread or our

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124 Cf., esp., John Calvin, *Come Out From Among Them: 'Anti-Nicodemite' Writings of John Calvin*, trans. Seth Skolnitsky (Dallas, TX: Protestant Heritage Press, 2001).

125 Nicolaas H. Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), pp. 59-70.

126 Belgic Confession, Art. 28.

127 Calvin, "Catechism of the Church of Geneva," pp. 49-50.

trembling in terror or our being filled with dismay.<sup>128</sup> Only justification by faith alone—the assurance that the righteousness of Christ is reckoned to our account by God’s grace without works—can give us confidence, nay “singular delight,” both now and at the last day, with regard to God’s judgment.<sup>129</sup>

Any doctrine of justification that cannot do this is, therefore, a false doctrine of justification, and not the doctrine of justification taught in the Bible, nor at the Reformation, nor by Calvin. This is the condemnation of Romanism, false ecumenism, the New Perspective on Paul, and the Federal Vision (amongst others).

John Calvin—good pastor and theologian that he was—preached the good news of justification to the catechumens in Geneva. We and our seed need to hear and believe it continually too: “Little children, do not be distraught as you contemplate the great judgment day. Do not think of it in abject terror. Consider it with singular delight because you are justified, you are righteous with the righteousness of God Himself wrought in our Lord Jesus Christ, who faced the judgment for you two thousand years ago on the cross.”

Under a section entitled, “The Judge is the—Redeemer!” in the Battles edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin rejoices in this “wonderful consolation,” which is “no mean assurance”:

Hence arises a wonderful consolation: that we perceive judgment to be in the hands of him who has already destined us to share with him the honor of judging [cf. Matt. 19:28]! Far indeed is he from mounting his judgment seat to condemn us! How could our most merciful Ruler destroy his people? How could the Head scatter his own members? How could our advocate condemn his clients? For if the apostle

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128 Only justification by faith alone frees “the conscience of fear, terror, and dread,” in approaching God, states Belgic Confession, Art. 23, for, “verily, if we should appear before God, relying on ourselves or on any other creature, though ever so little, we should, alas! be consumed.”

129 Cf. Quistorp: “For the reformers the doctrine of the end is primarily a Gospel, a teaching about the joyful Day of Judgment (Luther) or about the day of our salvation and blessed resurrection (Calvin). For them too it is of course a day of judgment, but of the judgment of Jesus Christ and His grace” (*Calvin’s Doctrine of the Last Things*, p. 12).

dares exclaim that with Christ interceding for us there is no one who can come forth to condemn us [Rom. 8:34, 33], it is much more true, then, that Christ as Intercessor will not condemn those whom he has received into his charge and protection. No mean assurance, this—that we shall be brought before no other judgment seat than that of our Redeemer, to whom we must look for our salvation! Moreover, he who now promises eternal blessedness through the gospel will then fulfill his promise in judgment. Therefore, by giving all judgment to the Son [John 5:22], the Father has honored him to the end that he may care for the consciences of his people, who tremble in dread of judgment.<sup>130</sup>

Cornelis Venema presents Calvin's teaching:

Through fellowship with Christ, believers enjoy through faith an anticipation of the final verdict of free acceptance and favor with God. Justification in Calvin's conception is, therefore, a thoroughly eschatological benefit. By virtue of Christ's atoning death and resurrection, believers who are united to him enjoy the gospel pronouncement of free acceptance with God, which is no less than the present declaration of what will be publicly confirmed at the last judgment.<sup>131</sup>

All true believers have been justified at Calvary; all true believers receive this acquittal in their consciences as they exercise faith in Christ crucified and risen; all true believers will be openly declared righteous with Christ's righteousness at the great assize.

However, it is as the child of God earnestly follows Christ as a lively church member, continually seeking and experiencing forgive-

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130 Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.18, p. 526. Elsewhere in his magnum opus, the French Reformer states that "we fearlessly present ourselves to God" (4.10.3, p. 1182), for we have "untroubled expectation of judgment" (2.16.19, p. 528), since, "being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we...have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father" (3.11.1, p. 725). Calvin even speaks of our going "to God's tribunal" and "to meet Christ" "confidently," "cheerfully," and "joyfully" (*Commentary on I John* 4:17).

131 Cornelis P. Venema, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Last Things: The Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting (3.25 et al.)," in Hall and Lillback (eds.), *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes*, pp. 461-462.

ness for his wretched depravity and manifold sins, that he is enabled *more and more* to consider the judgment day with singular delight. After all, each day he is assured of the verdict of the heavenly tribunal that Jehovah mercifully justifies him and his works.<sup>132</sup> In this way, the great white throne loses its terror for us and is understood as a throne of grace.

This is how Calvin puts it in his Romans commentary:

...as our faith makes progress, and as it advances in knowledge, so the righteousness of God increases in us at the same time [i.e., progressive sanctification], and the possession of it is in a manner confirmed [i.e., increased confidence in our justification]. When at first we taste the gospel, we indeed see God's smiling countenance turned towards us, but at a distance: the more the knowledge of true religion grows in us, by coming as it were nearer, we behold God's favour more clearly and more familiarly.<sup>133</sup>

Christ the judge is “our advocate”; we are “under his faith and protection”; He is coming not for our condemnation but “only for our salvation”—to our “singular delight!”<sup>134</sup> ●

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132 Cf. Engelsma: “Calvin does not [only] mean that this heavenly tribunal is where we are going to stand *some day* at the moment of our death, and also on the *last day*, when all of us stand on the judgment seat of Christ, but he means that this is where we stand *every day* in the matter of justification” (*The Reformed Faith of John Calvin*, p. 228; italics Engelsma's).

133 Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (1:17).

134 Calvin, “Catechism of the Church of Geneva,” p. 50. What Calvin speaks of in terms of “singular delight,” the Heidelberg Catechism treats as “comfort”: “What comfort is it to thee that ‘Christ shall come again to judge the quick and the dead’? That in all my sorrows and persecutions, with uplifted head I look for the very same person, who before offered Himself for my sake, to the tribunal of God, and has removed all curse from me, to come as judge from heaven: who shall cast all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation, but shall translate me with all His chosen ones to Himself, into heavenly joys and glory” (Q&A. 52).



# John Calvin's Doctrine of Predestination

Rev. Chris Connors

## Introduction

“If I wished to write a confession of my faith; I could do so with all fullness and satisfaction to myself out of his writings.” That is what Calvin said of Augustine; and I say it of Calvin. I suppose that means this paper has a huge bias. I am a Calvinist by conviction—for I believe the doctrines of grace are the gospel. That may not be the most scholarly approach—but I am unrepentant! Indeed, my hope is that this speech might in some small way spur us all to kneel alongside the apostle Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin to magnify the sovereign mercy of almighty God.

Allow Calvin to introduce us to his doctrine of predestination:

Let us hold fast this glorious truth—that the mind of God, in our salvation, was such as not to forget Himself, but to set His own glory in the first and highest place; and that He made the whole world for the very end that it might be a stupendous theatre whereon to manifest His own glory. Not that He was not content in Himself, not that He had any need to borrow addition from any other sources; but it was His good pleasure so highly to honour His creatures, as to impress on them the bright marks of His great glory.<sup>1</sup>

That is Calvin's vision! When I read those words in my early twenties, I felt that I had met a man who could show me what it really meant to glorify God! Calvin sees GOD! He sees God GREAT and

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1 John Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: RFP), p. 86. All quotes are taken from an undated, first edition of RFP. See also in this respect, Calvin's introduction to the Secret Providence of God: “Nor will anyone profitably contemplate the Providence of God in the government of the world, as it is set before us in the Scriptures and seen by faith, but he who, feeling that he has to do so with his Maker and with the Creator of all things, first “bows the head” with the awe and reverence and with that humility which becomes one standing before such stupendous Majesty!”

lifted up in glory unapproachable with such transcendent dominion and power and authority—that it takes your breath away!

*Adore with astonishment the secret counsel of God, through which, those which seemed good to him are elected, and the other rejected!*<sup>2</sup>

That encapsulates Calvin, the believer/theologian’s approach to predestination. He beheld the glory of God revealed in the word. He prostrated his mind and heart before the God of the word. And because he heard God speaking so clearly of His eternal predestination, Calvin believed it, taught it, and preached it! Calvin, you see, *practiced Sola Scriptura!*

That reforming principle demanded predestination; and it delivered us from bondage to Rome’s semi-Pelagianism! Predestination, you see, is both the fountain of grace and the death knell to human merit; predestination is what gives us the other great *solas* of the Reformation: *grace alone*, in *Christ alone*, through *faith alone*, to *God’s glory alone*. **GRACE ALONE!** That is the triumphant cry of the Reformation. Calvin took us to its source—the *eternal predestination of God*. He drove his peg into that mighty truth and anchored us in the *free grace of God*.

Calvin’s doctrine of predestination stands at the very heart of the Reformed confessions.<sup>3</sup> The doctrines of grace, or five points

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2 Calvin, *Sermons on Election and Reprobation* (New Jersey: Old Paths Publications, 1996), p. 31. And...“Let those who come to Christ remember that they are ‘vessels’ of grace, not of merit” (*Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 84).

3 The Westminster Confession, chapter 3, reads:

I. God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin; nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.

II. Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass, upon all supposed conditions; yet hath he not decreed any thing because he foresaw it as future, as that which would come to pass, upon such conditions.

III. By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some

of Calvinism,<sup>4</sup> have rightly become the common-places for biblical Christianity.

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men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.

IV. These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite that it can not be either increased or diminished.

V. Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his free grace and love alone, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace.

VI. As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ; are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season; are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power through faith unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.

VII. The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice.

VIII. The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men attending to the will of God revealed in his Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God; and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel.

4 Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints.

Let us take a look at what Calvin himself taught concerning predestination, and then draw out something of the challenge he holds for the churches still today.

### I. Calvin's Doctrine Outlined

**First off, let us glance at Calvin's big picture.** Calvin locates predestination in the eternal covenant between God as Father, and God the Son appointed to the office of Mediator. He writes in the *Institutes*:

The elect are said to have been the Father's before he gave them to his only begotten Son. ... the Father's gift is the beginning of our reception into the surety and protection of Christ.... [T]he whole world does not belong to its Creator except that grace rescues from God's curse and wrath and eternal death a limited number who would otherwise perish. But the world itself is left to its own destruction, to which it has been destined....

"Thus we must believe," writes Calvin, that "when he [Christ] declares that he knows whom he has chosen, he denotes in the human genus a particular species, distinguished not by the quality of its virtues, but by heavenly decree."<sup>5</sup>

That is the pattern of Calvin's thought, a pattern from which he never deviates.

#### 1. Calvin's definition of Predestination.

In the *Institutes*, he writes:

We call predestination God's eternal decree, by which he determined within himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition: rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or to death.<sup>6</sup>

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5 John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (London: SCM. Press, Ltd, 1960), Book 3, chapter 22, section 7.

6 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.5.

In his “Treatise on Eternal Predestination” (1552) over against a certain Albertus Pighius, who, in Calvin’s words, “attempted...to establish the free-will of man, and to subvert the secret counsel of God by which he chooses some to salvation and appoints others to eternal destruction,” he writes:

Now, if we are not really ashamed of the gospel, we must of necessity acknowledge what is therein openly declared: that God by His eternal goodwill (for which there was no other cause than His own purpose), appointed those whom He pleased unto salvation, rejecting all the rest; and that those whom He blessed with this free adoption to be His sons He illumines by His Holy Spirit, that they may receive the life which is offered to them in Christ; while others, continuing of their own will in unbelief, are left destitute of the light of faith, in total darkness.<sup>7</sup>

To deny predestination was, in Calvin’s judgment, to “be ashamed of the gospel.” In fact, without predestination there is no gospel: “Let us take away election,” he says, “and what shall there remain? As we have declared, we remain altogether lost and accursed.”<sup>8</sup> Mercy is our only plea.

Calvin preached the same truth in a simpler way to his flock, as can be seen in his *Sermons on Election and Reprobation*. Preaching on the Genesis account of God’s dealings with elect Jacob and reprobate Esau, he said:

It behooved [was needful and fitting, cjc] that He [God] chose according to His liberty, such as He thought good, and that the rest should remain in their cursed state.... It behooveth not [it is not needful or fitting] that we enter into any deeper disputation of this matter, unless it be to adore with astonishment the secret counsel of God, through which, those which seemed good to him are elected, and the other rejected.<sup>9</sup>

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7 Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 31.

8 Calvin, *Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, p. 39.

9 Calvin, *Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, p. 31.

## 2. Calvin taught and preached *double* Predestination.

Calvin never uses this terminology. Calvin would have thought it a redundancy to speak of *double* predestination!<sup>10</sup> You see, Calvin proceeds on the basis that predestination is one decree, which necessarily has two aspects. Calvin taught that there cannot be one without the other; and he could not be clearer about that: "...many," he says, "as if they wished to avert a reproach from God, accept election in such terms as to deny that anyone is condemned. But they do this very ignorantly and childishly, since election itself could not stand except as set over against reprobation."<sup>11</sup>

"When Pighius holds that God's election of grace has no reference to, or connection with, His hatred of the reprobate, I maintain that reference and connection to be a truth. Inasmuch as the just severity of God answers, in equal and common cause, to that free love with which He embraces His elect."<sup>12</sup>

## 3. Calvin held election and reprobation as equally absolute and unconditional.<sup>13</sup>

Modern moderate Calvinism, embarrassed by absolute sovereignty and fearing lest the whole truth be too offensive to those of universalist persuasion, is strangely silent regarding reprobation, or else it leaves the impression that reprobation is based upon foreseen sin. Calvin had no time for such finagling: "That they were fitted to destruction by *their own wickedness*," he wrote, "is an idea so silly that it needs no notice."<sup>14</sup> Over against that, Calvin taught that: "It must be confessed by all that... [the] difference made between the elect and the reprobate...proceeds

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10 Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 45. "There is, most certainly and evidently, an inseparable connection between the elect and the reprobate. So that the election, of which the apostle speaks, cannot consist unless we confess that God separated from all others certain persons whom it pleased Him thus to separate. Now, this act of God is expressed by the term predestinating."

11 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.1.

12 Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 75.

13 Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 75. "...according to His sovereign and absolute will"—that is Calvin's maxim.

14 Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 76.

from the alone secret will and purpose of God.”<sup>15</sup>

Certainly, Calvin taught that God “casts the blame for... *perdition* upon those who of their own will bring it upon themselves.” And he cautioned against representing the reprobate as so destitute of the common operations of the Spirit in God’s dealings with their resisting consciences, that the fault for their sins could be cast upon God.<sup>16</sup> And, at the same time, he insisted that “it is utterly inconsistent to transfer the *preparation* for destruction to anything but God’s secret plan.”<sup>17</sup>

To the objection that such an exercise of sovereignty makes God a tyrant, Calvin, with no hint of backward step, replies: “With Augustine I say: the Lord has created those whom he unquestionably foreknew would go to destruction. This has happened because He has so willed it. But why He so willed it is not for our reason to enquire, for we cannot comprehend it.”<sup>18</sup> For Calvin, God’s will is “so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, reprobation itself “has its own equity, unknown indeed, to us, but very sure.”<sup>20</sup>

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15 Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 77.

16 Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 176.

17 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.1. See also, in sections 1 and 7, “Those whom God passes over, he condemns, and this he does for no other reason than that he wills to exclude them from the inheritance which he predestines for his own children. ... As Scripture, then, clearly shows, we say that God once established by his eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once for all to receive salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, he would devote to destruction. We assert that, with respect to the elect, this plan was founded upon his freely given mercy, without regard to human worth: but by his just and irreprehensible but incomprehensible judgment he has barred the door of life to those whom he has given over to damnation.”

18 Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 32.

19 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.2.

20 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.9. And he insists, at the same time, that it is perverse for sinners to suppress the cause of their condemnation, which is nothing other than their own sin, in order to cast the blame upon God. Calvin’s point is that no sinner shall ever arrive in hell, except it be in that he walked all the way there in his own sin.

#### 4. Calvin's understanding of foreknowledge.

His opponents, like the universalists of our day, “barked and yapped” about God choosing and rejecting on the basis of foreseen faith and free-will. In Calvin’s judgment, “such kind of men have no drop of the fear of God.”<sup>21</sup> To present God as limited and reactive was, to Calvin, a form of blasphemy.<sup>22</sup> “The opponents,” says Calvin, “imagine that [God] foreknows from an idle watchtower, what he does not himself carry out.” But, “God is not a watcher but the Author of our salvation. . . the Author of our salvation does not go outside himself.”<sup>23</sup> “God foresees future events only by reason of the fact that he decreed that they take place.”<sup>24</sup> “The elect of God were foreknown when, and because, they were freely chosen.”<sup>25</sup> Calvin had a higher view of God. He saw the God of Scripture to be infinite, eternal, omnipotent, self-sufficient, sovereign. Thus his extended definition of foreknowledge as it is in God:

When we attribute foreknowledge to God, we mean that all things always were, and perpetually remain, under his eyes, so that to his knowledge there is nothing future or past, but all things are present. And they are present in such a way that he not only conceives them through ideas, as we have before us those things which our minds remember, but he truly looks upon them and discerns them as things placed before him. And this foreknowledge is extended throughout the universe to every creature.<sup>26</sup>

#### 5. That leads us to Calvin's doctrine of Election.

He writes,

Scripture clearly shows, we say, that God once established by his eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once for all to receive salvation...this plan was founded upon his

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21 Calvin, *Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, p. 38.

22 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.5.

23 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.22.6.

24 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.6.

25 Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 48.

26 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.22.1.



freely given mercy, without regard to human worth.... Now among the elect we regard the call as a testimony of election. Then we hold justification another sign of its manifestation, until they come into the glory in which the fulfillment of that election lies.<sup>27</sup>

Calvin emphasized three things about this election:

**A. Election is...*in Christ*.**

Calvin sees God as turning His eyes upon Christ, arrayed in His threefold office,<sup>28</sup> as the complete basis of salvation for the elect.

...since among all the offspring of Adam, the Heavenly Father found nothing worthy of his election, he turned his eyes upon his Anointed, to choose from that body as members those whom he was to take into the fellowship of life. Let this reasoning, then, prevail among believers: we were adopted in Christ into the eternal inheritance because in ourselves we were not capable of such great excellence.<sup>29</sup>

Four points of emphasis appear. First, God has made Christ to be the “fountain of life, the anchor of salvation, and the heir of the Kingdom of heaven.”<sup>30</sup> Second, election incorporates particular sinners *into* Christ for salvation. Third, “God had no regard to what we were or might be, but our election is founded in Jesus Christ.”<sup>31</sup> And fourth, God opens His fatherly mercy and kindly heart to His elect in Christ.<sup>32</sup>

Election, then, is the eternal aspect of union with Christ. The elect are placed *in Him* eternally in order that they might be *united to Him*

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27 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.7.

28 Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.15.1-6.

29 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.22.1.

30 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.24.5.

31 Calvin, *Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, p. 55.

32 A further point of emphasis in Calvin is adoption. Election and adoption are almost synonymous in his mind. Election is the eternal adoption of children by the Father, who opens His heart to them in and through Christ. This is the way Calvin views the relationship of the “covenant.” The covenant relation is filial—and the relationship it affords is filial love and communion.

in time, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.<sup>33</sup> Out of this truth Calvin draws the sweet doctrine of Christ as the mirror in whom believers must find the assurance of their own election. “If we seek God’s fatherly mercy and kindly heart, we should turn our eyes to Christ...for we have a sufficiently clear testimony that we have been inscribed in the book of life if we are in communion with Christ.”<sup>34</sup>

**B. Election is, therefore, completely unconditional.**

It would not be possible to overemphasize just how completely Calvin repudiated conditional election. This is what Calvin preached:

Paul would frustrate whatsoever men might bring of themselves, and show that nothing has dominion herein, but the only mercy of GOD! ...So then, let us not pretend that we can either will or run: but it behooveth that God find us as lost, and that he recover us from that bottomless pit, and that he separate us from them with whom we were lost, and to whom we were alike.<sup>35</sup>

That “grace...is ultimately rendered effectual by the will of man,” he writes, is a “*fiction*.”<sup>36</sup> His words almost leap off the page as he demolishes free will: “No free-will of man can resist Him that wills to save. Wherefore, we are to rest assured that no *human wills* can resist *the will of God*, who does according to His will all things in heaven and in earth, and who has already done by His will the things that shall be done.”<sup>37</sup> What unfolds in time (providence) is, for Calvin, nothing less than God bringing to pass His eternal counsel. Therefore, “to make faith the *cause* of election,” he writes, “is altogether absurd, and utterly at variance with the word.”<sup>38</sup>

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33 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1. Thus, when Calvin explains how the elect receive the grace of Christ, he begins with the work of “the Holy Spirit as the bond that unites us to Christ.”

34 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.24.5.

35 Calvin, *Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, p. 42.

36 Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 46.

37 Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 149.

38 Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 45.

### C. Election is the *singular* fountain of grace.

According to Calvin, reprobation adds nothing; but election actively bestows Christ and complete salvation in Him. "...all benefits that God bestows for the spiritual life...flow from this one source: namely, that God has chosen whom he has willed, and before their birth has laid up for them individually the grace that he willed to grant them."<sup>39</sup>

Following the divine logic of Romans 8:29-30, Calvin traces grace from unconditional election like a stream from its fountain-head. At times he follows it down to us from eternal predestination, through effectual calling, to justification; and shows us that it must issue, without fail, in glorification!<sup>40</sup> At other times he teaches us to trace grace back upstream from faith, to effectual calling, and from calling to Christ, in whom is our adoption by the Father. This is how he put it: "God calls and justifies, in His own time, those whom He predestinated to these blessings before the foundation of the world."<sup>41</sup> Effectual calling is a testimony and sign that manifests election,<sup>42</sup> and "faith is the special gift of God, and by that gift election is manifested to, and ratified in, the soul that receives it."<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, any glimmer of holiness in the saints is referred "to the election of God, as waters are traced to their originating source."<sup>44</sup> Salvation is, therefore, the working of God's purest grace—from beginning to end!

This says something about Calvin's understanding of *grace*.

Grace, in Calvin's mind, always "*delivers*" God's children into Christ's hands and possession.<sup>45</sup> Much ado has been made of Calvin's mention of a "common" or general kindness of God manifest in His providential dealings with all His creation. But I want to point out that whenever Calvin's context has anything to do, *even remotely*, with salvation or the gospel, Calvin had grace *hooked into* predestination.

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39 Calvin, *Institutes* 3.22.2.

40 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.7.

41 Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 112.

42 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.7.

43 Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 97.

44 Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 154.

45 Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 51.

For Calvin, when it came to salvation, the idea of *grace* flowing to those whom God has passed by and left outside Christ as objects of His righteous hatred—was a falsehood to be demolished.<sup>46</sup> *Calvin sees a predestinating God—the omnipotent volitional being—who is eternally putting forth His favor to Christ and those particular sinners He has chosen to eternal life in Him.* He sees grace as God’s purposeful, personal, irresistible, saving favor.<sup>47</sup> “Rest assured,” he advises us,

No human will can resist the will of God, so as to prevent him from doing what he wills, seeing that He does what he will with the wills themselves of all mankind.<sup>48</sup>

And it also says something about Calvin’s view of what God’s purpose, or desire, is with the preaching of the gospel.

Calvin refutes Pighius’ idea that God sends the gospel to be preached to all men because He desires the salvation of all men. Calvin, holding to the truth of predestination, brings it to bear on the tenacious error of universalism. What he writes applies to any and every hint of universalism. “The great question,” he says, “lies here: did the Lord by His eternal counsel ordain salvation for all men?”<sup>49</sup> Obviously

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46 Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 75. “When Pighius holds that God’s election of grace has no reference to, or connection with, His hatred of the reprobate, I maintain that reference and connection to be a truth. Inasmuch as the just severity of God answers, in equal and common cause, to that free love with which He embraces His elect.”

47 Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 150. How? “Does He bind their bodies, I pray you with chains?” asks Calvin, “Oh, no! He works within; He takes hold of their hearts within; He moves their hearts within; and draws them by those, now, new wills of their own which He has Himself wrought in them.”

48 Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, pp. 149-150.

49 Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, 93-94. Pighius objects: Special and particular election is false, “because Christ, the redeemer of the whole world, commanded the gospel to be preached to all men, promiscuously, generally, and without distinction. But the gospel is an embassy of peace, by which the world is reconciled to God, as Paul teaches. And, according to the same holy witness, it is preached that those who hear it might be saved.” And, “It is quite

not—predestination proves otherwise. Therefore he concludes: “the mercy of God is offered equally to those who believe and to those who believe not, so that those who are not divinely taught within are only rendered inexcusable, not saved.” And: “That they [the reprobate, cjc] may come to their end, he [God] sometimes deprives them of the capacity to hear his word; at other times he, rather, blinds and stuns them by the preaching of it.”<sup>50</sup>

This is how he put it when he preached about preaching:

“When God generally sets salvation before us in Jesus Christ his only Son [that is, in the outward call that touches the ear of all], it is to make the reprobate so much the more inexcusable for their unthankfulness, inasmuch as they have despised so great a benefit: in the mean time the elect are touched, and God not only speaks to them outwardly but also inwardly.”<sup>51</sup>

Calvin did not believe that the gospel is sent to all because God desires the salvation of all! He withstood that idea. Calvin believed that God desires the salvation of all the *elect*, and because they are scattered among the reprobate, He causes His gospel to be heard by all men. Calvin believed that the outward call is the means by which

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manifest that all men, without difference or distinction, are *outwardly called* or invited to repentance and faith. It is equally evident that the same Mediator is set forth before all, as He who alone can reconcile them to the Father. But it is as fully well known that none of these can be understood or perceived but by faith, in fulfillment of the apostle Paul’s declaration that ‘the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth’; then what can it be to others but the ‘savour of death unto death’? as the same apostle elsewhere powerfully expresses himself” (*Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 95).

50 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.24.12.

51 Calvin, *Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, p. 63. See also *Institutes*, 3.24.12. “As God by the effectual working of his call to the elect perfects the salvation to which by his eternal plan he has destined them, so he has his judgments against the reprobate, by which he executes his plan for them. What of those, then, whom he created for dishonour in life and destruction in death, to become the instruments of his wrath and examples of his severity? That they may come to their end, he sometimes deprives them of the capacity to hear his word; at other times he, rather, blinds and stuns them by the preaching of it.”

God saves His elect by grace, and brings the reprobate to their appointed end in the way of their own wicked unbelief.<sup>52</sup> God's desires are never unfulfilled.<sup>53</sup>

## II. Calvin's Challenge to the Church

I want now to call attention to some of the more practical, and challenging, aspects of Calvin's doctrine of predestination.

### 1. Calvin's challenge to commitment to predestination as a truth we receive from God through His word.

Calvin did not just teach a doctrinal *system*—he experienced the reforming power of *sola scriptura*. Consequently, he models what happens when a mind well versed in Scripture and enlightened by the Spirit submits itself under God speaking in the word; and he challenges us to do the same—in a most practical way. This is what made Calvin such a catalyst for thorough-going reform.<sup>54</sup> And this is what it takes to stand fast in the truth of predestination, against the tide, in our day. So, let's take a brief look at Calvin's teaching with respect to the faithfulness that God required.

This was Calvin's rule—*fully as far, but no further*. Faith must follow Christ *fully as far, but not one step beyond*. Perhaps the best way to show how completely he submitted to that rule, and how firmly he required others to do the same, is to read a passage from one of his sermons:

Let us know that our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us, that we cannot do amiss to harken and open our ears, to inquire and search after what it

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52 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.24.12.

53 Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism*, p. 179. We read: "God always wills the same thing; and this is the very praise of His immutability. Whatever He decrees, therefore, He effects; and this is in Divine consistency with His Omnipotence. And the will of God, being thus inseparably united with His power, constitutes an exalted harmony of His attributes worthy of that divine providence, by which all things in heaven and earth are governed."

54 On Sunday, August 16<sup>th</sup> 2009, an ABC radio program was dedicated to a discussion of John Calvin's life and influence. It was stated, and agreed by the panel, that "without John Calvin, the world we live in would be a very different place."

has pleased him we should know: but let us take heed that we go not beyond it: for there is no rage so great and outrageous, as when we will know more than God shows us.... Let us therefore keep this mean: that is to say, to hearken to that which God propounds unto us: and as soon as he shall once shut his mouth, let us have all our understandings locked up and captive, and let us not endeavour to know more than he shall have pronounced to us.... And when we shall be...[troubled] tormented, let us have recourse unto God: that is to say, let us hearken to that which is shown us in the holy Scripture, let us pray that God will open our ears and our eyes, to the end we may understand his will. And further, we have this; it behooves us altogether to rest therein, and to be quiet. *For there is no cause of disputing any farther, when God has once pronounced his sentence.*<sup>55</sup>

Calvin's challenge is to *faith!* Faith must go *as far as, but no further.* That is a constant refrain in Calvin. He repeats it so often that you get the impression Calvin didn't expect anyone to agree with what he taught about predestination unless *this way of relating to the word* was fixed in the heart. And especially when he must touch upon a "perplexing" point he sets his hearers inside this principle by reiterating it before, during, and after what he has to say!

Now, that principle is of course a two-edged sword—it cuts both ways, revealing either faith or unbelief. It holds us between a rock and a hard place! To those who deny predestination because it raises "questions concerning the judgments of God which are incomprehensible, and which are of so high and profound matter, that the Holy Spirit has to teach them," Calvin says, "instead of curious searching, we must adore them!"<sup>56</sup> "Let us not be ashamed to be ignorant of something in this matter wherein there is a certain learned ignorance" required. "We cease to speak well when we cease to speak with God."<sup>57</sup> So, *not one step beyond!* And at the same time, Calvin judged it to be false humility, dishonouring to God, and detrimental to God's children to draw back from predestination as if it is a reef upon which we might

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55 Calvin, *Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, p. 30. See also pp. 28, 29, 31, 36, 37, 52, 53, 54; and in the *Institutes*, 3.21.3.

56 Calvin, *Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, p. 52.

57 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.5.

be shipwrecked. And he chides the “teary moderation” of the “insipid cautious ones”<sup>58</sup> who want to hide what God teaches men to believe. He believed they made themselves wiser than God, for implying that the Spirit had let slip something by mistake that was injurious to His church. To such like, Calvin says—*fully as far as He leads!*

The insipid cautious ones of our day may not take refuge in Calvin’s calling reprobation “the dreadful” decree. McNeill has it right when he explains that “Calvin is awestruck but unrelenting in his declaration that God is the author of reprobation.”<sup>59</sup> By all means, let us be awestruck, but let us not be dumbstruck. The heirs of Calvin will surely be interested in the *unrelenting* bit also! Calvin’s doctrine of predestination includes, indeed demands, just such subjection to God speaking in the word. For Calvin, denial and/or suppression of predestination was a display of *unbelief!*

## **2. Calvin therefore holds a challenge to the churches to teach and preach predestination.**

Calvin’s conviction was that, “The doctrine of election ought to be preached constantly and thoroughly.” And when it comes to those who “carp, rail, bark or scoff at it,” Calvin challenges us to remember that, “if their shamefulness deters us, we shall have to keep secret the chief doctrine of the faith, almost none of which they or their like leave untouched by blasphemy.”<sup>60</sup> Predestination is *not* an addendum to the gospel—nor is it something that is to be hidden from the world in case it causes offence! Predestination is, in Calvin’s judgment, the *chief* doctrine. And his challenge to the churches is this: *If opposition to predestination can drive you into an embarrassed silence—there is nothing you will ultimately stand on.* And it is telling to see what he associates this with. What if someone opposes the doctrine of the Trinity, he asks? Or what if someone guffaws at your belief that only a little more than 5000 years have passed since creation? No! insists Calvin, “God’s truth is so powerful, both in this respect and in every other, that it has nothing to fear from the evil-speaking of wicked

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58 Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 150.

59 McNeill, *Institutes*, 3.23.7, note 17.

60 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.4.



men.”<sup>61</sup> For the church to suppress and hide predestination, because of what men might think or say, is *unbelief!* That is Calvin!

If we would stand with Calvin, we will need to say: “Let those deride us who will, if God but give His nod of assent from heaven to *our* stupidity (as men think), and if angels do but applaud it.”<sup>62</sup>

### **3. Finally, Calvin challenges us to embrace predestination as gospel truth—and to preach and teach it for the good of God’s elect, and the glory of God’s name.**

Calvin firmly believed that without the truth of predestination we are “blind to the three great benefits of salvation, namely, God’s free grace, God’s glory, and sincere humility.”<sup>63</sup> Predestination grounds the gospel in grace, and humbles us all under the reality that “there is nothing but his mercy alone.”<sup>64</sup> And it opens before us the only sure hope of salvation, namely, that there is mercy with God. Furthermore, out of election in Christ flows all comfort to believers—and they may not be robbed of the inheritance God has given. It holds us at the foot of the cross!

And because that is so, Calvin has a caution. He insists, with Augustine, that, “*those things which are truly said can at the same time be fittingly said.*”<sup>65</sup> What did he mean by “fittingly said”? That is a subject worthy of a paper in its own right. But the way he put his *Institutes* together, and what he writes therein, show us clearly enough what he meant. He both models and teaches what he means.

In the *Institutes* he models what he means when he leaves his formal treatment of predestination until Book Three. When we might expect him to deal with predestination under Theology, he leaves it until towards the end of his treatment of the way of salvation. Calvin first leads us through faith as a gift of God, through regeneration and effectual calling, into *union with Christ*. Then, only when he

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61 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.4.

62 Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, p. 84.

63 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.1.

64 Calvin, *Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, p. 41-42.

65 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.14.

has shown us that in Christ we are made partakers of the benefits of salvation, Calvin introduces us to predestination!

I find in Calvin three primary reasons for this order. **First**, he believed that the *natural place* for predestination to arise, as Paul shows in Romans 9, is in answer to that crucial question: Why, when the gospel is preached to all, do only some believe? **Second**, he believed firmly and passionately that predestination must never be preached in such a way that it sends sinners to God's secret counsel to discover their election. For preaching to do that, says Calvin, would be to, "cast men into the depths of a bottomless whirlpool to be swallowed up; then he tangles himself in innumerable and inextricable snares; then he buries himself in an abyss of sightless darkness."<sup>66</sup> If we would teach men how to sail the ship of faith so as to avoid this rock, "against which no one is ever dashed without destruction," and to do so safely, calmly, and pleasantly, then "let this therefore, be the way of our inquiry: to begin with God's call, and to end with God's call."<sup>67</sup> He refers to the effectual call that unites the soul to Christ by faith. And that is his **third** reason: election must be *revealed* to and *ratified* in the soul by faith! It is only to believers, indwelt by the Spirit of His Son, that God gives that power to become the Sons of God, and to cry Abba, Father. Therefore, if we would preach predestination as Calvin would have it preached, then one thing must be made so perfectly clear that there is not so much as a hint of its opposite left in the minds of our hearers. Knowledge of God's electing love can be had in no other way than by faith in Jesus Christ. Preaching must call sinners to "Christ as the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election."<sup>68</sup> Thus, predestination demands that sinners be called to faith in Christ alone. That is what preaching is for. It is to unite the elect to Christ by faith, build them up in Christ by faith, and bring them safely home to Christ through faith!

**Predestination is, therefore, the great encouragement to preach the gospel.**

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66 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.24.4.

67 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.24.4.

68 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.24.5.

Calvin saw that predestination grounds the gospel message in God's sovereign mercy, and directs sinners to Christ alone. And this is so far from militating against the preaching of Christ to all men, that it beggars belief that the charge is ever made!

Predestination lets the gospel of God loose as the power of God to all those that do believe. It sends the gospel to call every sinner to believe in Christ as the Savior of unworthy sinners of every sort. It has a divine promise that is grounded in eternal election to encourage and enrich whosoever believes! And it sends it forth with confidence—absolute and unshakable confidence—for it places the preacher in the midst of a fallen world, like Ezekiel called to declare the word of God in the valley of dry bones. Can these bones live? The irresistible grace of unconditional election is able to make them live! GOD can do it—and He will, for all His elect! GOD will call His elect to life through the gospel. That is the encouragement to preach! That is the basis of missions! That is the encouragement for us to witness and share the gospel with our neighbours, to teach and nurture our children—to bring the word as elders in admonition and discipline! Christ will make His sheep to hear His voice!

That is the good news! God is still God!

Thanks be unto God, who always causes us to triumph in Christ, and makes manifest the savour of His knowledge by us in every place. For we are the savour of death unto death, and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things? For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ (II Cor. 2:14-17).

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## Book Reviews

*The Divine Authenticity of Scripture: Retrieving an Evangelical Heritage.*, by A. T. B. McGowan. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008. 240 pages. Paper. [Reviewed by Herman Hanko.]

This is a very puzzling book. The author professes to hold to the errorless character of Scripture, and yet he argues vehemently against the doctrine of inerrancy. He sets inerrancy, which the book sharply condemns, over against infallibility, when both words mean the same thing according to my unabridged dictionary. He argues strongly against the position of Warfield and Hodge, who held to inerrancy, but recommends the position of James Orr. I find the book strange and unclear. But let me be more specific.

The purpose of the book is set down in the “Introduction.”

The purpose of this book is to contribute to discussions about the nature and function of Scripture in evangelical Christianity. I shall argue that, in formulating our doctrine of Scripture, we need to review both our vocabulary and our theology, in order to clarify precisely what we mean when we speak about Scripture as the Word of God. I shall also argue

that the way Scripture functions in the church ought to be revisited, first, by analyzing the relationship between Scripture, confessional statement and tradition, and second, by a reassessment of how Scripture is to be preached (9).

By settling the squabble between “inerrantists” and “infallibilists” the author hopes to unite evangelicalism on this crucial issue.

The author has imposing credentials. He is principal of Highland Theological College in Dingwall, Scotland, adjunct professor of theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, and visiting professor of theology at Westminster Theological Seminary. One would think that one would get a clear, forthright and sturdy defense of the truth of an error-free Scripture, but such is not the case.

We should take a closer look at the author’s position.

Dr. McGowan clearly and emphatically does not want any

part of the position of those he calls inerrantists. He refers especially to the position on inspiration developed and defended by Benjamin Warfield and Charles Hodge and followed by many in evangelical circles. He strongly urges that their terminology and what he considers their position be abandoned. He divides the inerrantists into three camps. The first he calls “fundamentalist inerrantists who reject all textual criticism, are largely academic, sometimes tend towards dictation theories and usually argue that the King James Version of the Bible is the only legitimate version.” People belonging to the second are called “Textus Receptus inerrantists who offer a detailed textual argument in favour of the view that the *autographa* [the original MSS of the Bible, HH] are accurately represented by (and only by) the so-called Textus Receptus.” The third camp are called “Chicago inerrantists, being those who can affirm the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy as explained above” (a position that the author says comes close to that of the infallibilists) (103). The first two are rejected out of hand; the last is not, though it is mildly reprov-

The arguments against the

inerrantist are these. The first argument is not entirely clear, but the author seems to argue negatively that inerrantists find it impossible to explain discrepancies between different parts of Scripture dealing with the same subject. Here the author seems to indicate that we must allow for certain errors in Scripture that do not affect the purpose of Scripture and are incidental to Scripture’s teachings (106).

The second argument is no clearer. The argument is again vague and for that reason not of much value. Because inerrantists believe that the *autographa* were without error, how is it to be explained that God did not preserve these documents? (107-112). A great deal of time is spent on this objection to the inerrantist position, but the argument seems to me to come to nothing. Errorless *autographa* are the necessary result of a God-breathed Scripture and are essential for the faith of the church that confesses, along with the Westminster Confession, that the Scriptures are preserved “by [God’s] singular care and providence [and are] kept pure in all ages” (108).

The third argument is very much like the first. Inerrantists find it difficult and unconvinc-

ing to explain discrepancies and contradictions. The objection is summed up in these words: “After all, if God is able to use the errant copies (manuscripts, translations, editions) that we do have, in order to do his work, why invest so much theological capital in hypothetical originals we do not have?” (113). Note how this argument clearly allows for errors in the *autographa*.

The fourth argument is that to insist on an inerrant *autographa* is to make an unwarranted assumption about God—that is, that the nature and character of God require that God’s work be without error. But this is not necessarily true, says McGowan. He writes: “In other words, I agree with the inerrantists that God *could* have brought into being inerrant autographic texts, had he chosen to do so, but I reject their argument that he *must* have acted in this way” (113, 114). But why? Why reject what God could have done that was in keeping with His nature: that is, because He is holy and without any imperfection, the Scriptures He wrote by the Holy Spirit are also holy and without imperfection. There is no good reason for denying this.

But there are other reasons

why the author rejects what he calls the inerrantist position. McGowan considers the inerrantist position as rationalistic—although once again I cannot understand why this should be the case. And, as a matter of fact, it is not the case, and the charge is simply false.

But when everything else is said and done, the author’s main objection against the inerrantist position is the charge that it does not do justice to the human side of Scripture and undermines human agency. This is repeated again and again (158, 161). The problem, the book claims, with the inerrantists is that their view leads to a mechanical view of inspiration, a view that, when I was in high school, was called the dictation or typewriter theory of inspiration. This view destroys the human agent. Only the infallibilist view can do justice to Scripture and preserve the human element in inspiration. And this view is what is called the organic view of inspiration.

This organic view, which, according to McGowan, maintains human authorship, retains the humanity of the authors along with their weaknesses (147). It alone gives proper credit to the men who wrote the Scriptures,

and it also allows for errors that belong to all humans (158, 161).

And so, the author opines, it is wrong to speak of verbal inspiration, because it too suggests a mechanical view of inspiration (184). A conception of organic inspiration that allows room for errors is set over against a mechanical view of Scripture, and these two positions are the only alternatives the author will permit.

The key statement in the whole debate, according to the author, the one we must steadfastly maintain, is that the Scriptures are as God intended them to be. This is repeated several times. But no one, so far as I know, would disagree with that very obvious truth. By it the author is assuming what has to be proved: Did God intend to give men a Bible with mistakes in it? Or did God intend to give His church a book that He Himself wrote without error, though it be through human instruments?

The author claims to be advancing new ideas and new approaches to Scripture's inspiration, but to set these two views over against each other (the inerrantist position, which is accused of being mechanistic, and the infallibilist, which allows for errors) is an old ploy that I was

confronted with way back in my college days. But the believer of Scripture responds: A plague on both your houses. This dilemma with which the author confronts us is not only an old ploy, but is very wrong.

What is the biblical position?

First of all, we ought to quit playing with words. To use inerrancy and infallibility as contrary views is playing with words and confusing the issue. Both words mean the same thing. Inerrant means, according to my unabridged dictionary, "free from error." Infallible means, according to the same dictionary, "Exempt from liability to error, absolutely trustworthy or sure." To make the latter mean "liable to error" is unconscionable.

Secondly, we must indeed hold to an organic view of inspiration. But an organic view must not be interpreted to mean "open to error." The organic view of Scripture means: 1) That God conceived of the entire Bible in His eternal counsel as the written record of the revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ as the God of our salvation. 2) God sovereignly determined that because revelation is in history, those whom He

would use to write that record were men of His choosing. 3) That God sovereignly determined the time in history that they were born, the circumstances of their life in all its details, their gifts and all that goes to make up their personalities, the place they occupied in the history of redemption, and what part of Scripture they would write. 4) God inspired these men in their writings by His Holy Spirit. 5) The result of their writings was that Scripture is God-breathed (II Tim. 3:16) and that this Scripture is written by “holy men of God” who were “moved by the Holy Spirit” (II Pet. 1:21). 6) These written Scriptures are themselves “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (II Tim. 3:16, 17).

One ought to notice that the Scriptures themselves make no explicit mention of a human factor or human agency. II Timothy 3:16 speaks only of divine agency, for the Scriptures are “God-breathed.” II Peter 1:21 speaks of the men God used, but says of them that they were “holy men of God,” that is, men who in their writing were preserved

from error. It says that these men were moved by the Holy Spirit, the word used being the same as would be used for ships moved by the wind over the water.

The whole concept of a human agent is not ever explicitly mentioned in Scripture and cannot be deduced from the two classical proof texts for inspiration: II Timothy 3:16, 17, and II Peter 1:21. It is a deduction. It is a deduction from the fact that each book of the Bible bears the unmistakable imprint of its human instrument—the imprint of his personality, his style of writing, his purpose in being chosen as an instrument for revelation. Moses writes as Moses, Amos as Amos, and Peter as Peter. This is obvious and has never been denied in all the history of the church. But the question is the way in which God used them. And a correct conception of an organic inspiration will explain God’s absolute sovereignty in the work of salvation and in the inspiration of Scripture, a part of this glorious work of salvation.

Of the result of their being moved without their wills, the text says that their writings were not “of any private interpretation”; that is, their writings never expressed



their own opinions about things or their own ideas. These writings did not come by the will of man: a very strong statement that absolutely excludes all possibility of error and that makes Scripture more trustworthy than eyewitness accounts (II Pet. 1:19).

It is well, rather than tampering with Scripture's infallibility, that we take heed to Scripture as a light that shines in a dark place (this world of sin and error) until the day dawn, and the day star arise in our hearts—when Christ takes us to heaven and we have no need for Scripture because we shall see Him face to face (II Pet. 1:19).

I have used the analogy (of inspiration and salvation) elsewhere; it is a proper one, for Scripture is a part of the salvation of the elect and the means to bring salvation in Christ to them. Hence, the inspiration of Scripture is a miracle as surely as our salvation is a miracle. McGowan must not hurl at us the charge of rationalism; he is the rationalist, for he denies the miracle. We believe the Scriptures are connected with our salvation, and both are miraculous works of almighty God. Just as there is no element of

human cooperation and no smid-geon of a human contribution in God's work of saving us, so is there no element of human invention, cooperation, or contribution in the writing of Scripture.

But just as God saves us as rational and moral creatures so that, although He works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure (Phil 2:13), and just as those good works that He works in us are our works and even rewarded, so Scripture is not by the will of man, but it remains the writings of Paul and Moses and Isaiah and....

To deny Scripture's own teaching on inspiration is to deny that salvation, which comes through Scripture, is the work of God.

Beza was speaking of the church when he addressed the bloodthirsty Duke of Guise, but his remark can just as well be applied to Scripture. "Sire, it belongs, in truth, to the church of God, in the name of which I address you, to *suffer* blows, not to *strike* them. But at the same time let it be your pleasure to remember that the church is an anvil which has worn out many a hammer." ■

*Election and Free Will: God's Gracious Choice and Our Responsibility*, by Robert A. Peterson. Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2007. 208 pages. Paper. (Part of the Series, "Explanations in Biblical Theology.") [Reviewed by Herman Hanko.]

One whose love is Reformed theology picks up a book with this or a similar title with a certain eagerness. The book is on a doctrine that is close to his heart and one of such interest to the church and to believers that it has been a subject of discussion, debate, and disagreement for over 1,500 years—that is, since the time of the great bishop of Hippo, Augustine. The author, professor of systematic theology in Covenant Theological Seminary, works within the tradition of Presbyterian development of the truth, which reached its crowning glory at the Westminster Assembly.

From a certain viewpoint the book defends the doctrine of sovereign election and holds firmly to man's accountability for his sin. It even makes brief mention of reprobation and speaks of reprobation as sovereign (in distinction from the Arminian position of conditional predestination) (139-142). And yet one soon finds himself dissatisfied and troubled by the book. It is easy to say, of course, that one who is troubled by the book is too picky

in his theology, and too ready to condemn others who do not hold firmly to what he considers the truth of sovereign election and reprobation. But it is not a matter of being picky. A brief comparison with Luther's teaching on the subject in *The Bondage of the Will* and Calvin's treatise on *The Eternal Predestination of God*, not to mention the emphatic statements of Dort and Westminster, clearly demonstrates the inadequacy of this treatment of the subject.

The dissatisfaction starts early in the book when the author bemoans the fact that there is antagonism between Calvinists and Arminians and holds up the friendship between George Whitefield and John Wesley as being an example worth emulating. But if past defenders of the truth would have followed his advice, Luther would have been friends with Erasmus—and there would have been no reformation in Germany; Calvin would have enjoyed the friendship of Pighius and Bolsec, and the battle for the truth would have been lost; Dort would have shaken hands with

the Arminians and wished them Godspeed rather than condemning their theology as Pelagianism resurrected from hell; and Westminster would have sold out the shop to the Amyraldians represented at the Assembly.

The dissatisfaction increases when one comes across the author's altogether inaccurate description of hyper-Calvinism, a description that basically puts consistently Reformed men in the hyper-Calvinist camp. He describes hyper-Calvinism's main tenets to be: "First, God loves the elect, but not the non-elect. Second, there is no such thing as a universal gospel call, but only an effective call to the elect. Third, strictly speaking, unbelief is not a sin because the nonelect cannot possibly exercise saving faith. Fourth, anything short of this degree of Calvinism is sub-Christian" (31).

From this contrived description of hyper-Calvinism, it is clear that he wants to put all those who deny a love of God for all men and who repudiate the idea of a gracious and well-meant gospel offer in the camp of the hyper-Calvinists. No Reformed man is intimidated by this, for the charge is old and has been answered

times without number.

Although what the author says about divine election is true taken alone, he omits important and necessary aspects of the doctrine. He fails to define election as a decree of God's counsel (there is no mention of the counsel of God in the whole book so far as I could see), and he therefore has no room for the decree of election as eternal, unchangeable, and in no way based on human responses or works. I do not mean to say that the author does not condemn conditional election; he does, but the full impact of it is lost when it is discussed apart from God's counsel.

Election "in Christ," while referred to from time to time, is not given its full significance. That is, Christ and the elect given to Him are not described in terms of the organism that God chooses and saves, and because of which the elect stand in everlasting union with Christ their Head.

Election as the fountain and cause of all salvation (which the Canons emphatically assert) is barely mentioned. And this serious omission demonstrates the importance of understanding and explaining election as "in Christ."

As a matter of fact, the author has a very peculiar definition of the phrase “chosen in Christ,” a definition that seems to come perilously close to denying the eternity of election. He writes:

God’s choice of us ‘in him before the foundation of the world’ (v. 4; see also v. 11 [of Ephesians 1, HH] speaks of our union with Christ before creation. But these words cannot speak of actual union with Christ, for before our creation by God we did not exist. Instead, Paul speaks of God’s plan to unite us to Christ. Therefore, the meaning of the words ‘he chose us in him before the foundation of the world’ is that God not only chose to save his people, but also planned the means by which they should experience that salvation; he purposed to unite them spiritually to his Son (106).

The error lies in treating the decree of election outside the counsel of God.

Reprobation, while briefly mentioned and described in a biblically correct way, is not defined in terms of being a part of the same decree and election—as the Canons of Dordt say (Canons

1/6). The pertinent part of this article reads:

That some receive the gift of faith from God and others do not receive it proceeds from God’s eternal decree..., according to which decree [note the singular] He graciously softens the hearts of the elect...while He leaves the non-elect in His just judgment to their own wickedness and obduracy.

To follow this truth of the Canons would require that the author deal with the relationship between election and reprobation and the need for both. The book is weak at this crucial point. The author observes that John Wesley’s hatred of predestination was basically his hatred of reprobation. This is still true today.

When the author turns to the subject of man’s responsibility, he is equally weak and not always all that clear.

Perhaps I can mention in passing that the chapter on Free Will opens rather strangely and inappropriately with a reference to a professional baseball player who, we are told, is an evangelical Christian. Apart from the notion that a man who repeatedly

desecrates the Sabbath can be an “evangelical Christian,” it seems incongruous to begin such an important chapter with this subject. It may be that the relation between a discussion of free will and a professional baseball player is in the statement: “He gave his heart to Jesus Christ and asked him to become Lord of his life” (125). If this interpretation is true, the author of this book surely tips his hand in revealing what he considers to be the relation between faith in Christ and the decree of election.

The terminology Petersen uses is different from what has been used in the history of the church. He calls the freedom we have to keep God’s law “the freedom of our relation to God.” He distinguishes between that freedom and what he calls freedom of choice. While the author is not always clear on what this term means, he probably refers to the freedom a man has as a rational and moral creature. His definition is not helpful: “Freedom of choice is the ability to make spontaneous choices according to the inclination of the will” (132). Petersen does strongly insist on the absolute slavery of the depraved sinner (129).

The entire paragraph in which the freedom of choice is defined, and that is a key paragraph in the discussion, reads:

It is fruitful to consider human freedom in light of the unfolding biblical story. At creation God gave Adam and Eve freedom of choice and true freedom. Freedom of choice is the ability to make spontaneous choices according to the inclinations of the will. This is an unlosable part of our humanness. By contrast true freedom is losable, and in fact was lost in the fall. True freedom is relational; it is the ability to know, love, serve, and enjoy God as he intended (132).

It is especially in the area of freedom of choice that the author, when he should be absolutely clear, becomes very fuzzy. He speaks a great deal of human agency and its importance; he speaks of the relation between divine sovereignty and human responsibility as “double agency”; he feels compelled to take hyper-Calvinism to task once again. No Reformed man is offended by a vendetta against hyper-Calvinism, but the underlying assumption in his definition

of hyper-Calvinism seems to be that those who consistently defend absolute sovereignty in the work of salvation are also hyper-Calvinists. This is wrong.

The elements that are missing in the whole treatment of free will are these. God alone is absolutely free, for He is the Creator of all men. Adam's freedom in Paradise, while indeed a freedom of moral choice, was circumscribed by God's absolute sovereignty. Adam was a creature, dependent on God for his very existence and able to live only within the scope of his own creatureliness.

Adam's fall was not outside the counsel of God. To maintain that it was is to put two independent powers in the universe: God and sin. There is something Gnostic or even Manichaeic in that dualism.

All man's so-called freedom of choice after the fall was also circumscribed by God's sovereignty. The freedom of the redeemed child of God is possible only because Christ fulfilled the law for His elect, because the Spirit writes the law on the hearts of God's people and because God works in His people "both to *will* and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

The freedom of the redeemed is a greater freedom than Adam possessed, for Adam's freedom made a fall possible, while our freedom means that to fall from Christ is impossible.

Human accountability is written on every page of Holy Writ. While not in any way claiming to understand fully the mysterious ways of God, we may confidently say at least that man remains responsible for his sin because he sins willingly. God's sovereignty remains intact, and man's accountability brings him to hell, unless he is redeemed in the blood of the cross. God does not, though in a mysterious way, violate the will of the sinner—even though He remains sovereign also over sin. It does not trouble me, nor do I seek a full solution to the problem, for all God's works of which I am a witness every day anew are far beyond my understanding. I cannot even understand how a blade of grass grows or how God forms a baby in the womb of its mother (Ps. 139). God's ways are beyond finding out—always.

The author is well advised to have done his research before taking pen in hand. A reading of Augustine's *The Freedom of the*

*Will*, as well as of Augustine's *Enchiridion* and writings against the Pelagians, would have been helpful. He mentions Luther's magnificent book *The Bondage of the Will*, but he should have used it. Calvin wrote a book on the same subject, and to read it is of great benefit in a discussion of the question the author addresses. Dordt and Westminster

had much to say on the subject, and the question, addressed in the light of their confessional statements, would have altered significantly the contents of the book. In other words, a book on such a theological subject written outside the mainstream of the church's thinking and confession is a book bound to be amiss. ■

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***The New England Theology: From Jonathan Edwards to Edwards Amasa Park***, ed. Douglas A. Sweeney and Allen C. Guelzo. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006. 320 pages. \$29.99. Softcover. [Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.]

This book is a "collection of the New England Theology's primary texts" (24)—selections from the writings of the two Jonathan Edwards (the well known preacher, and his son by the same name), Joseph Bellamy, Samuel Hopkins, Sarah Osborn, Nathan Strong, Nathanael Emmons, Stephen West, John Smalley, Asa Burton, Timothy Dwight, Nathaniel W. Taylor, James Harris Fairchilds, Charles G. Finney, Edwards Amasa Park, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. The thesis that the book demonstrates is that these writers were committed to the New England Theology.

Each selection is introduced by some editorial comments of a page or two, giving an overview of the role the author played in the movement and explaining what the selection contributed.

### **"New England Theology"**

Claimed by the editors to be "America's first indigenous theological movement" (24), "New England Theology" refers to the teachings of Jonathan Edwards (died 1758) as developed by other men over two succeeding generations. This "New England Theology" was a reaction both to Calvinistic orthodoxy on the one

hand, and to the Enlightenment on the other.

Central to this theology is Edwards' view of the freedom of the will, and the related matter of the role the sinner himself plays in his own conversion. In part one, the editors develop this by quoting selections from Edwards' works *A Divine and Supernatural Light*, *Religious Affections*, his biography of David Brainerd, and his *Freedom of the Will*.

Part two traces the development of this thought into a movement through the work and writings of various people, chiefly Edwards' two most famous students, Joseph Bellamy and Samuel Hopkins. This movement was founded on the principles that revivals were legitimate and desirable; that full church membership should be limited to those who gave evidence of true renewal; that every sinner is able of himself to repent and is required to live a holy life that "amounted almost to moral perfectionism" (70); and that Christ's atonement was sufficient for all men, and the only reason not all were saved is their own failure to believe and repent.

The Edwardsean view of atonement is set forth at greater

length in part three. Edwards subscribed to the governmental theory: in the death of Christ, God showed Himself to hate sin, and able to destroy sinners. He did this, not to expiate His wrath and provide atonement, but to give man every reason to turn from sin in true repentance.

Part four, entitled "Edwardsean Ethics," purposes to demonstrate that the preachers of the New England Theology were practical and relevant to the times: they encouraged mission work, and denounced slavery.

Part five deals with the movement's division into two factions in the first half of the 1800s over the issue of sin's origin—referring now not to its historical origin in Adam, but to the question, "In what part of man do his own particular sins originate?" Nathanael Emmons spoke of sin as arising, not in the nature, but in the functions of man's will. Asa Burton came closer to locating sin's origin in man's nature, when he found it in man's heart, which he distinguished from man's will.

Part six focuses on further developments in this school of thought also in the early 1800s with the founding of the divinity school at Yale, in New Haven,



Connecticut. Nathaniel Taylor gave new meaning to the term “original sin” by emphasizing that Adam’s guilt is not imputed to the human race. In his work “*Concio Ad Clerum*” (“Charge to the Clergy”), he explained what he means when teaching that mankind is entirely depraved by nature: “I do not mean that their nature is *itself* sinful, . . . but I mean that their nature is the occasion, or reason of their sinning” (201; emphasis his). Taylor also revised the doctrine of regeneration, claiming that during regeneration man becomes conscious of the truth; and he endeavored to merge the ideas of God’s sovereignty in salvation and the freedom of man’s will by teaching that “God always effects what God intends to effect in us . . . by winning over our wills” (214).

That Charles G. Finney was part of this movement, in spite of his criticisms of Edwards, is the argument of part 7. The editors assert that Finney’s criticisms were not really responding to Edwards as such, but to Edwards as portrayed by Nathaniel Taylor. Finney’s own teachings, later classified as the “Oberlin Theology,” relied heavily on the New England Theology. Finney

himself appealed to Edwards in teaching that sin lay not in the nature, but in the will, so that the sinner was able to choose to be saved.

The movement ended with Edwards Amasa Park (died 1900), and his theology of the intellect (reason) and of the feelings (Christian piety), treated in part eight. That these were two distinct theologies, each valid in themselves, and yet overlapping, served as his presupposition to explain why God cannot lie nor repent (I Sam. 15:29) and yet did repent (Gen. 6:6). Park also wrote “the first-ever, comprehensive history” of this movement in his essay “New England Theology” (256).

The concluding part of the book notes how the novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, born and raised according to the teachings of this movement but never completely happy with them, integrated the tenets of the movement in her novels, at times creating some of her fictional characters as ministers either in sympathy with, or not in sympathy with, the movement.

The book ends with a select bibliography, not meant to be exhaustive, which covers almost 40 pages.

### “Consistent Calvinism”

The book gives ample testimony to the fact that the men of the New England Theology movement considered themselves consistent Calvinists. While pointing out ways in which the movement departed from traditional Calvinism, the editors express their own opinion that the New England Theology is a form of “evangelical Calvinism” (21).

The editors note that, in the minds of Bellamy and Hopkins, Jonathan Edwards’ dismissal from Northampton “only underscored the degree of New England’s apostasy from true Calvinism” (15). They “saw themselves as restorers of pure Calvinism” (71). Denying that sin originates in the nature, Nathanael Emmons was “just as eager not to lose a grip on Calvinism in the process” (173). Nathaniel Taylor and his cohorts “formed a kinder, gentler evangelical Calvinism” (188). Explaining Ephesians 2:3 (“and were by nature the children of wrath”) so as to deny that sin arises in man’s nature, Taylor appealed to Calvin and the Westminster divines (197). Even Finney’s criticisms of Edwards supposedly “were influenced not by a repudiation of Calvinism...” (220) but by

Nathaniel Taylor’s portrayal of it. Fairchild speaks of the Oberlin Theology as being “New School Calvinism” (222). In his essay on New England Theology, Edwards Amasa Park wrote: “New England Theology is Calvinism in an improved form.... The substance of our theology is Calvinistic.... It is not mere Calvinism, but it is consistent Calvinism” (260). In fact, according to Park,

the New England theologians not only stood in the line of Edwards but also developed Edwards’s thought in “a system the *minutiae* of which” even “Calvin and Augustine would have defended” had they “lived when the laws of interpretation and the philosophy of common sense had been as clear and prominent as they have been during and since the time of the Edwardses” (256).

### AntiCalvinism

My own assessment, based on the evidence presented in this book, is much different from the New England Theologians themselves. They were not Calvinists. They were not modified Calvinists. Their teachings were not merely unCalvinistic. They

were AntiCalvinists—portraying to be the very thing of which they were the very opposite. They were inherent liberals. Even those who do not want to place Edwards himself in this category must honestly admit that his teaching on free will contradicts the Calvinistic doctrines of total depravity and irresistible grace.

This assessment is not mine alone. One familiar with the history of the period knows that many preachers and theologians, those of Princeton among them, were alarmed at what the New England theologians were teaching. B. B. Warfield, speaking highly of Edwards himself, wrote that it “was Edwards’ misfortune that he gave his name to a party” that was “in many respect the exact antipodes of Edwards” (20).

The antiCalvinism of this movement becomes clear, when one compares its teachings to the doctrines of Calvinism, popularly summed up by the acronym “TULIP.” The New England theologians’ view of free will contradicts total depravity and irresistible grace. The governmental view of Christ’s death contradicts limited atonement. Redefining the nature and scope of Christ’s atonement necessarily

requires one to think of election in terms other than unconditional.

The editors are candid that Edwards’ own students departed from Calvinism. Bellamy and Hopkins

had difficulty squaring their ideas with the official Calvinist orthodoxy New Englanders had inherited from Geneva, the Synod of Dordt, the Westminster Confession, and even their own Cambridge Platform of 1648. In regard to the five cardinal “points” of Calvinist orthodoxy, Hopkins’s and Bellamy’s preaching needed careful explaining to connect with four of them, while the notion of a natural ability in all sinners seemed to cut directly across the fifth, the limitation of the efficacy of the atonement only to the elect (71).

In addition to these obvious points, we have drawn attention to the way in which the New England theologians redefined original sin and then re-explained the way in which sin is a matter of the nature. That Adam’s guilt is not imputed to us (130) and that not Christ’s righteousness but only the benefits of that righteousness are imputed to us (129) were other errors taught so rigorously

that these theologians brought their teachings

into conflict with what had been a central belief of Calvinist orthodoxy since the sixteenth century and, for that matter, the Protestant Reformation itself: the understanding that the righteousness that saves a sinner comes not from the sinner but from a transfer (or imputation) of the merits of Christ to the repentant believer (109).

How else can Charles Finney be viewed as Edwardsean, except that this movement, beginning with Edwards himself, was principally Arminian?

### **The Book's Value**

The book's value is three-fold.

First, it presents the writings and teachings of these men as being part of a movement, and demonstrating that the movement originated in Edwards, though he

did not intend to start a movement.

Second, it clearly demonstrates what the men themselves denied, and what supporters of Edwards would not want to hear: Edwards was not a Calvinist, and the movement that he started was not Calvinistic, in the true sense of the term. Edwards himself was principally Arminian, and as the movement gained momentum, that became more and more clear.

Third, the book demonstrates the antiCalvinism of these theologians from their own original writings, so that we are not left to conjecture. The book is not primarily a scholarly work in which two men endeavor to show something about Edwards and his followers, and support their views with copious references to other scholars and to original sources; it presents the sources themselves, so that the reader can easily discern the truth of the matter. ■



***John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man***, by Carl R. Trueman. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co, 2007. 132 pages. \$29.99. Softcover. [Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.]

This book is part of a series entitled “Great Theologians,” which Ashgate is publishing. Other theologians treated in this series include Athanasius, Aquinas, Barth, and Anselm of Canterbury. The subject of this present work is John Owen, who “was without doubt the most significant theological intellect in England in the third quarter of the seventeenth century” (1). Carl Trueman, author, is professor of historical theology and church history at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia.

The main theme of the book is that the theology of John Owen (1616-1683) was fundamentally Reformed, but at the same time based on and continuing the theology of the early church, particularly Augustine (to convey all this the title uses the phrase “Reformed Catholic”), and also influenced by his extensive learning, and in particular his knowledge of the Classics (so “Renaissance”). This combination made him a solid theologian; and especially his learning made him a formidable opponent to Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, and Socinianism.

This theme Trueman introduces in his first chapter, the title of which is the same as the title of the book. The chapter begins with a biographical survey of Owen’s life, noting the works that he published, his sermons before Parliament after the execution of King Charles, and his move from a Presbyterian to an Independent view of church government; indeed, Owen was one of those who revised the Westminster Confession with the Savoy Declaration of 1658.

Acknowledging that Owen was a Puritan, Trueman gives reasons why he rather prefers to speak of Owen as an orthodox Reformed theologian: “this is at once both more easily defined and less limiting than the category of Puritanism” (6). He gives a fuller explanation of what he means when saying that Owen is a “Catholic” and a “Renaissance” man. Then at length he gives the background for Owen’s polemics against Rome, Arminianism, and Socinianism, stating that “at the heart of his dispute with these groups is his attitude to the priesthood of Christ”

(17). In concluding this chapter, Trueman argues that the neglect of scholars over the centuries to study Owen “has more to do with writing the history, rather than the intrinsic mediocrity of his thought” (32)—meaning that Owen himself is worthy of much more study, but that, being a Puritan, and excluded from the Church of England in 1662, he was on the “losing” side, and historians prefer to write about winners.

In chapter 2 Trueman investigates Owen’s doctrine of God. Owen’s doctrine of God was orthodox. While he did not develop the doctrine in any notable way, he certainly defended it polemically. Particularly, this chapter focuses on Owen’s defense of God’s simplicity, immensity and omnipresence, and justice (regarding this latter attribute, Owen’s views underwent change and development during his life); Owen’s teachings on the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and the deity of the Holy Spirit; and Owen’s view of God’s foreknowledge regarding creation and history, over against the idea of middle knowledge, which was taught in his day. This chapter ends by quoting the first seven questions from

a satirical catechism that Owen wrote in response to the Socinian John Biddle’s view of God’s attributes, which quote underscores Owen’s use of wit—biting humor, at times—in his writings. For the reader’s benefit, I quote this section in full (p. 66):

**Qu. 1:** What is God?

**Ans.** God is a spirit, that hath a bodily shape, eyes, ears, hands, feet, like to us.

**Qu. 2:** Where is this God?

**Ans.** In a certain place in heaven, upon a throne, where a man may see from his right hand to his left.

**Qu. 3:** Doth he ever move out of that place?

**Ans.** I cannot tell what he doth ordinarily, but he hath formerly come down sometimes upon the earth.

**Qu. 4:** What doth he do in there in that place?

**Ans.** Among other things, he conjectures at what men will do here below.

**Qu. 5:** Doth he, then, not know what we do?

**Ans.** He doth know what we have done, but not what we will do.

**Qu. 6:** What frame is he upon his knowledge and conjecture?

**Ans.** Sometimes he is afraid,

sometimes grieved, sometimes joyful, and sometimes troubled.

**Qu. 7:** What peace and comfort can I have in committing myself to his providence, if he knows not what will befall me tomorrow?

**Ans.** What is that to me? See you to that.

In chapter 3 Owen's doctrine of the covenants (plural, referring to his view of a covenant of works with Adam before the fall, the covenant of grace with the elect after the fall, and the covenant of redemption between God and Christ) and his Christology are on the foreground. As Owen lived in the second century after the Reformation began, the Reformed doctrine of the covenant had begun to be developed in Owen's day, but stood in need of further development and discussion. Owen taught that the covenant of works was unilaterally imposed upon Adam, but also that by perfect obedience Adam "was able to achieve a supernatural end" (74).

That the covenant of grace is the outworking of God's decree of predestination, and its realization the sovereign work of God Himself, Owen rightly taught. In

speaking of the work of Christ in time, especially in Christ's death, Owen highlighted the priesthood of Christ. He also insisted that this death was expiatory and atoning, inasmuch as Christ bore God's wrath and punishment for our sins; and he taught that Christ's atonement was limited.

Owen did justice to the place of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity, and the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation. In fact, he developed the Reformed view of the covenant of redemption by speaking of the role of the Holy Spirit in this covenant between the Father and Son.

Owen's view of justification gets special treatment in chapter 4. After describing the development of that doctrine in Protestant thought prior to Owen, Trueman treats Owen's teaching that both Christ's active righteousness and His passive righteousness are imputed to believers (prior theologians had argued that only His passive righteousness was imputed); Owen's teaching of eternal justification; and Owen's view relating sanctification to justification, in which Owen offered good evidence that James and Paul do not contradict each other in their treatment of justification and faith.

Though relatively short, this book does not read quickly. Partly this is due to the typesetting—smaller font, and relatively close line spacing. And partly this is due to the author’s style—at times ponderous; to follow him takes some effort.

The reader will learn as much about other Reformed men as about Owen himself. As one example, in the chapter on Owen’s view of the covenant, Trueman repeatedly devotes several pages to the views of others, especially Francis Turretin and Patrick Gillespie. The positive benefit of this is that Owen is set in his historical context. At the same

time, I found it necessary to keep reminding myself what point about Owen was being developed; it seemed that the extended treatment of the views of other men interrupted the flow of thought.

The book gives the reader a good overview of Owen’s theology and polemical works, and it explains well the context in which Owen wrote. Particularly I appreciated the section treating Owen’s view of the covenant, for it falls to theologians today to continue to develop on the foundation rightly laid by our Reformed predecessors, and to revise where they strayed. ■

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***Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision***, by N. T. Wright. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009. 279 pages. Cloth (\$25.00). [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

The main value of this latest book by the prolific N. T. Wright is its demonstration of the radical rejection of the sixteenth century Reformation of the church, particularly orthodox, creedally Reformed Christianity, by the New Perspective on Paul (hereafter, NPP). Indeed, despite Wright’s disarmingly deceptive, gentlemanly manner, the book is

another salvo in the NPP’s attack on the gospel, recovered by the Reformation.

Wright is forthright: “The stray lambs [Wright and his NPP cohorts—DJE] are not returning to the Reformation fold.... It is time to move on” (29).

### **Justification**

At the heart of Wright’s new



perspective on Paul, especially in Romans and Galatians, is a doctrine of justification that is not the forgiveness of sins by the imputation of Christ's righteousness. The Reformation's doctrine of imputed righteousness, that is, that Christ's righteousness is "credited to [the] account" of others, "simply muddles up" the biblical teaching (213). Justification in Paul, according to Wright, is God's verdict that someone belongs to the covenant community, or church.

The faith by which one is justified, in Paul's theology, is similarly "re-viewed" by the NPP. Faith does not function as the means, or instrument, of imputation (since justification is not imputation). Rather, faith is merely the "badge" (Wright's term) that identifies one as belonging to the covenant community.

Justification by faith, in NPP theology as delivered by Wright, means that "God declares a person to be 'righteous' *on the basis of faith*" (212; emphasis added). Present justification (in distinction from the justification that really matters, the future justification of the final judgment) is based on the human work of believing. One should take note of Wright's

significant quotation marks around the word "righteous" in the last quotation. "Righteous" in Wright's theology of justification does not mean "righteous" at all, but "in the right," which is something altogether different.

As present justification is based on the human work of believing, the justification that awaits believers in the final judgment will be based on all their good works. Wright explains Romans 2:13 ("the doers of the law shall be justified"), which is proving to be the crucial text in the controversy over justification, as teaching what can and will actually take place: doers of the law will be justified by their doing. This is Wright's explanation of the text, despite Paul's insistence in the rest of Romans 2 and in Romans 3 that there is no doer of the law and despite Paul's declaration in Romans 2:20 that "by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight" (183, 260).

Wright acknowledges that the death of Christ is also part of the basis of justification (along with the human works of faith and obedience). It is remarkable that Wright never explains *how* and *why* the death of Christ settled God's score with the sins of oth-

ers, so that God can declare sinners “in the right” (as Wright puts it). Somehow or other, Christ was “faithful” to God’s plan for Israel in a way that makes it possible for God to justify (in the NPP sense) others.

But about one thing Wright is clear, emphatic, and repetitive: The Reformation’s doctrine of the cross as substitutionary satisfaction to the justice of God for the guilt of sinners is wrong. “[Christ did not] ‘fulfill...the law’ in the sense of obeying it perfectly and thus building up a ‘treasury of merit’ which can then be ‘reckoned’ to his people” (135). The teaching of the great “exchange (‘We were under the curse; he took it; we go free’)” is “simplistic” (136). “The ‘obedience’ of Christ is not designed to amass a treasury of merit which can then be ‘reckoned’ to the believer, as in some Reformed schemes of thought” (228).

### **Synthesis of Heresies**

The theology of N. T. Wright is a brilliant, fresh synthesis of the works-righteousness doctrine of the Judaizers, who bewitched the Galatians (now the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church); of the liberal abhorrence of the

righteousness of God (expressed in the demand of the death of His Son as punishment for sin and in a strictly legal pardon of the guilt of sin); and of Arminian universalism (Christ died to make salvation possible for all, in the love of God for all mankind), with an ecumenical purpose (Wright promotes his theology as bringing all professing Christians, Roman Catholics as well as Protestants of all varieties, to the same Lord’s Table), for the benefit specifically of evangelicals.

Making an awareness of the NPP, particularly N. T. Wright’s version, imperative for Reformed ministers and professors of theology is the fact that the men of the federal [covenant] vision are heavily influenced by the NPP, particularly by N. T. Wright. Even where supposedly conservative theologians do not espouse the distinctive tenets of the federal [covenant] vision, there is openness to the NPP. Not a few are enamored of N. T. Wright.

### **Exegesis**

Wright’s persuasiveness is due in large part to his exegetical skills. By far the bigger part of the book is seemingly careful exegesis of Galatians and Romans, with

exegesis of important passages in Philippians, I and II Corinthians, and Ephesians thrown in for good measure. The incautious reader will find himself carried along with the smooth exegetical flow to the conclusion that Paul teaches a justice of God devoid of righteousness, a faith that does not, above all things, receive by divine reckoning God's righteousness worked out in the death of Christ, and a justification that is not the forgiveness of sins.

But then the believer, layman as readily as theologian, remembers Paul. Paul teaches that in justification "God imputeth righteousness" (Rom. 4:6), which is not the verdict that someone somehow is "in the right," but the reckoning, legally, to someone's account perfect obedience to the will of God as revealed in His law, so that this someone now has the legal standing of innocence before the tribunal of God, that is, of having fulfilled every demand of the law of God.

Paul teaches that this righteousness, which is imputed in the act of justification, is God's own righteousness (which surely cannot be God's being "in the right") worked out for guilty sinners as their righteousness in the bloody

death of the eternal Son of God in human flesh (Rom. 3:24-26).

Paul teaches that the imputation of this righteousness consists mainly of the forgiveness of sins (Rom. 4:6, 7).

Paul teaches that faith is the God-given means by which the guilty sinner receives the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ by imputation (Rom. 3:28).

And Paul teaches that the benefit of justification is the personal assurance of a relationship of friendship with God (Rom. 5:1).

Paul also teaches that anyone who preaches another gospel than this one perverts the gospel and is cursed of God (Gal. 1:7-9).

Wright's impressive exegetical skill is obviously not the spiritual gift that enables one to know the things of God—the most important and glorious things of God—in Scripture.

Martin Luther did have this spiritual gift. The Anglican prelate is bold to criticize Luther's grand commentary on Galatians: "Luther's...deeply flawed commentary on Galatians" (112). Compare Wright's commentary on Galatians 2:16 with Luther's. Galatians 2:16 reads: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith

of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.”

Wright explains the text this way:

“To be justified” here does not mean “to be granted free forgiveness of your sins,” “to come into a right relation with God” or some other near-synonym of “to be reckoned ‘in the right’ before God,” but rather, and very specifically, “to be reckoned by God to be a true member of his family, and hence with the right to share table fellowship” (116).

And Luther:

Here it is to be noted that these three things are joined together: faith, Christ, and acceptance or imputation. Faith takes hold of Christ and has Him present, enclosing Him as the ring encloses the gem. And whoever is found having this faith in the Christ who is grasped in the heart, him God accounts as righteous. This is the means and the merit by which we obtain the forgiveness of sins and righteous-

ness.... This doctrine brings firm consolation to troubled consciences amid genuine terrors (Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 26, *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, Saint Louis: Concordia, 1963, 132, 133).

### Covenant

Wright wrote *Justification* in response to John Piper's defense of the orthodox doctrine of justification against Wright. Wright's refutation of Piper is devastating. However wrong his doctrine, Wright is right to imbed justification and the cross in the covenant of grace, as Paul does in Romans and Galatians, especially Galatians 3. As a dispensational Baptist, Piper has no eye for the covenant and the unity of God's saving work in history. Wright exposes this fatal flaw in his Baptist adversary.

Paul's doctrine of justification is therefore about what we may call *the covenant*—the covenant God made with Abraham, the covenant whose purpose was from the beginning the saving call of a worldwide family through whom God's saving purposes for the world were to be realized. For Piper, and many like him, the very idea of a covenant of this

kind remains strangely foreign and alien (12).

*Recognize its* [the one covenant of grace established with Abraham—DJE] *existence* for Paul...and for any construction of his theology which wants to claim that it is faithful to his intention. For whenever you ignore it... you are cutting off the branch on which Paul's argument is resting. To highlight this element, which Reformed theology ought to welcome in its historic stress on the single plan of God (as opposed to having God change his mind in midstream [as is the teaching of dispensational Baptists

such as John Piper—DJE]), is to insist on the wholeness of his train of thought (94).

Ignorance of the covenant makes it impossible to do justice to the biblical doctrine of justification.

By the same token, such is the intimate relation of covenant and justification that the errant view of the covenant as conditional grace to all who are baptized necessarily implies justification by faith and works. And this is the heresy now flourishing in Reformed churches as the federal [covenant] vision.

With the help of the NPP of N. T. Wright. ■

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*The God-Breathed Scripture*, by Edward J. Young. Willow Grove, PA: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2007. 112 pages. \$5.00. Softcover. [Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.]

The four chapters that comprise this book are the written version of four lectures that Edward J. Young (1907-1968) gave in 1966 at Grace Theological Seminary and College, and which were published in the Fall 1966 volume of the *Grace Journal*. Spoken some nine years after the publication of Young's well known book *Thy Word is*

*Truth*, these lectures "clearly reflect the basic contents of that book" (7), according to Richard B. Gaffin, Jr, who wrote the foreword. Indeed, in this book Young's high view of Scripture is evident.

In the book Young argues that the Bible is self-authenticating. In Gaffin's words, "Young...is insistent...that Scripture's self-witness

must be foundational and controlling in formulating the doctrine of Scripture” (9).

In chapter one, entitled “Scripture: God-Breathed and Profitable,” Young argues that the views of higher criticism proceed on “the fundamental assumption...that the mind of man, without the assistance of divine revelation, can make pronouncements as to whether certain parts of the Bible are from God or not” (14), and that the conclusion to which such thinking leads is “that the teaching of the Bible concerning itself is in error and must be corrected” (14).

Working through the exegetical questions that II Timothy 3:16 raises, focusing on Greek words translated “and,” “all,” “God-breathed,” and “profitable,” Young concludes that in this verse “Paul is declaring the divine origin of Scripture” (22).

Then he draws the practical conclusion that, viewing all of Scripture as profitable, we should study all of Scripture with a view to such profit. Interesting examples he uses to drive home his point include the canonicity of the book of Esther and the “Shibboleth” incident of Judges 12:5ff.

Chapter 2 is entitled “What is God-Breathed Scripture?” By

this question Young means to ask whether only the autographa are God-breathed and profitable, or whether these terms apply also to all available and current copies, versions, and translations of Scripture.

Answering this question, Young is both at his best and his worst.

He is at his best in making a careful distinction between the autographa and the current copies and translations of Scripture. He notes that II Timothy 3:16, referring to the origin of Scripture, indicates that the autographa were inspired, and not the copies and translations of Scripture. Yet he maintains that any faithful copy and translation of Scripture is profitable for us. Appealing to the doctrine of verbal inspiration, Young makes a good point regarding the necessity of having competent translators of the Scriptures (referring not only to those men who translate with a view to publication, but to all ministers and students of Scripture who translate). Raising the issue of difficulties and inconsistencies found in Scripture, Young gives good caution that we not suppose these difficulties were part of the autographa themselves.

But he is at his worst in taking Genesis 5 as the great example of a difficult passage of Scripture, and trying to explain how it is profitable. Much of what he says is no doubt true: “what the writer wishes to convey is that even during the line of promise death exercised its universal, almost unrestrained, reign” (50). But, clearly convinced that the earth is older than the 4004 B.C. age that the chronology of Genesis 5 suggests, he argues that in this chapter we have a schematic arrangement of the line of the promise, and that the purpose of the chapter is not to teach chronology.

While Young’s instruction in the chapter is solid, his specific instance of how to deal with a difficult passage contradicts the very instruction he gave, in that he expressly allows himself to be influenced by science in his understanding of Scripture: “But natural revelation can often be of aid in enabling us rightly to understand the Scripture” (46).

In his third lecture, Young argues that the Bible is absolutely necessary for the faith and life of the child of God, and opposes the idea that one can be a good Christian even apart from the Bible. Specifically, he notes Alan

Richardson’s attempt to hold to the Christian faith, at the same time denying that the Gospel accounts give a reliable record of the fact of Christ’s resurrection. In response to this, Young defends the Scriptures as God’s Word, therefore reliable and necessary for doctrine and life, ascribing praise to the true author of the Scriptures: “In His great mercy toward us God has not left us who live today to depend on garbled tradition...but has given to us His written Word, in order that we may have a true and dependable account of those great events upon which His church is founded” (72). Therefore, “The Bible is the source from whence we learn what our doctrine is to be and also what our life is to be” (77).

His final lecture, “A Modern View of the Bible,” exposes the erroneous view of Scripture underlying the Confession of 1967, adopted that same year by the United Presbyterian Church in the USA. He demonstrates that this confession denies Scripture to be God’s word and revelation, and therefore denies Scripture as the norm for Christian faith and life.

Young concludes by calling the churches to defend the Scriptures from their current attack, and to preach them faithfully.



Being rather short and having medium-size type, this book can be read quickly. Some of it, the last chapter in particular, appears only remotely relevant to today.

Yet its defense of the biblical doctrine of Scripture, and its stand against the modern view of Scripture, make it relevant today, and worthwhile reading. ■

THE REFORMED FAITH OF  
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As the sub-title indicates, *The Reformed Faith of John Calvin* is a summary (not an abridgment) in one volume of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In a succinct, systematic way, the book sets forth the essence of the great Reformer's teachings in his *Institutes* on all the truths of the Christian Religion.

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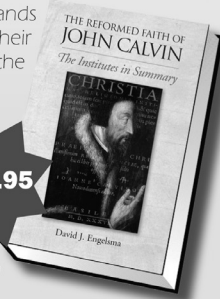
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