

“Deus humanitus saepe cum suis agere solet”:
An Analysis of Divine Accommodation
in the Thought of John Calvin

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This study is an attempt to analyze the motif, or collection of motifs, of divine accommodation as they appear in the thought of John Calvin. After introducing the subject and critically summarizing the relevant secondary literature, the course for the thesis is plotted. To determine the most basic elements of a reference to accommodation, these are set out in the form of three questions.

1. What is human capacity?
2. What is the character of the accommodating responses of God to that capacity?
3. What do Calvin’s explanatory statements, which often accompany his remarks on accommodation, teach us about his accommodating God?

Each of these is given individual attention. Chapter two examines human capacity, concluding with an attempt to reassess the three-fold division of it into human finitude, sinfulness, and Jewish barbarity which has arisen in scholarly discussion. Next, God’s responses to that *captus* are considered. Here their scope and character are appraised by means of constructing a taxonomy of them, which is organized on the supposition that they appear in different spheres of the divine-human relationship, namely, the pedagogic, legislative, cultic, pastoral, incarnational, and covenantal spheres. In chapter four, Calvin’s observations on the reasons, intentions, and motives behind God’s self-adapting are explored towards the end of drawing the portrait of the reformer’s accommodating God. The thesis finds that accommodation is so pervasive in Calvin that it appreciably penetrates his thinking about God. Accommodation touches on many different aspects of the divine-human relationship and is a frequent theme in the reformer’s interpreting of God’s behavior. In addition, Calvin’s reflections on the Almighty’s reasoning behind his accommodating actions are wide-ranging, and often depict God in surprising ways. All of this results in questions being raised about the character of Calvin’s God, the coherence of Calvin’s theology, and the relationship which exists between the reformer’s dogmatic and exegetical works, which are addressed in the concluding chapter.

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Preface

Some dissertations focus on a very small point and produce a detailed study of it, while others focus on a broad concept and examine its basic parameters in the hope that more detailed studies will follow. An example of the latter is what you have before you. Because accommodation in Calvin is an immense and multifaceted concept which permeates the reformer's sizeable *corpus*, and because the current scholarly writings on the topic are, almost without exception, small articles which are not able adequately to treat accommodation *in toto*, its contours have yet to be sufficiently sketched. Hence, our task in this dissertation will be to pursue this goal.

As the origins which gave rise to my taking up this particular topic are neither interesting nor pertinent, I will leave off mentioning them. Thus, I have only to thank those who have helped me during the last four years. Thanks are unquestionably due to Professor David F. Wright for his exceptional supervision. I have learned so much from him and count it an honor to have studied under him. I must also thank both Dr. Ligon Duncan and Dr. Duncan Rankin, without whose encouragement I would never have undertaken doctoral studies. Others—among them Tim Trumper, Ruth Richmond, Bob and Heather Akroyd, Calum and Liz Ferguson, and the wonderful people of Buccleuch and Greyfriars Free Church of Scotland and New Hope Presbyterian Church (PCA)—are also worthy of my gratitude. In addition, I would like to express my appreciation to Principal Donald MacLeod of the Free Church College for several helpful discussions on various subjects, and for the clarity of his preaching, writing, and piety. My family also: my father, mother, step-mother, brothers and sister-in-law are all due my immense thanks! I owe a debt to them which I can never repay. The same must be said for Tim Mountfort. I am being remiss in not including others, but the list must stop somewhere.

I am dedicating this dissertation to Bilgay Izci, gülüm. For her friendship and love, her encouragement and so many other things, she is worthy of such a dedication. I recall with fondness how many times she studied with me, discussed John Calvin with me, and asked amazingly helpful questions. I want this to be one way in which I say thank you!

It remains only to say that this essay is produced for the benefit of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Such a statement is not intended to stake a claim for the greatness of the work presented here but rather for Christ's worthiness of all our works. May this endeavor be of some small benefit to his kingdom.

Abbreviations

Calvin's works

CO – *Calvini Opera*

Inst. – Institutes of the Christian Religion (1559 edition)

Inst. (1536) – Institutes of the Christian Religion (1536 edition)

OS – *Opera Selecta*

SC – *Supplementa Calviniana*

Calvin Studies

ACC – Articles on Calvin and Calvinism

CED – *Calvinus Ecclesiae Doctor*

CEGC – *Calvinus Ecclesiae Genevensis Custos*

CSRV – *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex*

CSSP – *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor*

Luther's works

LW – *Luther's Works*

WA – *D. Martin Luthers Werke*

General

Hebrew Bible – *Hebrew Bible, Old Testament: the history of its interpretation*,
vol I/1

NRSVB – *New Revised Standard Version Bible*

PRRD – *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*

Chapter One

Introduction

By common consent John Calvin was and is a controversial figure.¹ The infamous French exile and *littérateur* of the *Institutes* has made countless enemies and

¹ Innumerable biographical pieces of varying sizes have been written over the years on Calvin. The early work of Theodore Beza and Nicholas Colladon (*Selected Works of John Calvin, Tracts and Letters*, eds. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), vol. 1, ix-c) is, of course, extremely important. More recent efforts are of varying significance and quality; see, T.H.L. Parker, *John Calvin: a biography* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), William Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), Cornelis Augustijn "Calvin in Strasbourg" in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor*, edit. Wilhelm Neuser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 166-77. [Henceforth the volume entitled, *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor* will be referred to as *CSSP*], and Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, trans. M. Wallace McDonald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) for a sampling of some of them. The thoughtful effort by Augustijn is one of an increasing number of studies which examines only a portion or particular period of the reformer's life. One of the best of these treats Calvin's early years; see, Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, trans. David Foxgrover and Wade Provo (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987). François Wendel's *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1963, 1987) is still widely considered the best introduction to him. For some of the discussions of the biographies produced in the twentieth century, see: T.H.L. Parker's "A Bibliography and survey of the British Study of Calvin, 1900-1940" in *Evangelical Quarterly* 18 (1946), 123-131; A. Wolters, "Recent Biographical Studies of Calvin" in *In Honor of John Calvin, 1509-64; Papers from the 1986 Calvin Symposium, McGill University* (Montreal: Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University, 1987), 349-60; Richard Muller, "Directions in Current Calvin Research" in *Calvin Studies IX; Papers Presented at the ninth Colloquium on Calvin Studies, January 30-31, 1998*, edit. by John Leith and Robert Johnson, 74-76.

disciples over the years, and his thought has been scrutinized by both. His capacious mind and eloquent (if often inflammatory) prose seem to have intrigued even those who despised the man himself, and his occasional arrogance and overbearing (if well-intentioned) reforming tactics have done little to disaffect those who adored him. Not surprisingly, then, multiple interpretations of him and his theology have arisen. To many he cannot outlive his attachment to predestination. For others he is the ultimate control-freak, despot of Geneva, and designer of Presbyterianism. A third group find in him the architectonic systematizer and constructor of a worldview within which God can be seen to exercise his sovereignty in every sphere of life.² A host of additional interpretations have also sprung up, each bringing with it a slightly different, and frequently tendentious, portrait of Calvin and his God. Accordingly, a sentiment has arisen within scholarly circles to which John Leith gave expression in 1962: “[i]t is now apparent that Calvin research has not reached any simple agreement as to the content or nature of his theology.”³

² See Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943). On some of the different interpretative schools within Calvin studies, see, Heiko Oberman, “Calvin’s Critique of Calvinism” in *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 259-58.

³ John Leith, “Calvin’s Theological Method and the Ambiguity in His Theology” in *Reformation Studies: Essays in Honor of Roland H. Bainton*, edit. Franklin H. Littell (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1962), 106 reprinted in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 7; *Influences Upon Calvin and Discussion of the 1559 Institutes*, edit. by Richard Gamble (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1992), 264. [Hereafter Gamble’s collection, *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, shall be referred to as ACC: followed by the volume number and the page number(s)]. This number also includes Joseph McLelland, who stated, quite colorfully, in 1986: “John Calvin’s method has been analyzed almost ad nauseam, and with conflicting conclusions: a method utterly systematic, boldly dialectical, badly confused, deliberately paradoxical” (Joseph McLelland, “Renaissance in Theology: Calvin’s 1536 Institutio – Fresh Start or False?” in *In Honor of John Calvin*, 156). But the first to note the presence of such problems may have been Hermann Bauke, who wrote in 1922: “What is the peculiar characteristic of Calvinistic theology which makes possible such contradictory views?” (Cited in Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. H. Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 10).

It was also around this time, 1952 to be precise, that the subject of this dissertation, divine accommodation, first made its entrance on the scholarly stage.⁴ Prior to this, it lay for all intents and purposes unrecognized, hidden within the bulk of Calvin's vast *corpus*. The theme, though a topic of increasing interest in these days, has yet to receive substantial treatment,⁵ and can, in this year of 2002, claim to have attracted the attention of only a handful of journal articles, chapter sub-sections, and encyclopedia entries.⁶ Exactly what led to its discovery in the fifties is hard to say.

Curiously, though, this paucity of scholarship, and its recent appearance on the scene, have not kept accommodation from being touted as a motif of momentous importance to the reformer and absolutely fundamental to his theology. So in his well-known statement, Ford Lewis Battles almost apologizes for giving it such a prominent place in Calvin's thought but confesses with equal earnestness that he feels constrained

⁴ That is, the first appearance of any substantial size; see below for discussion of secondary literature. On the timing referred to in the text, Edward Dowey can say, accommodation was "largely unnoticed by students of Calvin until the middle of this century ..." (Edward Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952; expanded ed., 1994), 249). Interestingly, it should be noted that even as late as 1931, Warfield could produce an important treatment of the knowledge of God which does not feature accommodation at all; see, Benjamin B. Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God" in *Calvin and Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), 29-130. To do the same today would be an impossibility!

Having said that, however, it should be acknowledged that accommodation was taken up in the seventeenth century by some who self-consciously associated themselves with Calvin—particularly, Moïse Amyraut, John Cameron and other French theologians; see Brian Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-Century France* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), especially 202-8 (see also the index). Yet this seems to have been a simple parroting of some of his general ideas on the subject with reference to the doctrine of revelation, and, as such, does not really represent the kind of study to which Dowey is pointing.

⁵ We mean, of course, the theme as it appears in Calvin. To be sure, this assertion could be contested and depends very much on what is meant by adjectives such as "substantial." What we mean by this adjective is full treatment of the topic (rather than partial treatment or discussion of a particular aspect of it) and prolonged treatment (rather than a brief summary). Thus, really only the kind of treatment one finds in a monograph or other sizable volume on a subject could fulfill the requirement. No doubt, various aspects of accommodation have been studied. Also, the phenomenon as a whole has been discussed in articles and sections of chapters of books on Calvin's thought. But to date the subject has not yet received substantial treatment.

to do so.⁷ Further, H. Jackson Forstman calls accommodation “perhaps [Calvin’s] most widely used exegetical tool.”⁸ And David Wright also observes that, “accommodation takes us to the heart of Calvin’s theology.”⁹ Others too have made comparable confessions.

But disputes have begun over this exegetical/theological *topos* as well. Perhaps not surprisingly, this burgeoning consensus regarding the significance of accommodation has not precluded disagreements over its interpretation. As will be reviewed in a later portion of this chapter, the stock rendering sees accommodation as a pedagogical device and God as the Grand Rhetor adapting his discourse to poor and feeble hearers. Yet a recent challenge seeks not only to alter the appearance of the

⁶ This year marks the golden jubilee of accommodation studies; a fact which is based on the publication date of Dowey’s study.

⁷ Ford Lewis Battles, “God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity,” *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 33. The remark by Battles will be cited later in this chapter.

⁸ H. Jackson Forstman, *Word and Spirit; Calvin’s Doctrine of Biblical Authority* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), 13.

⁹ David Wright, “Calvin’s Accommodating God” in Wilhelm Neuser and Brian Armstrong, eds., *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex* (Kirksville: Sixteenth Century Journal, 1997), 18. Even early on Dowey seems to have had a sense of the importance of the subject, for he could write: “Although largely unnoticed by students of Calvin until the middle of this century ... the importance of accommodation in revelation is beginning to be realized” (Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 249).

It is worth noting briefly that utterances similar to those recorded above have been made concerning two of Calvin’s contemporaries, namely Erasmus and Peter Martyr Vermigli. So Manfred Hoffmann refers to “the single most important concept in Erasmus’ hermeneutic, accommodation” (Manfred Hoffmann, *Rhetoric and Theology: the Hermeneutic of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 106. Additionally, it is said of Vermigli that “For his part, Peter Martyr was convinced that Christian theology stands or falls with a doctrine of accommodation” (Peter Martyr, *The Life, Early Letters & Eucharistic Writings of Peter Martyr*, introd. and edit. by J.C. McLelland and G.E. Duffield (Oxford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1989), 134). Expanding our purview, Amos Funkenstein complained about the lack of current scholarship on the use of accommodation in the Middle Ages, which “was so fundamental to the medieval reflections on God and mankind, nature and history” (Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 213). Moreover, concerning the patristic period, Stephen Benin observes that accommodation “appear[ed] prolifically in both Christian and Jewish religious traditions. ... Accommodation ... pervades countless works” (Stephen Benin, *The Footprints of God; Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), xv). Thus, across a range of ages accommodation seems—if these scholars are right—not only to appear but to be an important (perhaps crucial?) element of the thinking of the period. Such considerations

current landscape of the study but also to suggest that accommodation may well have serious, and as yet undisclosed, implications for contemporary understandings of Calvin's God. Although the former shows no signs of budging, the cracks exposed in it by the latter are not to be overlooked, particularly with such weighty issues at stake.

This, then, is where the matter stands at present. We have a theme, quite new to the study of Calvin, which is acknowledged to be of almost unrivaled importance to him, has never received extensive analysis, and about which there are still contentious issues outstanding. These facts are enough, it would seem, to suggest the need for this extended examination of accommodation in Calvin, and further, to raise the question of how such an examination might impact upon current views of Calvin and his God.

1.1 Divine Accommodation: an Introduction to the rise of the idea in Christian Thought

And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth,
and it grieved him to his heart¹⁰ – Genesis 6: 6

No problems have plagued the interpretative and apologetic efforts of the New Testament church like those posed by the Old Testament, in comparison with which the clarity and simplicity of the apostolic witness has seemed blinding.¹¹ To deal with such

cannot help but move one to contemplate the prospects for further study of the concept which exist, and to wonder what the nature of the study will look like, say, fifty years from now.

¹⁰ Quoted from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible, Anglicized Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5.

¹¹ As Heiko Oberman notes, see, *Forerunners of the Reformation; the Shape of Late Medieval Thought Illustrated by Key Documents* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 281. We shall state here our indebtedness to a number of authors or works, in addition to the one just cited from Oberman, which

a behemoth the church employed a number of techniques. This initial section will introduce one of them, divine accommodation, as it came into use in the Christian church during the patristic period.

The difficulty just referred to did not deter the majority of early Christians from embracing these ancient writings as their own, though at times it required from them a mighty effort both to render them comprehensible and to defend them from attack. *Inter alia*, the church pondered over the numerous issues implicit in statements such as the one cited above which seems to ascribe distinctly human characteristics to the eternal God. Clinging onerously to many facets of its work and making even the task of biblical translation a potentially perilous one,¹² such passages have elicited a number of different responses from both within and outside of the household of faith. The fathers vigorously asserted the impassibility of the deity¹³ and insisted on a non-literal interpretation of these passages, one of the principal manifestations of which was the allegorical thrust

have covered various aspects of the interpretation of the Old and New Testaments and its historical development within the Christian church: *Hebrew Bible, Old Testament: the history of its interpretation I/1*, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1996); James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise; Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969); G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: S.P.C.K., 1952); R.P.C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event; a Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1959); Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis; vol. 1: the Four Senses of Scripture* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000); Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1966); Beryl Smalley, *The Study of The Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1941; reprinted 1952); Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2 vols (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987, 1993).

¹² John Wevers notes the interpretive difficulties faced by the translators of the Septuagint in regards to Genesis 6: 6. Objecting to the idea that God “repented,” they opted instead to say that God “was angry;” and rather than declare that God “was grieved in his heart,” they rendered the passage, “he pondered” (John Wevers, “The Interpretative Character and Significance of the Septuagint Version” in *Hebrew Bible*, 106).

¹³ Many books could be pointed to for coverage of the topic. Our thinking on the subject was first stimulated by Donald Macleod, *Behold your God* (Edinburgh: Christian Focus, 1990), 7-21. For the patristic period, see, Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 6-9. For exceptional coverage of the issues and a helpful bibliography, see, Richard Bauckham, “‘Only the Suffering God Can Help’: Divine Passibility in Modern Theology” in *Themelios* 9, 3 (1984), 6-12.

seen in the exegesis of the early church which blossomed in the work of Origen and became an abiding aspect of the legacy of the patristic period. Taking matters further, various gnostic groups sought the hidden meaning of the letter of the text, which lay deep behind the text and required a secret *gnosis* in order to discern it. Going to the other extreme, the Anthropomorphites embraced a strictly-literal rendering of various portions of Scripture, which produced the conviction that God had hands, eyes, and other body parts; a position against which many fought vehemently. And the notorious Marcion rejected the Old Testament and its God wholesale.

One of the ways such interpretive problems were handled by those desirous to hold on to the Books of Moses but to move away from a *prima facie* reading of its text was by appealing to the notion of divine accommodation.¹⁴ Such an approach—it is probably more appropriate to refer here to a collection of approaches, as we shall see—was not the sole possession of Christian interpreters. Jewish exegetes also employed accommodation (notably Philo¹⁵), as did, it would appear, pagan writers (with reference, of course, to their own literature).¹⁶ Its usage by Philo has moved some scholars to detect his influence on Christendom at this point.¹⁷ Others, such as John Reumann, prefer to speak of the “pagan backgrounds” of the concept, at least in one of its Greek

¹⁴ An alternative way can be seen, for example, in Tertullian’s *Against Praxeas*, and involves looking at these places where God is spoken of in human ways as adumbrations of the day when the Son of God would become human; see, *Tertullian Against Praxeas*, trans. A. Souter (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1920), 70-73.

¹⁵ Several scholars point to Philo’s statement: “The lawgiver talks thus in human terms about God, even though he is not a human being, for the advantage of us who are being educated, as I have often said in other passages,” cited from Battles, “God Was Accommodating Himself,” 19-38; especially 23. Additional references for Philo can be found in Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 231.

¹⁶ See, John Reumann, “Oikonomia as ‘Ethical Accommodation’ in the Fathers, and its Pagan Backgrounds” in *Studia Patristica* 3, I (1961), 370-9; Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 210-31; Benin, *Footprints*, 10, 127; Folker Siegert, “Early Jewish Interpretation in a Hellenistic Style” in *Hebrew Bible*, 130-98.

manifestations, namely *oikonomia*, though he also acknowledges the possibility of Philo's influence in its eventual connection with the exegesis of biblical narratives.¹⁸ Given the substantial work done by Reumann, it is difficult to deny at least some connection between pagan and Christian usage, though by and large the question of sources and resources for this cluster of motifs is an exceedingly difficult one.¹⁹ Setting it aside, therefore, since it is not essential to our pursuits, we will note that as early as Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215 AD) accommodation can be found in documents of Christian origin, being employed as a means of interpreting the way in which God reveals himself to humankind:

It is not possible to speak of the divine in its actual nature. But even though we are fettered to flesh, it is possible for us to hear the Lord, accommodating himself to human weakness for our salvation, in the words of the prophets.²⁰

Later Cyril of Jerusalem would speak in an almost identical way.²¹

It was just this understanding that helped believers when they faced specific biblical passages, such as texts which describe the Almighty as changing his mind. That such a thing could happen was dismissed out of hand as an impossibility. Therefore God, the fathers argued, was accommodating himself to his people by depicting himself

¹⁷ Battles, "God Was Accommodating," 23.

¹⁸ Reumann, "Oikonomia as 'Ethical Accommodation' in the Fathers," 370-9. The same history is briefly laid out by Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 74-5. Both suggest that the first to apply *oikonomia* to God were the Stoics.

¹⁹ For a more extensive consideration of the connection between Christian and pagan usage, see John Reumann, "The Use of *oikonomia* and Related Terms in Greek Sources to about A.D. 100 as a Background for Patristic Applications" (unpublished dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1957).

²⁰ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis. Books 1-3*, trans. John Ferguson (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 2, 16. Reference from Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 7.

²¹ "[W]e cannot speak of God as we ought (for that is known to Him only), but so much as the capacity of human nature allows, and so much as our weakness can bear" (cited by Jacobus de Jong, *Accommodatio Dei. A Theme in K. Schilder's Theology of Revelation* (Kampen: Kok, 1990), 18).

in such a peculiar way. Maximus the Confessor explains that such an assertion was “an accommodation of biblical language to human ways of speaking. Scripture spoke in such a way that was not literally accurate.”²² A host of exegetes before and after Maximus elucidate the matter in the same way.²³

But this appeal to accommodation, at least amongst Christians, generally took a particular form. It was not so much a tool for the faithful’s endeavors in constructive theology, nor was it simply an exegetical technique *per se*, but rather, as the fledgling Christian Church faced opposition, it wielded accommodation as a means of self-defense.²⁴ When, for example, Celsus accused Christians of absurdly believing in a God who is “a cook” who would soon bring a fire upon the earth to consume it, Origen rejoined that what the Bible refers to is a refining fire, and explained that “the Scripture is appropriately adapted to the multitudes of those who are to peruse it, because it speaks obscurely of things that are sad and gloomy, in order to terrify those who cannot by any other means be saved from the flood of their sins.”²⁵ In this way the Alexandrian deftly,

²² Cited from Battles, “God Was Accommodating,” 26.

²³ We briefly note Origen’s discussion of such matters, *Origen: Contra Celsum*, 6, 58, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953). John Calvin, of course, deals with the matter as well, many years after Maximus; see, John Calvin, “Commentarii in Quinque Libros Mosis” in *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*. 59 tomi. eds. Wilhelm Baum, Eduard Cunitz and Eduard Reuss. Corpus Reformatorum 29-87 (Brunswick: C. A. Schwetsche, 1863-1900), 23 (1882), 118. [References to the *Calvini Opera* will hereafter be abbreviated as CO, followed by volume number, and column numbers.]. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King (Edinburgh, 1847) reprinted (Grand Rapids, 1981), volume 1, 248-49. [References to the Calvin Translation Society series will hereafter be designated by giving Calvin’s surname, the book of Scripture on which he is commenting, the volume number, and the page numbers.].

²⁴ The polemic aspects of accommodation are mentioned by several; Battles, “God was Accommodating,” 26; Wright, “Calvin’s Accommodating God,” 7.

²⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 5, 15.

if somewhat provocatively,²⁶ evaded the cavil of his adversary and staunchly defended the Christian faith. The same apologetic bent is apparent throughout Christian usage.²⁷

But humanizing descriptions of God were not the only problem posed by the Old Testament, nor the only difficulty to which accommodation was the solution. A second focuses on divine capitulation, and is nicely introduced by Oskar Skarsaune in his discussion of Justin Martyr's comments on the Law of Moses.

If Justin regarded Isa. 1:11ff and other anti-cultic saying of the prophets as statements to the fact that God *after the coming of Christ* would have no pleasure in Jewish observance of the ritual Laws, he was left with the question: Then why did God give all these ritual commandments in the first place?

The answer is often given in the *Dialogue*, e.g. like this:

When Israel made the calf in the wilderness ... God accommodated himself to that people, and commanded them to bring sacrifices, as unto his name, in order that you should not commit idolatry (*Dial.* 19.5f).²⁸

Justin's reasoning here, bearing a noticeable resemblance to Christ's on divorce in Matthew 19: 7-9, is quite different from the examples cited thus far, from which the breadth of accommodation begins to be understood. Skarsaune's summary of the

²⁶ Its provocative nature comes from the fact that Origen's reference to a refining fire may very well be connected to a view of the eternal punishment of the damned which saw that punishment eventually ending, and thus to a view of the universal salvation of all human beings and possibly the devil himself; on this see, Jeffrey Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 109-25.

²⁷ We have no statistics on how often accommodation was used as polemic device to defend Christianity and how often it was used with other purposes in mind. Therefore, our observation is not to be read as if it were made with technical precision. Rather, it is simply the fact that many of the references to divine accommodation which can be found in early Christian literature were polemic in their intent.

On occasion, it should be noted, the tables were turned and accommodation was deployed against Christians. So we see Irenaeus having to argue against the "vain sophists" who asserted that the apostles hypocritically communicated the truth of God when they accommodated it to their hearers; see, Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, trans. Alexander Roberts and W. H. Rambaut, Ante-Nicene Christian Library (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1868), 3.5.2.

²⁸ Oskar Skarsaune, "The Development of Scripture Interpretation in the Second and Third Centuries – except Clement and Origen" in *Hebrew Bible*, 399.

apologist's thought is excellent: "The idea of this is perfectly clear: since the episode with the golden calf proved that Israel had an ineradicable propensity for bringing sacrifices (to idols), God allowed them to sacrifice to himself instead. The people suffered from *sklerokardia*, that made the ritual laws necessary, but only as a temporal remedy."²⁹

The sense here is startling. Yet, as Stephen Benin has shown,³⁰ this interpretation of Jewish sacrifices was a favorite amongst Christian polemicists. While we may assume that they believed the position which they asserted, it also seems likely that the apologetic force of it, and particularly the ability which it gave to them to argue for the superiority of a New Testament position without repudiating the legitimacy of God's previously-established covenant, made it an especially attractive interpretive option. Sometimes the lure also seems to have included the ability to denigrate the Jewish religion, as John Chrysostom's comments in *Adversus Judaeos* indicate.

The Lord seeing them (the Jews) so frantic in their desire for sacrifices, that they were ready to desert to idols if they did not get them—not only were they ready to desert, but had in fact already deserted—permitted sacrifices. This is discernible by the order of events. After completing their feasts to worthless demons, God allowed sacrifice, all but saying, "You are mad and will desire to sacrifice. If so, then sacrifice to Me."³¹

But it was by no means restricted to answering Jews, as Tertullian's address to Marcion shows: "One should see that careful interest by which, when the people were prone to idolatry and transgression, God was content to attach them to his own religion by the

²⁹ Skarsaune, *Hebrew Bible*, 399.

same sort of observances in which this world's superstition was engaged."³² Regardless of its attraction, its usage was not uncommon as additional citations could attest; indeed Gregory the Great and Thomas Aquinas may even be counted as propounders of this position.³³

Sacrifice, however, was not the only area in which these thinkers discerned in God this kind of concessive, or perhaps canny, manner of dealing. Chrysostom observes that "all the Jewish rites also, the sacrifices, and the purifications, and the new moons, and the ark, and the temple too itself, ... even these derived their origin from Gentile grossness."³⁴ The same reasoning can be found in Irenaeus.³⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus aptly summarizes matters on this front in a way which expresses beautifully his thinking on the accommodating Lord.

Therefore like a tutor or physician [God] partly condones ancestral habits, conceding some little of what tended to pleasure, just as medical men do with their patients, that their medicine may be taken, being artfully blended with what is nice. For it is no easy matter to change from those habits which custom and use have made honorable. For instance, the first cut off the idol, but left the sacrifices; the second, while it destroyed the sacrifices did not forbid circumcision. Then, when once men had submitted to the curtailment, they also yielded that which had been conceded to them; in the first instance the sacrifices,

³⁰ We refer to the previously-cited work by Benin, *Footprints*, 1, 43, 57, *et passim*; see also, *id.*, "The 'Cunning of God' and Divine Accommodation" in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45 (1984), 179-91 esp. 179-85; and, Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, 222ff.

³¹ Cited from Benin, "The 'Cunning of God'," 183.

³² Cited from Benin, "The 'Cunning of God'," 184.

³³ Regarding other fathers who argued the position, see, for example, Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4, 14, 2-3; 4, 15, 1. That Gregory and Aquinas both argued the position is demonstrated by Benin, *Footprints*, 109, and *id.*, "The 'Cunning of God'," 181, respectively. Funkenstein, in fact, demonstrates that a number of medieval theologians comment similarly on the point; see, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, 222-27.

³⁴ John Chrysostom, *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, trans. Sir George Prevost (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1852), 82 (homily on Matthew 2: 1-2). Reference from Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 61.

³⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4, 18-9.

in the second circumcision; and became instead of Gentiles, Jews, and instead of Jews, Christians, being beguiled into the Gospel by gradual changes.³⁶

In numerous ways, then, the Lord demonstrates his self-adapting shrewdness. Not surprisingly, similar reasoning would be used by Augustine to answer the charge of inconsistency sometimes leveled against God because of the differences between the testaments.

Whoever denies that both Testaments come from the same God for the reason that our people are not bound by the same sacraments as those by which the Jews were bound and still are bound, cannot deny that it would be perfectly just and possible for one father of a family to lay one set of commands upon those for whom he judged a harsher servitude to be useful, and a different set on those whom he deigned to adopt into the position of sons. ... [one objecting to this] ... may find difficulty in explaining how a single physician prescribes one medicine to weaker patients through his assistants, and another by himself to stronger patients, all to restore health.³⁷

Likewise, this same thinking made its way into the fathers' exegesis of individual passages. So Irenaeus sees the idea of such divine indulgence as helpful in interpreting Genesis 19 and the incest of Lot's daughters. In fact, he even suggests that the Lord infused such episodes with spiritual meanings to benefit those in the New Testament community.³⁸ Additionally, Justin Martyr finds it useful in making sense out of Jacob's

³⁶ The passage is cited from Benin, *Footprints*, 41-2; see, Gregory of Nazianzus, *Discours 42-43*, Grégoire de Nazianze; introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes par Jean Bernardi (Paris, 1992), 31, 25. As these shall be of some importance momentarily we shall mention here that the images of doctor, tutor, and the like are helpfully highlighted by Ford Lewis Battles as being a regular part of the fathers' discussions of accommodation; see Battles, "God was Accommodating," *passim*.

³⁷ Cited from Benin, *Footprints*, 98. For an English translation of *De vera Religione*, which is the work Benin is citing, see Augustine, *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, trans. John Burleigh (London: SCM Press, 1953), xvii. 34.

³⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4, 31, 1-2.

marrying two sisters at the same time in Genesis 29.³⁹ And Chrysostom mentions the episode involving the witch at Endor as an example of this kind of dispensation.⁴⁰ Such accommodation is, however, not only an Old Testament activity, for Irenaeus discerns similar permissiveness in the New Testament era: “even in the New Testament, the apostles are found granting certain precepts in consideration of human infirmity.”⁴¹

The educational, familial, and medical themes just alluded to provide points of contact between this and a final comment which will be made under this second head. It will be introduced by Clement of Alexandria. God, Clement writes,

not only thinks what is true, but he also speaks the truth, except it be medicinally, on occasion; just as a physician, with a view to the safety of his patients, will practise deception or use deceptive language to the sick.⁴²

Thus is presented the idea that God, the Great Physician, will speak untruth in order to further the salvation of his ill patients in accommodation to their condition. Though a shocking notion, the same thought finds expression elsewhere in Clement’s writings. It can, likewise, be discovered in the works of another Alexandrian—Origen. So in expounding Jeremiah 20: 7, “You deceived me, Lord, and I was deceived,” he avers,

When guiding children we speak to children, and we do not speak to them as we do to mature people but we speak to them as children who need training, and we deceive children when we frighten children in order that it may halt the lack of education in youth. And we frighten children when we speak through words of deceit on account of what is basic to their infancy, in order that through the

³⁹ Justin Martyr, *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas Falls (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1948), 355. Both the example of Irenaeus and that of Martyr come from Reumann, “Oikonomia as ‘Ethical Accommodation’ in the Fathers,” 370.

⁴⁰ Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, 83 (homily on Matthew 2: 1-2).

⁴¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4, 15, 2. Reference from Benin, *Footprints*, 6.

⁴² Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies book VII* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1902), 93. The reference, which is to *Stromateis* 7.9.53, is from Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 230.

deceit we may cause them to be afraid ... We are all children to God and we need the discipline of children. Because of this, God, since he cares about us, deceives us.⁴³

The proliferation of the previously noted themes by these two authors suggests an awareness on their parts that they were dealing with potentially explosive matters, which is also suggested by their further elucidations on the *topos*. Both saints explain that when God behaves in such a way he does not do so thoughtlessly or without reflection, but rather, he does “some things, which would not be done by him in the first instance, were it not for” those whom he wishes to help.⁴⁴ He employs remedies “as He would not employ preferentially, but only according to circumstances.”⁴⁵ Interestingly, this interpretation becomes an apologetic tool in the hands of Origen, who uses it to defend the Christian Church against the cavils of Celsus.⁴⁶ Though this is the case, however, its origins are not Christian; or do not seem to be. The idea is linked to Philo and Plato as well. Plato, notably, argued that it was not wrong to lie to a homicidal maniac.⁴⁷

At times, then, God’s accommodating behavior as interpreted by some of the fathers seems surprisingly unethical, raising a number of questions which the fairly

⁴³ Origen, *Homilies on Jeremiah; Homily on 1 Kings 28*, trans. John Clark Smith (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 217-18. Reference from Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 229. The text of Jeremiah which we cited is from this collection of homilies. There are textual issues regarding the translation of the words; they can alternatively be translated, “You have persuaded me,” For the issue, see D. J. Clines and D. M. Gunn, “‘You tried to Persuade me’ and ‘Violence! Outrage!’ in Jeremiah XX: 7-8” in *Vetus Testamentum* 28 (1978), 20-27.

⁴⁴ Clement, *Miscellanies book VII*, 93.

⁴⁵ So Origen says in an addition commenting on the deceiving work of God, which is found in his previously-cited work against Celsus, *Contra Celsum*, 4, 19. Reference from Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought*, 78.

⁴⁶ Celsus himself concedes, Origen confidently asserts, that it is “sometimes allowable to employ deceit and falsehood by way, as it were, of medicine.” Where, then, is the absurdity of God taking up the same method? (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 4, 19. Reference from Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought*, 78).

narrow scope of this dissertation does not allow us to pursue. But not all of its manifestations are so provocative, nor are they all found in the Old Testament (which has already been hinted at). To close this survey of patristic references to divine attempering, a third somewhat broad classification of instances having to do with God's accommodation in providence shall be briefly considered. Many of these will be drawn from Prestige's volume on God in patristic thought and his reflections on the fathers' usage of *oikonomeo*.⁴⁸

Chrysostom notes a particular instance of the Lord's managing of providence in his homilies on Matthew. Commenting on the star of Bethlehem's leading of the wise men, he observes that "when they ought to proceed, [it] proceeded, when they ought to halt, [it] halted, economising everything to circumstance."⁴⁹ Thus, the movements of the star were accommodated to need and situation. Still discussing the same event, Chrysostom asks why God employed a star as his messenger instead of some other vehicle. But how, he inquires, should the Almighty have done it if not in this way? Through a prophet? The magi would not have listened to him. A voice from above or, perhaps, an angel? Again, they would not have attended to such things. "And so," he avers,

for this cause dismissing all those means, God called them by the things that are familiar, in exceeding condescension; and He shows a large and extraordinary

⁴⁷ Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought*, 78. Although Hanson does not mention Plato's comments on deceiving a maniac, he does point to Plato as the likely source for Clement and Origen; see, *Allegory and Event*, 230.

⁴⁸ Prestige writes concerning the Greek word *oikonomeo*: "Certain other important senses of the word 'economise' occur; ... First, that of 'accommodation'" (Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 61).

⁴⁹ Chrysostom, *Homilies on St. Matthew*, 80 (homily on Matthew 2: 1-2). The reference is from Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 61.

star, so as to astonish them, both at the greatness and beauty of its appearance, and the manner of its course.⁵⁰

Thus, Chrysostom expresses his conviction that even particular elements of providence are accommodated to fit the need of the moment.

But surely God's most profound interaction with providence came in his own entrance into the world in his Incarnation and earthly life. Basil speaks of Christ "economising, or 'studying,' two types of human frailty in His refusal to give knowledge of the day or hour of the judgment—encouraging the valiant to hope that his good fight might not be too prolonged, and the wicked to utilize the delay for repentance."⁵¹ Later both Erasmus and Calvin would remark in similar ways on Christ's discourses.⁵² A different sense of accommodation, that of stooping or condescending, is impressively introduced by Irenaeus who observes: "[w]ell spoke he, who said that the unmeasurable Father was Himself subject to measure in the Son; for the Son is the measure of the Father, since He also comprehends Him."⁵³ Origen declares the Incarnation to be "an accommodation to our present capacities in this life."⁵⁴ Additionally, the Alexandrian asserts that the Word did not operate with the Godhead unveiled but by assuming the form of a servant.⁵⁵ Summarizing matters, Prestige notes that this notion of the

⁵⁰ Chrysostom, *Homilies on St. Matthew*, 80.

⁵¹ Cited from Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 61.

⁵² CO 2: 960; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 4, chapter 14, section 25, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, edit. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) [References to the Library of Christian Classics version of the *Institutes* shall hereafter be abbreviated *Inst.*, followed by the book number, the chapter number and the section number.]. For Erasmus, see Hoffmann, *Rhetoric and Theology*, *passim*.

⁵³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4. 4. 2. This assertion would be cited by Calvin many years later; see CO 2: 251-52; *Inst.* 2.6.4.

⁵⁴ Reference from Benin, *Footprints*, 11.

⁵⁵ Mentioned by Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 60.

condescending Christ played a significant role in the thinking of the early church.⁵⁶ Accommodation is also alluded to by Irenaeus in a different way in book four of his *Against Heresies* where he refers to “the Word of God who dwelt in man, and became the Son of man, that,” Irenaeus states, “He might accustom man to receive God, and God to dwell in man.”⁵⁷ Here the idea—which is closer to accustoming, fitting, habituating, or suiting one thing to another—may be only faintly expressive of accommodation, but it still seems to fit into its varying range of meanings. Accordingly, then, Christ’s advent involved him in accommodating acts of various sorts. These are well worth probing but for the purposes of this short digest, the coverage produced heretofore shall have to suffice.

1.1.1 Accommodation, the Church and John Calvin

This introduction has been admittedly brief. But even with this brevity, we cannot help but see that accommodation is a very old idea, and one which was already present and fairly mature in the thinking of the church by at least the middle of the fourth century if not earlier. Our survey tells us relatively little about how pervasive the idea was; usage may or may not have been wide-spread.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, from this

⁵⁶ Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 67.

⁵⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3, 20, 1. Reference from Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 81.

⁵⁸ Claims concerning the ubiquity of accommodation in the writings of this period are made by Stephen Benin: accommodation “appear[ed] prolifically in both Christian and Jewish religious traditions. ... Accommodation ... pervades countless works” (Benin, *Footprints*, xv). See also, Battles, “God Was Accommodating Himself,” 19-38. Further, it is argued that in the writings of Origen, accommodation is quite prevalent; see, Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought*, 75-94; Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 210-31. Additionally, the frequency of Chrysostom’s use is mentioned by Sten Hidal, “Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Antiochene School with its Prevalent Literal and Historical Method” in *Hebrew Bible*, 559; see also Chase, *Chrysostom*, 42. Hidal, in the same treatment, observes that assertions of accommodation were made “by many Fathers of the Church before John” (Sten Hidal, *Hebrew Bible*, 559). For further studies of accommodation in Chrysostom, see Fabio Fabbi, “La ‘Condiscendenza’

summary it is apparent that Christendom did not need to wait for the systematizing of a Lombard or Aquinas, for the hermeneutical developments which bequeathed to the church the fourfold sense in its clarity and fullness, or even for Augustine, in order to begin to employ the concept, for it had learned to have recourse to various, fairly-sophisticated forms of divine accommodation within the first three centuries of its existence; indeed a particularly impressive sense of it can be found as early as ca. 135 AD in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho!* Nor did it need to wait for Calvin. A number of the uses to which he puts accommodation are, in fact, already present in identical forms in the writings of the fathers. Thus, the idea is by no means his invention, but has been with the church very nearly from its inception.

But from what has been said thus far one cannot help but wonder whether Calvin learned accommodation from his reading of the fathers. This is, of course, one of the claims of contemporary Calvin scholarship. It is, however, a claim about which there is some disagreement. Therefore, let us turn now to examine it and the other assertions found within the scholarly pool of opinion on accommodation in Calvin.

Divina Nell'Inspirazione Biblica secondo S. Giovanni Crisostomo" in *Biblica* 14 (1933), 330-347; R.C. Hill "St. John Chrysostom and the Incarnation of the Word in Scripture" in *Compass Theology Review* (1980), 34-8; *id.*, "On Looking Again at SUNKATABASIS" in *Prudentia* 13 (1981), 3-11. For further studies of accommodation generally, see Henry Pinard, "Les Infiltrations paiennes dans l'ancienne loi d'après les Pères de l'église," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 9 (1919), 197-221; K. Duchatelez, "La notion d'économie et ses richesses théologiques," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 92 (1970), 267-92; *id.*, "La 'condescendance' divine et l'histoire du salut," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 95 (1973), 594-621. A number of the further references to Chrysostom and to accommodation in general which are listed above are found in Benin, *Footprints*, 218-19, and Wright, "Calvin's 'Accommodation' Revisited," 188.

1.2 The Current State of the Question within Calvin Studies

1.2.1 The Study of Accommodation in Calvin: a history

1.2.1.a Edward Dowey; *venerabilis inceptor*?

It appears that Edward A. Dowey, Jr., in his 1952 volume *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*,⁵⁹ was the first modern author to give serious attention to the subject.⁶⁰ Whether, however, he ought to be credited with its discovery is not apparent. Both Richard Stauffer and Ford Lewis Battles seem to claim this honor for themselves,⁶¹ but it could be that any one of a number of scholars is worthy of the distinction.⁶² The issue is complicated by the fact that it is not at all clear what it means to discover the idea. Mention of accommodation can certainly be found in works that appeared earlier than Dowey's. The theme is raised as early as 1849 by Thomas Myers,⁶³ but whether

⁵⁹ Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 3-17.

⁶⁰ Of course, accommodation has a history outside of Calvin. The literature on this together with a brief history of its study can be found in Benin's introduction; see Benin, *Footprints*, xix-xxi.

⁶¹ Note Stauffer's words, "Cf. l'excellent article de Ford Lewis Battles ... qui, en même temps que nous, découvre l'importance de la notion d'accommodation dans la théologie de Calvin" (Richard A. Stauffer, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans le Prédication de Calvin*, Basler und Berner Studien zur historischen und systematischen Theologie, 33 (Berne: Peter Lang, 1978), 36 n. 31). This work was brought to my attention by David Wright, "Calvin's 'Accommodation' Revisited," in Peter De Klerk, ed., *Calvin as Exegete: Papers and Responses Presented at the Ninth Colloquium on Calvin and Calvin Studies* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Studies Society, 1995), 171. To be sure, Battles does not explicitly claim the discovery, but his footnote at the beginning of the paper certainly leans in this direction. He states, "I know of only one contemporary study explicitly devoted to accommodation: Clinton Ashley, *John Calvin's Utilization ...* It has not been used in preparing this essay" (Battles, "God Was Accommodating," 19 n. 1).

⁶² See, for example, Paul Lobstein, "La Connaissance religieuse d'après Calvin. Étude d'Histoire et de Dogmatique," in *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 42 (1909) 53-110; A. Mitchell Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin; A Modern Interpretation* (Glasgow: Maclehose, Jackson and Co., 1920), 48, n. 2. Klaas Schilder, *Zur Begriffsgeschichte des "Paradoxon," mit besonderer Berücksichtigung Calvins und das nach-kierkegaardschen "Paradoxon"* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1933), 319-47, as cited by Wright, "Calvin's Accommodating God," 6, n. 14; Arnold Williams, *The Common Expositor; An Account of the Commentaries on Genesis, 1527-1633* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948), 176-177.

⁶³ Myers, in discussing Calvin's commentary on Ezekiel, writes, "[Calvin], in various passages throughout this Prophet, finds it necessary to introduce the principle of accommodation" (Thomas Myers, "ON THE PRINCIPLE OF ACCOMMODATION" in *CTS Ezekiel*, 2, 448-51). Myers says very little about

this amounts to a discovering of it is hard to say. Since a satisfactory answer seems neither attainable nor necessary we will leave the question open. Dowey's fourteen-page examination of the topic is certainly the first one of a significant length.⁶⁴

Following his treatment, accommodation continued to receive both brief mention and longer analysis in discussions of Calvin's thought which appeared between 1952 and 1977 (the year Ford Lewis Battles' essay was published); although surprising in this regard is the silence of such an eminent scholar as Niesel (1956)⁶⁵ on the issue. Worthy of mention in this period are the works of H. Jackson Forstman (1962), Reinhold Hedtke (1969), E. David Willis (1970), as well as the unpublished Ph.D. dissertation by Clinton Ashley (1972), which is the only work that focuses solely on accommodation—though not solely on Calvin.⁶⁶

Calvin's actual usage of this "principle," but rather, curtly expounds the Realist vs. Nominalist controversy that he feels is behind the reformer's usage.

⁶⁴ To the Princetonian's credit, this is all he claims. For we find that, after mentioning several pages of Lobstein's work "La Connaissance religieuse d'après Calvin" that touch on accommodation, Dowey declares, "The first extended treatment [of accommodation] was my own." see Dowey, "The Structure of Calvin's Theological Thought As Influenced by the Two-Fold Knowledge of God," in *Calvinus Ecclesiae Genevensis Custos*, edit., W.H. Neuser (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1984), 140, n. 18, n. 19; reprinted in Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 249, n. 18, n. 19. [Henceforth the volume entitled, *Calvinus Ecclesiae Genevensis Custos* will be referred as *CEGC*].

⁶⁵ See Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*.

⁶⁶ Forstman, *Word and Spirit*, 13f, 16, 55, 60, 107, 114-115. E. David Willis' paper was first presented under the title "Dialectic and Rhetoric in Calvin's Theology" at the American Academy of Religion meeting in New York, U. S. A. in 1970 and published four years later; see E. David Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility in Calvin's Theology," in *The Context of Contemporary Theology. Essays in Honor of Paul Lehmann* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), 43-63; reprinted in ACC: 4, 83-103. Reinhold Hedtke, *Erziehung durch die Kirche bei Calvin. Der Unterweisungs- und Erziehungsauftrag der Kirche und seine anthropologischen und theologischen Grundlagen. Pädagogische Forschungen. Veröffentlichungen des Comenius-Instituts. Reihe: Editionem und Monographien, 39* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1969), 33-39, 106-114, 170-174, 203-206, as cited by Wright, "Calvin's 'Accommodation' Revisited," 183, n. 4. Clinton Ashley, "John Calvin's Utilization of the Principle of Accommodation and its continuing Significance for an Understanding of biblical Language." (unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, 1972). Though Ashley's work is devoted exclusively to accommodation, it is not devoted exclusively to Calvin. In addition to these works, accommodation is mentioned in several others that appeared during these years, 1952-1977; see, Ronald Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1953), 2-4, 84; Heinrich Quistorp, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Last Things*, trans. H. Knight (London: Lutterworth, 1955), 124; A. D. R.

Several of these works have left their mark on Calvinian scholarship. Edward Dowey's discussion has probably had the greatest impact, but the influence of Willis and even Forstman must also be acknowledged. Though praised by some, Hedtke's volume has not exercised a discernible sway over scholarship on the question.⁶⁷ And Ashley's Ph.D. thesis has never been considered of any real significance.⁶⁸

Yet when influence is spoken of here it has more to do with influence upon Calvin research generally than upon the study of accommodation specifically. In fact, we would even suggest that in some ways it is anachronistic to speak of the study of accommodation at this point, though for simplicity's sake it seems acceptable to do so. Nonetheless, what we effectively have in the period between 1952 and 1977 and really up until 1986 (the year of Wright's Pentateuchal Harmony essay) is a handful of publications, produced in near-isolation from one another, and placed into the scholarly domain to be gradually absorbed into the common body of knowledge associated with the reformer's thought. There is no engagement, no debate, indeed no interaction and almost no acknowledgment (!) of one another to be found amongst these authors. All of this would begin, not with the 1977 essay of Battles, but with those pieces which follow

Polman, "Calvin on the Inspiration of Scripture" in *John Calvin: Contemporary Prophet*, edit. by Jacob Hoogstra (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1959), 108-109 reprinted in ACC: 6, 302-303; John Dillenberger, *Protestant Thought and Natural Science: A Historical Interpretation* (Garden City: Double Day, 1960), 38 as cited in Brian Gerrish, *The Old Protestant and the New; Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982), 364, n. 104; Gordon Bates, "The Typology of Adam and Christ in John Calvin," in *Hartford Quarterly* 5 (1965), 42-43 reprinted in ACC: 6, 146-147; E. David Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology: The Function of the So-Called Extra Calvinisticum in Calvin's Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 86, 87; T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 85, 86; Garret Wilterdink, "The Fatherhood of God in Calvin's Thought," in *Reformed Review* 30 (1976-1977), 9-22, reprinted in ACC: 9, 175-188.

⁶⁷ Wright, "Calvin's 'Accommodation' Revisited," 182; *id.*, "Calvin's Accommodating God," 6, n. 14.

⁶⁸ As already noted, Battles simply acknowledged the existence of Ashley's work and declared, "[i]t has not been used in preparing this essay" (Battles, "God Was Accommodating," 19 n. 1). For an early effort,

and depend upon Battles.⁶⁹ Battles himself shows a curious ignorance of nearly all the scholarship discussed up to this point.

1.2.1.b The Hegemony of Ford Lewis Battles

This 1977 article ushered in what might be called a new phase in the study of accommodation. In it, Battles endeavors to set Calvin's use of the accommodation motif within a rhetorical context, which stretches back to Cicero and the classical period and works its way up through the church fathers. It is from these sources, Battles argues, that Calvin learned the idea. In practical terms the essay was a watershed for the study even if it cannot properly be called "groundbreaking," or even particularly novel, since almost all of the ideas present in it are found in either Willis or Dowey.⁷⁰ It would go unchallenged until 1986.⁷¹

however, it does not seem to us to be entirely deserving of the wholly critical reviews which it has generally received.

⁶⁹ For example, Willis, Forstman, and Ashley all refer to Dowey's 1952 work in a footnote, but do nothing else. The silence of Battles regarding scholarly work on accommodation which preceded his own has already been acknowledged in an earlier footnote.

⁷⁰ A number of scholars mistakenly call Battles' article "groundbreaking." See, for example, Richard Gamble, "Current Trends in Calvin Research, 1982-90" in *CSSP*, 95, n. 25. Additionally, I. John Hesselink calls Battles' piece "[t]he seminal study of this subject", *Calvin's First Catechism; A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 195 n. 6.

⁷¹ Interestingly, Dowey refers to the article from the late Pittsburgh and Calvin Seminaries professor in the footnote of a paper published in 1984. Noting its existence, Dowey explains Battles' essay as a piece "which presents classical and patristic precedents, as well as numerous examples from Calvin" (Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 249, n. 19)—curious praise, given that Dowey cites more examples than does Battles. His remark is also curious in that it seems to suggest that Dowey was unaware of the previously-mentioned paper by Willis, which is the first work to find precedents for Calvin's conception of accommodation in the rhetorical tradition (See "Revelation as God's Persuasive Accommodation" (Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility," 53-7)). Stepping back, much could perhaps be made of Dowey's comment were one willing to conjecture on his feelings in light of the place Battles' piece had assumed in scholarly circles. As was already alluded to, it is our view that the essay by Battles has been granted a standing and respect of which it is not entirely worthy. That Dowey could share this sentiment is quite possible.

1.2.1.c Stephen Benin and the Cunning of God

Before going on to address that challenge, the previously cited labors of the Jewish scholar, Stephen Benin, should be noted, which seem to have begun with his Ph.D. on sacrifice in medieval Jewish and Christian thought at the University of California at Berkeley in 1980.⁷² Little of his work focuses on Calvin, and that which does adds nothing to the scholarly conversation. However, his research into the fathers, which was alluded to and relied upon in the first section of this chapter, is significant; particularly his article, “The ‘Cunning of God’ and Divine Accommodation” (1983) and his book, *The Footprints of God* (1996).⁷³ In both pieces, especially the first, he argues for a conception of divine accommodation in the patristic period which is multiform and quite sophisticated, producing a treatment which is considerably more satisfying than Battles and, for that matter, de Jong.⁷⁴ Thus, although his explicit engagement with the former is meager and with the latter non-existent, Benin effectively establishes an alternative reading of the fathers on this issue, which shall be useful to us later on.

Regardless, it seems undeniable that he witnessed the proliferation of an assessment attributed (largely) to Battles rather than to him in the years that followed.

⁷² Stephen Benin, “Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me: Sacrifice in Medieval Jewish and Christian Thought” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1980). I have not been able to obtain this dissertation, but in an e-mail from Dr. Benin, dated 18 February 2002, he indicated that his book *The Footprints of God* is a much-expanded version of it, and that there would be no benefit to be accrued from perusing the dissertation.

⁷³ Benin’s literary efforts on accommodation also include, “Sacrifice as Education in Augustine and Chrysostom” in *Church History* 52 (1983), 7-20, as well as several articles which focus more closely on the work of Jewish exegetes.

1.2.1.d Battles' Views challenged, and the Burgeoning Consensus

The years immediately following the publication of Battles' article were uneventful so far as the study of accommodation is concerned. No new treatment of the subject would appear for almost ten years.⁷⁵ However, David F. Wright, in a series of essays published between 1986 and 1998, began to criticize aspects of Battles' views

⁷⁴ de Jong, *Accommodatio Dei*, 16-26. In his build-up to analyzing Schilder, de Jong treats the fathers, giving slightly more attention to the East, from Clement of Alexandria to Augustine. His treatment shows some dependence on Battles and is brief and one-dimensional.

⁷⁵ The general trend already noted concerning accommodation making its way into a wide range of areas within Calvin studies became even more common following the publication of Battles' article on accommodation; see, for example, Calvin's intellectual background: Suzanne Selinger, *Calvin Against Himself; An Inquiry in Intellectual History* (Hampden, CT: Archon Book, 1984), 66, 69, 83-84, 115, 179, 213; William Bouwsma, *John Calvin; A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 105, 124, 125; *id.*, "Calvin as *Theologia Rhetorica*" in *Calvin as Theologia Rhetorica*, edit. Wilhelm Wuellner (Berkeley: Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1986), 10-11 reprinted in *ACC*: 7, 94-5; *id.*, "Calvin and the Renaissance Crisis of Knowing," *Calvin Theological Journal* 36 (1982), 207; *id.*, "Calvinism as Renaissance Artifact" in *John Calvin & the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 38; McGrath, *John Calvin*, 130-132, 263 (Appendix I); Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 28, 32-34, 61, 77, 108, 133-134, 187-188, 202. Calvin's exegesis and view of Scripture: Donald McKim and Jack Rogers, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 89-116; Richard Muller, "The Foundation of Calvin's Theology: Scripture as Revealing God's Word," in *Duke Divinity School Review* 44 (1979), 17-18, 22 reprinted in *ACC*: 6, 401-402, 406; *id.*, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics; volume 1: Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 125; *id.*, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics. Volume 2, Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 192-193, 319-320; Dirk Jellema, "God's 'Baby Talk': Calvin and the 'Errors of the Bible,'" in *Reformed Journal* 30 (1980), 25-47; Gerrish, *The Old Protestant and the New*, 6, 175-176, 178, 364, n. 95; David Steinmetz, "John Calvin on Isaiah 6: A Problem in the History of Exegesis," in *Interpretation* 36 (1982), 164 reprinted in *ACC*: 6, 182; T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 98-102; Jane Dempsey Douglass, "Calvin's Use of Metaphorical Language of God: God as Enemy and God as Mother" in *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 8 (1987), 19-32, especially 19-22; Anthony Baxter, *John Calvin's Use and Hermeneutics of the Old Testament* (unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Sheffield, 1987); Richard Gamble, "Calvin as Theologian and Exegete: Is There Anything New?" in *Calvin Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 182-183, 185; Susan Schreiner, "Exegesis and Double Justice in Calvin's Sermons on Job," *Church History* 58 (1989), 332; Roland Frye, "Calvin's Theological Use of Figurative Language" in *John Calvin & the Church; A Prism of Reform.*, ed. Timothy George, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 172-194; David Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 11, 40, 43, 51 n.110, 80 n. 106, 112-114. Calvin's theology: Richard Muller, *Christ and the Decree* (Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1986), chapter 1 (scattered references); Philip Butin, *Revelation, Redemption and Response: Calvin's Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 12-21; Paul Helm, "God in Dialogue" in *Interpreting the Bible; Historical and Theological Studies in Honour of David F. Wright*, ed. A. N. S. Lane (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1997), 223-240; especially 231-238;

and the general trend of study in this area.⁷⁶ By drawing attention to a previously unknown aspect of accommodation in Calvin—namely, God’s attempering of his laws to the barbarity of his Old Testament people—and by striving to re-evaluate the phenomenon in the reformer, Wright not only offered a formidable challenge to contemporary views but also demonstrated that, at least in his judgment, we have some way to go before we understand the place it holds in Calvin’s theology. This appraisal was not shared by others, as may be discovered by examining writings on accommodation which began to appear in the late eighties and early nineties. Without exception these treatments, even where they incorporated aspects of Wright’s findings, upheld the standard interpretation of Battles and others.

As such, their primary usefulness is to demonstrate the growing consensus of opinion on the subject.⁷⁷ This consensus may also be discovered by two further considerations. First, Calvin scholarship can be found coming to its own self-conscious judgment that the basic questions concerning accommodation in Calvin have been

Randall Zachman, “Calvin as Analogical Theologian” in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51, no. 2 (1998), 162-87.

⁷⁶ One finds a general criticism of Battles’ findings in Wright’s 1986 article on Calvin’s Pentateuchal harmony (David Wright, “Calvin’s Pentateuchal Criticism: Equity, Hardness of Heart, and Divine Accommodation in the Mosaic Harmony Commentary” *Calvin Theological Journal* 21 (1986), 45). More specific disapproval is expressed in a later essay of Wright’s, where he declares that Battles “is mistaken in arguing for [accommodation’s] roots in classical rhetoric” (*id.*, “Accommodation and Barbarity in John Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries,” in A. Graeme Auld, ed., *Understanding Poets and Prophets. Essays in Honour of George Wishart Anderson*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series, 152 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Series, 1993), 415, n. 3). Additional comments can be found in; *id.*, “Calvin’s ‘Accommodation’ Revisited,” 171-90, *id.*, “Calvin’s Accommodating God,” 3-19; *id.*, “Was John Calvin a ‘Rhetorical Theologian?’” in *Calvin Studies IX*, 46-69, especially 59-63.

⁷⁷ A. Baxter, “What Did Calvin Teach about Accommodation?” *Evangel 6:1* (Spring, 1988), 20-22; Michael Keefer, “Accommodation and Synecdoche: Calvin’s God in *King Lear*,” in *Shakespeare Studies* (New York) 20 (1988), 147-68; Martin Klauber and Glenn Sunshine, “Jean-Alphonse Turretini on Biblical Accommodation: Calvinist or Socinian?” in *Calvin Theological Journal* 25/1 (1990), 9-12; Klauber, “Francis Turretin on Biblical Accommodation: Loyal Calvinist or Reformed Scholastic?” *Westminster Theological Journal* 55 (1993), 73-86; de Jong, *Accommodatio Dei*, 35-43; Benin,

answered. This sentiment is reflected in the statement of Randall Zachman, made in 1998. Having cited a portion of Battles' essay, Zachman asserts:

While there is nearly universal agreement that this description of the role of accommodation in Calvin's theology is accurate, it still leaves unaddressed two major questions: *How* does such accommodation on the part of God take place, and *why* does it take the form that it does?⁷⁸

Zachman does not, of course, declare that all queries on the matter have been answered. Nonetheless, he points to an accepted opinion regarding the fundamental scholarly understanding of the role of divine accommodation in Calvin. A similar judgment is set out by Puckett as well.⁷⁹

This consensus is further demonstrated by the appearance of dictionary definitions of accommodation, such as this one from the *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, prepared in 1996 by Donald McKim.

(From Lat. *accommodatio*, "adjusting one thing to another") Theologians trained in classical rhetoric (Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine, and Calvin) used this idea to indicate God's condescension in revelation. God communicated in ways adjusted to limited human capacities.⁸⁰

Footprints, 187-192. The only one who incorporates Wright's findings is Baxter, and this incorporation does not influence his discussion of the topic very much.

⁷⁸ Randall Zachman, "Calvin as Analogical Theologian," 162 (italics belongs to Zachman). The statement of Ford Lewis Battles quoted by Zachman is: "It may be that we have succumbed to the temptation of putting the concept of accommodation too much at the center of Calvin's thought and of trying to organize everything around this notion. Yet, if this be a faithful interpretation, accommodation would seem (even when Calvin does not explicitly advert to it) his fundamental way of explaining how the secret, hidden God reveals himself to us" (Battles, "God Was Accommodating," 33).

⁷⁹ David Puckett makes an observation similar to that of Zachman when he declares: "The central role of accommodation in Calvin's doctrine of scripture is now generally recognized. References to the principle of accommodation are found throughout Calvin's commentaries on the Old Testament. Accommodation is an important part of his explanation of the rationale for typology" (Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 51, n. 110).

⁸⁰ "Accommodation" in *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, prep. Donald McKim (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), 2. A very similar definition of accommodation was set out by McKim in 1992; see, "Accommodation" in *The Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, ed. Donald McKim, consult. David Wright (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 1.

Note also the 1988 production of Timothy George, found in his glossary of theological terms from the Reformation.

accommodation A rhetorical metaphor frequently used by Calvin to refer to God's condescension to the limits and needs of the human condition. For example, with reference to Scripture, Calvin asserted that God was wont to "lisp" (*balbutit*) as a nursemaid conversing with an infant (*Inst.* 1.13.1).⁸¹

And in a similar glossary, found in Alister McGrath's 1990 biography on Calvin, he calls accommodation,

The principle, especially associated with Calvin, that God reveals himself in words and images that are appropriate to the human capacity to visualize and comprehend.⁸²

These statements amply bear witness to the consensus which was firmly ensconced in the scholarly mind by the early 1990s and which is still largely intact.⁸³

⁸¹ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, Tn: Broadman Press, 1988), 324.

⁸² McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin*, 263 (Appendix I). Also Richard Muller, in his dictionary of Latin and Greek terms, defines *accommodatio*, *attemperatio* and *condescensio* as follows: "The Reformers and their scholastic followers all recognized that God must in some way condescend or accommodate himself to human ways of knowing in order to reveal himself. This *accommodatio* occurs specifically in the use of human words and concepts for the communication of the law and the gospel, but it in no way implies the loss of truth or the lessening of scriptural authority. The *accommodatio* or *condescensio* refers to the manner or mode of revelation, the gift of the wisdom of infinite God in finite form, not to the quality of the revelation or to the matter revealed." (Richard Muller, *A Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 19).

⁸³ Though Millet's recent tome covers much more than accommodation, he devotes a section of his work to the subject and mentions it on one or two other occasions through out the volume; see, Olivier Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole. Étude de rhétorique réformée*, Bibliothèque littéraire de la

1.2.2 Current Views on Accommodation in Calvin

But what characterizes present-day views of Calvin's conception of accommodation? Having sketched the history of the study of the subject, this question will now be treated.

1.2.2.a The Consensus View

According to virtually every modern scholar, Calvin's conception of accommodation has to do with God's revealing of himself, and is consistently depicted as a simple and uniform (as opposed to complex and multiform) idea—the “principle” of accommodation.⁸⁴ As the issue is probed further, though, some slight variation in emphasis and approach can be found between the various authorities. Because this is so, the decision has been made to divide these scholars into two groups and treat their views in turn. Although there is overwhelming agreement, this method will allow for a more nuanced treatment of the subject. Thus, a distinction will be made between what will be termed the theology group (headed by Dowey) and the rhetoric group (headed by Willis and Battles).

Renaissance, série 3, Tome 28 (Geneva: Slatkine, 1992), 247-255 (see also index). I have been aided in my reading of Millet by a translation produced by Sylvie Slater.

⁸⁴ Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 10; Ashley, “John Calvin's Utilization of the Principle of Accommodation,” 64; de Jong, *Accommodatio Dei*, 35; Battles, “God was Accommodating,” 19; Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 249-50.

1.2.2.a.1 The theology group⁸⁵

As treated by the members of this group, accommodation is inextricably linked to the knowledge of God.

The term accommodation refers to the process by which God reduces or adjusts to human capacities what he wills to reveal of the infinite mysteries of his being, which by their very nature are beyond the powers of the mind of man to grasp.⁸⁶

The fundamental problem of revelation is the gulf separating God from human beings which is overcome by accommodation; that is, by selection and simplification. God chooses to leave some matters hidden. “[W]hat he wills to reveal,” he must simplify. Because of the character of God and humankind, this applies to all knowledge of the divine. Accommodation is, as it were, the lens through which Calvin interprets all of God’s revelatory dealings with his creatures.⁸⁷ Hence, there is no knowledge of God which is unaccommodated, whether it comes from nature or Scripture.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Given the precedence and quality of Edward Dowey’s account, his statement of the issues shall be relied upon here. Clinton Ashley’s treatment in his Ph.D. from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary propounds a very similar view, as does the Ph.D. thesis and article (summarizing Calvin’s teaching on accommodation) from Anthony Baxter, to which reference has already been made. Steven Benin’s 1993 interpretation of accommodation is also essentially the same. He is familiar with Battles’ article, but relies more heavily on the assistance of Forstman. There are, as mentioned, a number of scholars who could probably fit into either group. For example, Jacobus de Jong (in 1990), being familiar with the writings of both Dowey and Battles, produces a treatment which shows the influence of both authors. In a way similar to Battles, de Jong briefly mentions Calvin’s “drawing on the church fathers” (de Jong, *Accommodatio Dei*, 35). Otherwise, his treatment is quite theologically oriented and similar to Dowey’s discussion. He shall be considered within the rhetoric group; see de Jong, *Accommodatio Dei*, 35-43. Similar is the discussion of Timothy George, who cites both Dowey and Battles in a footnote.

⁸⁶ Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 3.

⁸⁷ The brief discussion of this point by Dowey is typical; see, Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 10.

⁸⁸ On the first point, regarding the accommodated character of all knowledge of God, one may find the sentiment amply expressed in Dowey’s definition; additionally, Ashley writes: “Finite man cannot attain a complete knowledge of the infinite God. Furthermore, what knowledge of God is possible must be accommodated to the capacity of man” (Ashley, “John Calvin’s Utilization of the Principle of Accommodation,” 97).

This is the substance of the position, but some additional matters should be mentioned. The assertion that nature's revelation is accommodated does not seem to have bothered scholars. That is to say, despite the explosive exchanges associated with the now legendary Barth-Brunner debates,⁸⁹ they do not affect, for good or ill, the discussion of this point, on which there seems—to the extent that any comment upon it—to be general agreement. Not even Dowey, writing in close chronological proximity to the contest, mentions it in the context of his discussion of accommodation.

A quality which also unites the members of this group is a strong reliance upon the *Institutes*, as is evidenced by their frequent employment of *Institutes* 1.13.1 as a kind of paradigmatic instance of divine attempering.⁹⁰ To be sure, this reliance can vary somewhat. But even when, as in the case of Dowey or Ashley or Baxter, citations from the reformer's commentaries are found in the treatment, the controlling structures of thought are still borrowed principally from the *Institutes*.

A number of these authorities also concur on the idea that accommodation is of fundamental importance to the reformer's thought. This is adumbrated in the earlier work of Paul Lobstein, prior to which (according to Dowey) the importance of accommodation to Calvin had gone unnoticed.⁹¹ Later Forstman would call accommodation "perhaps his most widely used exegetical tool," as was mentioned

⁸⁹ Karl Barth, "No! Answer to Emil Brunner," *Natural Theology*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (London: Centenary Press, 1946), 80ff; Emil Brunner, "Nature and Grace" *Natural Theology*, 20ff. For discussion of Calvin's thoughts on accommodation in both nature and Scripture see Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 3ff. The same can also be found by those within the group which we are characterizing as rhetorical; see, de Jong, *Accommodatio Dei*, 37.

⁹⁰ See, Ashley, "John Calvin's Utilization of the Principle of Accommodation," 65; Benin, *Footprints*, 189.

⁹¹ Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 249.

earlier.⁹² Not everyone, to be sure, has joined the chorus of praise (so to speak) for accommodation. But it is significant that no one of whom we are aware has made an effort to silence it either. Thus, the assessment which sees accommodation as of basic importance to the reformer seems gradually to be growing.⁹³

By contrast, few emphasize God's activity in the accommodating act the way Dowey does. "Revelation," Dowey states,

does not refer to some general streaming of light from the deity but a voluntary, directed "accommodation" of what God wills to make known of himself to the capacities of the human creatures.⁹⁴

It is an act of God, and a "voluntary, directed" act to which the Princetonian points. Conversely, many today ascribe accommodation predominantly to Scripture or the biblical writer.⁹⁵

Dowey's treatment is also distinguished by the fact that it is the first to differentiate between accommodation to finiteness and to sinfulness, which will be treated more fully in chapter two.⁹⁶ But he is, of course, not the only one with such identifiable emphases. Turning to a peculiarity of Clinton Ashley's discussion, we note his interest in the analogical character of humankind's knowledge of God. "Since man

⁹² Forstman, *Word and Spirit*, 13. Forstman's position is one which few today, it seems, would try to maintain. Wright, for one, asks in disbelief if what Forstman says could really be true; see, "Calvin's Accommodating God," 6.

⁹³ Closely related to this are the attempts, made by some, to assess Calvin's place within the galaxy of theologians who employed the concept. So Ashley writes: "John Calvin's frequent utilization of the principle of accommodation as a hermeneutical method for understanding biblical language is without parallel in biblical and theological writings" (Ashley, "John Calvin's Utilization of the Principle of Accommodation," 64). A fairly recent assertion on this is found in Benin: "Calvin ... is almost unequalled in his exploitation of accommodation" (Benin, *Footprints*, 197).

⁹⁴ Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 249.

⁹⁵ Wright raises this point; see Wright, "Calvin's Accommodating God," 16-7.

cannot,” Ashley observes, interpreting Calvin, “know God as he really is, that is, in his essence, then man must formulate his conceptions of God by analogy.”⁹⁷ Ashley finds ample grounds for this assertion in Calvin’s commentary on Isaiah 40: 18 in which the reformer declares that God must compare himself with things which human beings know if he wishes to reveal himself to them.⁹⁸ Thus, Ashley draws his conclusion: “Man’s knowledge of God is essentially analogical;” that is, because it is accommodated it is by necessity analogical.⁹⁹ Additionally, Brian Gerrish is noteworthy for highlighting the variety present in God’s accommodating work. Making a distinction between form and content, he notes that God chooses accommodated forms such as human preaching and the sacraments in order to suit human weaknesses. But then, when treating the Scriptures, he argues that the actual content of them is attempered, specifically by the inclusion of anthropomorphisms which are, of course, so rife throughout the Bible. Moreover, the old dispensation was accommodated to the Jewish people, according to which spiritual blessings had to be spoken of in earthly terms due to human sluggishness. And the details of the creation account as recorded in Genesis mark another example of accommodation in that they are crafted with the simple reader in mind rather than the astronomer or scientist.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Dowey is the first one to make the point clearly; see, Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 4. He is not always explicitly followed on this, but the distinction has received general acceptance from scholars.

⁹⁷ Ashley, “John Calvin’s Utilization of the Principle of Accommodation,” 66. Zachman would later argue on this basis that Calvin’s use of accommodation makes him an analogical theologian; see Zachman, “Calvin as Analogical Theologian.”

⁹⁸ The same passage is cited and roughly the same point made by Douglass, “Calvin’s Use of Metaphorical Language of God,” 19-32.

⁹⁹ Ashley, “John Calvin’s Utilization of the Principle of Accommodation,” 67.

¹⁰⁰ For this discussion of Gerrish, see, *The Old Protestant and the New*, 175-76.

It can be seen, then, that some variety characterizes the different treatments. But this should not be allowed to overshadow the general agreement found here. Respecting a basic sense of what accommodation is, all included under this head agree that it is a means whereby God overcomes the ontological and epistemological gulf present between Creator and creature by selecting and simplifying the knowledge of himself to human capacity.

1.2.2.a.2 The rhetoric group¹⁰¹

Possessing slightly different accents, the assessment of these scholars is less theological, more rhetorical, less interested in the ineffability of the transcendent God, more interested in God's pedagogical skills by which he adapts his discourse to his hearers. So Battles states:

As in human rhetoric there is a gulf between the highly educated and the comparatively unlearned, ... a gulf which it is the task of rhetoric to bridge so that through simple, appropriate language the deeps of human thought yield up their treasures, or at least the views of the speaker are persuasively communicated—analogously in divine rhetoric the infinitely greater gulf between God and man, through divine condescension, in word and deed, is bridged.¹⁰²

Further, the following citation from Willis highlights an equally important emphasis; namely, that of God's intention to persuade:

¹⁰¹ As we have indicated, there are many today who would hold to this view with varying degrees of sophistication, or would hold to a kind of Dowe/Battles/Willis amalgamation. This will be reflected in the section which follows.

¹⁰² Battles, "God was Accommodating," 20. One might also look at Klauber's brief synopsis, "Francis Turretin on Biblical Accommodation," 77.

Far from maintaining a view of a lofty God who is untouched by human weakness and changeableness, Calvin presents a view of God who as a loving Father strategically adjusts his dealings with his people in order to inform, delight, and move them (cf. the three classical aims of rhetoric) to doing his will, which represents both his glory and their highest good. A favorite term used for this revelatory activity is “accommodation.”¹⁰³

These inter-related accents of pedagogy and persuasion are central to the understanding of these scholars. Thus, although an *Institutes*-based platform predominates here as well,¹⁰⁴ yet several slightly different notes are struck.

This is due to the fact that here accommodation in Calvin is conceived of as having its roots in classical rhetoric. Thinking on this matter has been profoundly shaped by the work of Battles, whose article provides citations from rhetoricians and church fathers who are supposed to have inspired the reformer in his thinking on the matter, as was mentioned earlier.¹⁰⁵ Others, like Millet, posit the mediating influence of Erasmus.¹⁰⁶ Regardless of the precise forerunner mentioned, these scholars contend that in rhetoric, “*accommodatio* consists of achieving an essential agreement (*aptum, decorum*)” between the person delivering the discourse, his discourse, his audience, and

¹⁰³ Willis, “Rhetoric and Responsibility,” 53. With respect to the importance of persuasive language in accommodation, see also the remainder of Willis, “Rhetoric and Responsibility,” 53-7; also, Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 249-50.

¹⁰⁴ Battles’ well-known statement on this matter is: “While the evidence of Calvin’s biblical commentaries has been examined, this paper rests primarily on the *Institutes* in which every aspect of accommodation has apparently been set forth.” (Battles, “God Was Accommodating,” 19, n. 1). See also, the heavy dependence upon the *Institutes* found in de Jong, *Accommodatio Dei*, 35-43.; Willis, “Rhetoric and Responsibility,” 53-7; and Gamble, “Calvin as Theologian and Exegete,” 182-3. One also finds the same tendency, pointed to in the earlier section, of using *Institutes* 1.13.1 as the paradigm for Calvin’s usage of accommodation; see, Hesselink, *Calvin’s First Catechism*, 56. Millet’s discussion, it should be acknowledged, covers a broader range of Calvin’s writings, see, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 247-55.

¹⁰⁵ Though Battles mentions several rhetoricians and fathers, he seems particularly convinced of the influence of Augustine. “Calvin’s reading of Augustine clearly familiarized him with accommodation as a hermeneutical principle” (Battles, “God was Accommodating,” 26).

¹⁰⁶ Erasmus’ influence is “doubtless (*sans doute*)” present here (Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 247).

the attendant circumstances.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, the verb, *accommodo*, is understood to be a technical term widely used by rhetoricians as well as Jurisconsults, which “always had to do with the adaptation of the verbal representation of the matter under consideration to the person being addressed, with full regard to their situation, their character, intelligence and their emotional makeup.”¹⁰⁸ Hence, it is maintained, accommodation has always been understood, from Cicero to Calvin, as a “speech-bridge”¹⁰⁹ between two parties separated by some intervening chasm, and that this is also how Calvin understands the notion.

This speech-bridge was intended both to simplify and to persuade. This latter emphasis is especially present, albeit in varying degrees, in the scholars found in this group. Some, like Willis, give prominence to it, calling revelation “God’s persuasive accommodation” and explaining that “God persuasively accommodates his purposes to man’s persuadability.”¹¹⁰ Olivier Millet also finds this aspect a fascinating one. The Frenchman focuses his attention on the reformer’s interpretation of the expressions of God’s love for his church, observing that Calvin’s adherence to the doctrine of impassibility moved him to interpret these expressions as metaphors (provided in accommodation to our capacity), and yet in such an interpretation Calvin also acknowledges the power this language has to attract us while, at the same time, making us aware of the profound distance there is between us and God that makes such

¹⁰⁷ Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 249.

¹⁰⁸ Battles, “God was Accommodating,” 22.

¹⁰⁹ Battles, “God was Accommodating,” 21. Also: “The precise aim of rhetoric was to accommodate, to adjust, adapt, or fit one’s language in a way that would be suitable to the intended audience. This too was what God did in making Himself known,” say George, in summarizing the idea in Calvin, who also finds classical rhetoric to be the “likely” source of the idea in the reformer; see, *Theology of the Reformers*, 192.

¹¹⁰ Willis, “Rhetoric and Responsibility,” 53, 55.

metaphorical language necessary.¹¹¹ Furthermore, Millet notes that, in Calvin's judgment, if God were to speak to us in his own language, it would actually be more moving and effective but his majesty would crush us. Thus, Calvin holds, God's accommodated language seeks a middle ground, striving to rouse us without overwhelming us.¹¹² Similarly, Millet ruminates, accommodation places the knowledge of God between two extremes. For, on the one hand this accommodated knowledge allows us to escape from ignorance (for it is a true revealing of God), but on the other hand it forbids us access to the incomprehensible mysteries of the Godhead, noting Calvin's frequent habit of warning against curiosity. Thus even more, Calvin's conception of accommodation accentuates the practicality and effectiveness of God's revelation.¹¹³ In slight contrast to Willis and Millet, though, Battles does not place as much emphasis upon this sense or quality of enticement.

Yet Battles' discussion is distinguished by something not touched on by these authorities; namely, an apparent willingness to expand accommodation beyond the confines of revelation. Here, however, the American is unclear and possibly inconsistent. He can make assertions on this matter which seem unambiguously supportive of such an expansion.

... unlike an Origen, or an Augustine, or a John Chrysostom, or a Hilary of Poitiers, Calvin makes this principle a consistent basis for his handling not only of Scripture but of every avenue of relationship between God and man.

¹¹¹ Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 248-9.

¹¹² Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 250.

¹¹³ Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 251.

accommodation has to do not only with the Scriptures and their interpretation, but with the whole of created reality to which, for the Christian, Scripture holds the clue.¹¹⁴

These, particularly the first citation, push the frontiers of accommodation past the boundaries of revelation. Or so it would seem, for, in later portions of his essay, Battles appears to contradict such an assessment: “[i]f accommodation is the speech-bridge between the known and the unknown, between the infinitesimal and the infinite ...” But to call it a speech-bridge raises questions as to what he meant by his earlier remarks. The same may be said of the following:

It may be that we have succumbed to the temptation of putting the concept of accommodation too much at the center of Calvin’s thought ... Yet, if this be a faithful interpretation, accommodation would seem (even when Calvin does not explicitly advert to it) his fundamental way of explaining how the secret, hidden God reveals himself to us.¹¹⁵

Here he seems just as clearly to refer to revelation alone, a verdict which is also supported, in our judgment, by an assessment of the article as a whole. It may be, then, that Battles simply means that God’s revelatory accommodation includes the created order (non-verbal revelation)—a verdict which was already discussed in the earlier treatment of natural revelation, but which here would also include this-worldly institutions such as civil government.¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, one cannot help but feel that, at least at times, Battles seems to want to say more than this.

¹¹⁴ Battles, “God was Accommodating,” 20, 21. Similar points are made by Bru, “La Notion d’Accommodation Divine,” 85-6.

¹¹⁵ Battles, “God was Accommodating,” 21, 33.

¹¹⁶ Battles, “God was Accommodating,” 20-21.

Jacobus de Jong, on the other hand, propounds the view of non-verbal accommodation explicitly. “Accommodation in Calvin covers more than God’s speaking.”¹¹⁷ Ascribing this insight to Battles, de Jong lists the creation, divine providence, angelic activity, civil authorities, and the patterns of weather, and declares, “Calvin sees all things in the light of God’s accommodating work.”¹¹⁸ The evidence employed in support of this position is sparse, amounting to two references to the *Institutes* (1.5.7, 8 and 4.1.1), and three to secondary literature. Nonetheless, his comments are important and should perhaps have been heeded more diligently by contemporary scholarship.

Finally, in concluding this section it should be acknowledged that, like the earlier mentioned group of scholars, Battles and many others clearly acknowledge the fundamental importance of this notion to Calvin. This can be seen in the citation from Battles listed earlier.¹¹⁹ In addition, Willis fashions the dictum, “Humanitas capax divinitatis per accommodationem” in order to express this conviction.¹²⁰ It is also expressed by the belief, articulated by many, that the incarnation is the supreme accommodation, the logical conclusion, as it were, of the principle. Battles, though not the first scholar explicitly to mention this point, is the one whose influence is most easily discerned respecting its proliferation, which may be detected in numerous scholars. He

¹¹⁷ De Jong, *Accommodatio Dei*, 39.

¹¹⁸ De Jong, *Accommodatio Dei*, 39.

¹¹⁹ See page 38.

¹²⁰ Willis, “Rhetoric and Responsibility,” 55. De Jong’s assertion similarly expresses this conviction, *Accommodatio Dei*, 35-6.

treats the matter in the last three pages of his article under the heading “The Incarnation as Accommodation.”¹²¹ The issue shall receive fuller attention in chapter three.

1.2.2.b David Wright’s Critique of the Consensus View

As mentioned, David Wright takes issue with several elements of the consensus view. He objects, to begin with, that no clear category of *accommodatio* can be found in classical rhetorical theory, therefore nullifying the claim that Calvin found such a category there and built his own ideas upon it. “I am certain,” Wright wrote in 1993, “that Calvin found no ‘category of rhetoric’ called ‘accommodation’ in the rhetorical works of Cicero, Ps-Cicero (*Ad C. Herennium*), Quintilian and others.”¹²² On this subject, he notes the unconvincing nature of Battles’ evidence. *Accommodo*, Wright explains, can have “a range of senses like ‘adapt, adjust, apply, suit, correspond, match’ etc.”¹²³ In fact the use of the verb by Cato cited by Battles has nothing to do with rhetoric, but speaks of “fitting together the parts of a mill.”¹²⁴ Therefore, while some references can be found in classical writings which are relatively close to Battles’ conception, many others appear as well, causing the supposed technical and precise sense of the verb to be lost within this wider semantic range. Furthermore, references to the enormous tome of Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*,¹²⁵ by Millet do not satisfactorily prove the case either, since the evidence culled from Lausberg is not

¹²¹ Battles, “God was Accommodating,” 36-8.

¹²² Wright, “Calvin’s ‘Accommodation’ Revisited,” 172.

¹²³ Wright, “Calvin’s ‘Accommodation’ Revisited,” 173.

¹²⁴ Wright, “Calvin’s ‘Accommodation’ Revisited,” 184, n. 14.

¹²⁵ Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*, trans. Matthew Bliss, Annemiek Jansen and David Orton, eds. David Orton and R. Dean Anderson (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

substantial enough to support the notion of a technical category of *accommodatio*.¹²⁶ Accordingly, the matter simply has yet to be satisfactorily proven, Wright argues.

Further, Wright disputes the supposed dependence of Calvin upon the rhetoricians and church fathers with respect to accommodation. He lodges this objection on the dual grounds that neither can any clear link between Calvin and a particular forerunner (Cicero, Origen, Augustine or someone else) be established to substantiate such dependence, nor is there significant agreement between the two parties on the matter in question—since anything in rhetoric that might be akin to accommodation (such as the notions of *aptum* and *decorum*) is “light years away from the range and depth of Calvin’s application of accommodation.”¹²⁷ Wright does not categorically oppose the suggestion that Calvin could have derived the idea from someone, but simply argues that such a link has yet to be adequately established; warning in this context against “the fashionable recent tendency to explain too much of Calvin in terms of the rhetorical tradition.”¹²⁸ His arguments here, though often penetrating, can be rather too pedantic at times.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, we fully concur with his conclusions on this question.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Wright, “Calvin’s ‘Accommodation’ Revisited,” 184, n. 15; see Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 249, n. 90.

¹²⁷ Wright, “Calvin’s Accommodating God,” 16. He reiterates his position on this matter in 1998: “I remain less than convinced that accommodation in Calvin is a rhetorical borrowing. It is at the very least a far-reaching transposition if the rhetorical category of *decorum* is its basis” (Wright, “Was John Calvin a ‘Rhetorical Theologian’?,” 62).

¹²⁸ Wright, “Calvin’s Accommodating God,” 18.

¹²⁹ An example of this may be seen in his treatment of Chrysostom as a possible influence on Calvin; especially the portion beginning, “We are also able to check Calvin’s manuscript annotations ...”. See, Wright, “Calvin’s ‘Accommodation’ Revisited,” 173ff.

¹³⁰ Wright’s opinion seems to be in line with that of Tony Lane, who recently asserted that “A hermeneutic of suspicion” is appropriate with respect both to determining which works Calvin actually consulted and which authors influenced the reformer. See, theses VII and VIII in “Calvin’s Use of the Fathers: Eleven Theses” in Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin; Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark,

Additionally, Wright opposes two related notions: the popular idea that accommodation in Calvin is a matter of mere pedagogy, and the view that accommodation affects only the form and not the substance of revelation; an assessment which he describes as “wholly inadequate.”¹³¹ These points he establishes on the basis of his examination of various individual instances of accommodation culled from Calvin’s Pentateuch harmony and Joshua commentaries. In these works, Wright discovers applications of accommodation which vary significantly from those discussed by others, suggesting the premature nature of the conclusions of these scholars.¹³² Wright also argues his case upon a broader platform in his paper, “Calvin’s Accommodating God,” in which he marshals evidence from a variety of commentaries, tracts and treatises.¹³³

1999), 6, 8. Evidence to back up this claim can be found in Wright’s comment: “Are we justified in requesting explicit evidence [concerning the idea that Calvin appropriated accommodation from Augustine] in the case of a thinker and writer so comprehensively immersed in the Augustinian corpus as Calvin unquestionably was?” He goes on to argue, essentially, that we are (Wright, “Calvin’s ‘Accommodation’ Revisited,” 174-5). Others in the scholarly community have voiced this concern for a cautious approach respecting the question of sources and influences in Calvin, especially after the overturning of the thesis of Karl Reuter that asserted an influence of John Major upon John Calvin during the latter’s student days. It is with respect to this issue that Heiko Oberman declares: “There cannot be any doubt that it is essential to be committed to the close scrutiny of Calvin’s late medieval *resources*. But without clear evidence these resources cannot be transformed into *sources*” (Heiko Oberman, “*Initia Calvinii*: The Matrix of Calvin’s Reformation,” in *CSSP*, 124).

¹³¹ Wright, “Calvin’s Accommodating God,” 15. This is a point that Wright frequently makes by querying the viability of alternative positions. For example, he asks: “Finally under this head may I raise a question for the christologians: does Calvin’s use of the vocabulary of accommodation in speaking of the incarnation touch the substance of his Christology? Is accommodation more than one of the categories of imagery which he applies to a dogmatically determined conception of the incarnation? Does it, for example, play a role at all comparable to the Logos theology of the second and third centuries in explaining how the immutable God could assume humanity?” (Wright, “Was John Calvin a ‘Rhetorical Theologian’?,” 63).

¹³² Wright, “Calvin’s Pentateuchal Criticism,” 33-50;

¹³³ Wright, “Calvin’s Accommodating God,” 3-19.

Given the variation found in Calvin's thinking, Wright expresses his misgivings over discussion of "the principle" of accommodation.¹³⁴ His opposition here seems to be against the assumptions associated with the term; specifically, that accommodation is one uniformly-applied principle. Wright suggests rather that what we meet in Calvin is "more a handful of practices, whereby Calvin steers perhaps a not always wholly consistent course ... or [risking a provisional judgment] a single hermeneutical tendency that finds expression in different, and at first sight not always compatible, ways."¹³⁵ On the whole, then, he expresses the belief that "[w]e are still, I would claim, at the stage of uncovering the shape of the animal."¹³⁶

Constructively, Wright seems to be in agreement with other scholars respecting the notion that accommodation belongs to the realm of instruction, though he posits the notion that it affects the substance of God's instruction and not merely its form. Even with this caveat, we shall take issue with him on this point in the chapters which follow. Additionally, he conceives of accommodation as being (at least to some extent) multifaceted. This may be inferred from his paper "Calvin's Accommodating God," in which he treats a variety of the uses made of the motif by the Genevan.¹³⁷ He posits a three-fold understanding of human *captus*, with accommodation being directed towards "first human beings *qua* finite creatures, secondly human beings *qua* sinners, and thirdly Israel as a primitive ethnos;" this third element being an addition to Edward Dowey's

¹³⁴ He makes this point in a number of places. See, Wright, "Accommodation and Barbarity," 415; *id.*, "Calvin's 'Accommodation' Revisited," 179. Given his opposition to this view of accommodation, he discusses it as a "motif, or cluster of motifs" (*id.*, "Calvin's Accommodating God," 18).

¹³⁵ Wright, "Accommodation and Barbarity," 415.

¹³⁶ Wright, "Calvin's 'Accommodation' Revisited," 172.

¹³⁷ Wright, "Calvin's Accommodating God," 3-19; esp. 7-19.

treatment.¹³⁸ He addresses the “emergence and development”¹³⁹ of the idea of accommodation in the writings of Calvin to a greater degree than do others.¹⁴⁰ And finally, he concurs with others respecting the pervasiveness and fundamental importance of accommodation in Calvin, declaring (as was already cited earlier) that “the motif, or cluster of motifs, of divine accommodation takes us to the heart of Calvin's theology.”¹⁴¹

1.2.2.c Further Discussion of the Inadequacies of Current Views of Accommodation

Wright has, in our judgement, made several astute criticisms against the contemporary position on accommodation in Calvin. Indeed, further consideration of these matters only heightens concerns over the coherence and credibility of the consensus view, at least as it is articulated by Battles. So, when one examines Battles' assertions concerning the supposed classical heritage of accommodation in Calvin, one is immediately struck by several facts. First, having emphatically stressed the reformer's use of verbs—“he never uses the noun *accommodatio*, but always either the verb *accommodare* or *attemperare*, when he has recourse to this principle” (an assertion which is certainly open to correction)¹⁴²—Battles begins his citing of rhetoricians with

¹³⁸ Wright, “Calvin's ‘Accommodation’ Revisited,” 178. He also comments, “To the images of the human being highlighted by Battles—child, schoolboy, invalid, frail creature (Battles 1977: 20, 27-32)—we must add the brute, the primitive, the savage.” (Wright, “Accommodation and Barbarity,” 423).

¹³⁹ Wright, “Calvin's ‘Accommodation’ Revisited,” 176.

¹⁴⁰ He treats the notion briefly; see, Wright, “Calvin's ‘Accommodation’ Revisited,” 176-7. Furthermore, less explicit observations on the subject can be found in the occasional comparisons Wright makes between the *Institutes* and Calvin's Old Testament commentaries, many of which were written after the final edition of the reformer's *magnum opus*; see, Wright, “Calvin's Pentateuchal Criticism,” *passim*; *id.*, “Accommodation and Barbarity,” *passim*.

¹⁴¹ Wright, “Calvin's Accommodating God,” 18.

¹⁴² Battles, “God was Accommodating,” 19. The sentiment is simply inaccurate. Indeed, Battles himself does not even adhere to his own assertion, for he refers to an instance in Calvin which employs the verb, *submitto*. In actual fact, there are quite a large number of words which Calvin employs to refer to

two sentences, from Cicero and “another rhetorician,” which feature the noun (*accommodatio*). Following a single quotation, also from Cicero, which does employ the verb *accommodo*, Battles then mentions, without citing them, a passage from Quintilian quoting Livy “to the effect that words are to be accommodated to the things to which they refer” (which, in fact, employs the noun again) and three passages from Cato which are also supposed to substantiate his argument.¹⁴³ These are the instances that deal with fitting together the parts of a mill. Following this, the American assures the reader that “[t]he rhetorical uses of the verb could be multiplied.”¹⁴⁴ Can this be so? He then adds the fact that *accommodare* was also a “technical term”¹⁴⁵ among Jurisconsults—without giving any proof for this. And finally, conceding that *attemperare* was not employed as a technical term in rhetoric, Battles finishes his survey of classical rhetoric by declaring:

However *accommodare*, then, was used in Latin rhetoric, it always had to do with the adaptation of the verbal representation of the matter under consideration to the persons being addressed, with full regard to their situation, their character, intelligence, and their emotional makeup. In his reading of the classics, Calvin frequently came across *accommodare* in Cicero, Quintilian, and the minor rhetoricians.¹⁴⁶

accommodation, including verbs and phrases such as *populariter scripsit, utitur rudi stylo et incomposito, ad communem populi paedagogiam submittere se, humano more loquitur, infirmitati concedere, descendo, permitto, patior, indulgeo, tolero, parco, balbutio, consulo, demitto, non gravatur, familiariter paciscitur, tempero, non exegit*, together with several other modifying phrases which describe either God’s labors or the people’s capacity in terms of accommodation, as (for example) *barbarus, rudis, indomabilis, immanis, inscitus, crassus*, and others, plus their French equivalents. Thus, the assertion of Battles is simply curious, and moves this reader to wonder what compelled him to make such a statement.

¹⁴³ Battles, “God was Accommodating,” 22.

¹⁴⁴ Battles, “God was Accommodating,” 22.

¹⁴⁵ Battles, “God was Accommodating,” 22.

¹⁴⁶ Battles, “God was Accommodating,” 22.

One may, of course, grant that Calvin may have come across the verb *accommodare* in his reading of various Latin authors without granting Battles anything else, for the mere presence of the word does not prove his case. Thus, the American scholar provides very little in the way of compelling evidence to substantiate the position for which he is arguing. In fact, the force of Battles' argument rests almost entirely on his own assertions that

- “In each of these stages [*Invention, Disposition, Elocution, and Pronunciation*] accommodation takes place; in fact, the whole process of rhetorical construction of discourse is one continuous act of accommodation.”
- “The rhetorical uses of this verb [*accommodare*] could be multiplied,”
- *accommodare* was a “technical term” in rhetorical and legal theory,
- When *accommodare* was used in Latin rhetoric, “it always had to do with the adaptation of the verbal representation of the matter under consideration to the persons being addressed,” etc.
- “In his reading of the classics, Calvin frequently came across *accommodare* in Cicero, Quintilian, and the minor rhetoricians.”¹⁴⁷

With respect to each of these points we are essentially asked to take Battles at his word. Yet these points make up the bedrock of his argument.

But a further problem arises when the next step in Battles' argument, his analysis of the patristic period, is considered. In this analysis the distinct impression is given that rhetorical accommodation, of the kind which Battles found in Cicero and Quintilian, was rather neatly picked up and appropriated by Origen, Augustine and others; and that this is the basic thrust of what one finds on accommodation in the fathers. It will be

¹⁴⁷ Battles, “God was Accommodating,” 22.

remembered, however, that in the initial section of this chapter elements of the church's and especially the fathers' employment of divine accommodation were traced, from which a broader and more diffuse picture than appears in Battles' essay was unearthed. Accordingly, the tidiness of his findings must be questioned. As a case in point, no mention is made by Battles of the use of accommodation to interpret the Jewish sacrificial system as a concession to the pagan practice of sacrificing. Other senses of concession are also overlooked by him, as are more peculiar aspects, such as God's work of deception, yet these are all present in the fathers' writings. It is here, in the impression of this author, that the work of Benin is quite helpful. For though lacking in analysis, his discussion of the early church covers a wide range of the various means which were connected with accommodation. In contrast, Battles' oversimplification reveals a further weakness in his argument, making his subsequent interpretation of Calvin less convincing.

Yet Battles' shortcoming on this front is symptomatic of the narrow understanding of accommodation manifest in the treatments (not only of the fathers but of Calvin as well) of the vast majority of scholars on the subject. It is, in fact, often more endemic amongst them, though in fairness many of these scholars do not take up accommodation with the purpose of producing an exhaustive treatment of it. Numerous authors, whether treating the subject tangentially or focusing their full attention on it, work with a sense of accommodation which includes little other than metaphors, anthropomorphisms, and the like. Further, if they expand their purview somewhat, they simply fail to recognize and adequately flesh out the real differences present in the passages they are citing. Thus, they limit themselves to a small region of what is a

larger topic. A good example of this can be seen in Millet's impressive volume on Calvin. After citing a pair of rhetorically-styled passages from the reformer's commentaries on Zephaniah and Isaiah, he declares "[t]hese two examples are indicative of how Calvin uses the notion of accommodation."¹⁴⁸ It can also be seen in Dowey's well-known definition in which divine accommodating is referred to "the process by which God reduces or adjusts to human capacities what he wills to reveal ...".¹⁴⁹ It can be seen in the previously-cited definition by McKim and others, as well as in E. David Willis' suggestive but narrowly-conceived study.¹⁵⁰ In most cases, if Richard Muller is to be believed, contemporary dogmatic beliefs on accommodation have tended to hem in and restrict the understandings of these scholars in a way which has hampered their analysis of Calvin as well as the fathers.¹⁵¹ Nonetheless, while this helps explain the oversight, it does nothing to redress it. Moreover, when some promise is shown, such as in the work of de Jong, the generality of the treatment and lack of engagement with primary source material leaves the discussion still wanting.

But the question naturally arises from such considerations—how broad is the notion? Surely if a criticism such as the one which has just been mentioned is applicable to Calvin scholarship up to this time, a careful pursuit of the lineaments of divine

¹⁴⁸ "Ces deux exemples sont suggestifs de l'usage que Calvin fait de la notion d'accommodation" (Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 249).

¹⁴⁹ Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 3.

¹⁵⁰ Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility, 43-63; ACC: 4, 83-103.

¹⁵¹ Richard Muller refers to this problem when he notes the presence of "dogmatic" readings in some of the earlier works on the subject; a problem which was exposed by Wright's articles on accommodation; see Richard Muller, "Directions in Current Calvin Research" in *Calvin Studies IX*, 84. For an example of the development of the Lutheran notion of accommodation, which would likely have influenced the thinking of the earlier students of Calvin (like Dowey), see Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture; a Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmaticians* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd Ltd., 1955), 62-4; see also Otto Weber, *The Foundations of Dogmatics*, trans. Darrell Guder, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), vol 1, 414-5.

accommodation is in order. What, then, is an appropriately expansive understanding of the subject? What was Calvin's conception of it? What are its basic building blocks? How many nuances or different shades of meaning ought to be associated with it? How should it be defined?

1.3 Plotting our Course: Three Questions

What course should be followed in examining accommodation in Calvin, and what ought to be focused upon? To answer this, a problem should first be attended to.

1.3.1 No Rules: Accommodation vs. Allegory

Studying accommodation in the ancient or early modern periods presents a peculiar problem. It may be noticed that the careful methodological work which is evident in the church's thinking on, for example, allegory is absent from their handling of divine attempering. As Preus says of allegory and the purpose of Tyconius' famous rules: "the Old Testament was not at all what it seemed; rather, it was a book of mysteries — *evangelical* mysteries, in fact. In order to unveil these mysteries, one needed guidelines by which to recognize the texts that should be given figurative interpretation, and how such interpretation could properly be controlled and attained."¹⁵² And it was with this object in mind that Augustine made his famous promulgation: "whatever appears in the divine Word that does not properly pertain to virtuous behavior

¹⁵² Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 10-11; italics original.

or to the truth of faith, you must take to be figurative.”¹⁵³ Thus, the church produced standards for allegorizing; the question of method was addressed by its teachers, and rules discussed and laid down by and for those who wished to practice it.

But with accommodation no such rules seem to exist.¹⁵⁴ If they do, this author has never found discussion of them in either primary or secondary literature on the subject.¹⁵⁵ How was one to know when accommodation was intended? What criteria did one use to make such a decision? Some might argue that these rules existed in ancient manuals on rhetoric produced by Quintilian and others, but—in addition to the arguments against this which are put forth by Wright—one has to wonder why these rules (if they did, in fact, exist in such manuals) were not explicitly summarized and discussed by the fathers as the rules of allegory were.¹⁵⁶ Thus, such a contention seems a doubtful one.

At times the thinking of the exegete is not difficult to penetrate. In fact, on many occasions it seems to have been similar to that which would have been used to determine the need for an allegorical interpretation; namely, a problem is detected in the text when

¹⁵³ Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 13.

¹⁵⁴ It might be noted that these two subjects—allegory and accommodation—bear some surprising similarities, as is noted by Wright, “Calvin’s Accommodating God,” 7.

¹⁵⁵ As discussion of rules raises the related question of definition, we note the slightly curious remark of de Jong in his treatment of the subject, which begins with the assertion that accommodation appears in the church fathers as a “well-defined . . . concept.” It would be preferable, in our judgment, to say “well-known,” though this comment by itself is not fatally damaging to his analysis. Yet, de Jong goes on to note that Irenaeus, in his dealings with the Marcionites, was “forced to define his understanding of the term.” Referring to the bishop’s *Against Heresies* 4.4.2—clearly to the assertion concerning the unmeasurable Father being measured in the Son—de Jong declares, “For Irenaeus, God’s accommodation is his willingness to adapt to man’s measure, specifically as it occurs in the incarnation.” This is evidently de Jong’s summary of Irenaeus’ definition, but whether this can be called a definition is surely a legitimate question. If it can, it is such a general one as to be of little use. Thus, if this is what de Jong means by “well-defined,” we must simply confess to finding his thinking rather unconvincing; see, de Jong, *Accommodatio Dei*, 16.

¹⁵⁶ Wright’s arguments against the notion that rhetorical manuals contained a category on accommodation has already been treated in an earlier portion of this chapter; see above, section 1.2.2.b.

read literally, for which reason a non-literal reading is chosen which presumes accommodation. So, when Luther comments on the passage, “I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me” (Gen. 18: 21), he notes that at times the Bible says “God saw,” as when it says “God saw that the malice on earth was great” (Gen. 6: 15), and here in Genesis 18: 21 it declares, “God heard the outcry.”¹⁵⁷ He avers that such assertions refer to the people’s apprehension of things. For Scripture, he suggests, “accommodates its way of speaking to human custom, not because God has undergone this change, but because this is the way it takes place in the hearts of the godly.”¹⁵⁸ So, troubles with a literal reading move him to seek a non-literal one and to discern God’s accommodating manner in the text of Scripture.

On other occasions, though, the exegete seems to take an alternative tack. It may still be that a *prima facie* reading of the text causes a problem, but whether this is so or not, some difficulty is posed to the interpreter for which the answer constructed is different from the one previously considered. For example, the answer may involve not so much looking for a different (non-literal) reading of the text, but looking for a different theological context through which to understand that text. A perfect example of this has already been seen in the comment by Justin Martyr cited in the first section of the chapter. There he does not seek a non-literal reading of Old Testament passages associated with circumcision and other aspects of the law, but sets them in a different

¹⁵⁷ Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar, 1883ff), volume 43, 38.40-39.36 [Hereafter Luther’s collected works in the Weimar edition will be referred to by the initials WA: followed by volume number, page number(s), and line number(s)]; Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, gen. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-86), volume 3, page 229-30 [Hereafter this American edition of Luther’s works will be referred to by the initials LW: followed by volume number and page number(s)].

¹⁵⁸ WA 43: 39.31-34; LW 3, 230.



context; one which allows him to interpret them as accommodations of God to the Jews and therefore temporal in nature. This can be seen in a large portion of the passage.

Circumcision, therefore, is necessary only to you Jews, in order that, as Osee, one of the twelve prophets, says, “thy people should not be a people, and thy nation not a nation.” Furthermore, all these men [whom he mentioned earlier] were just and pleasing in the sight of God, yet kept no sabbaths. The same can be said of Abraham and his descendants down to the time of Moses, when your people showed itself wicked and ungrateful to God by molding a golden calf as an idol in the desert. Wherefore God, adapting His laws to that weak people, ordered you to offer sacrifices to His name, in order to save you from idolatry,
¹⁵⁹
 ...

Here the passages are not allegorized, but a different approach is taken to the entire issue.

Yet, such reflection and guesswork will not suffice for our purposes. Although the thinking behind the habits of various writers and exegetes can be discerned to a limited degree, it is often shrouded in uncertainty. Add to this the fact that the practice, or practices, which lay behind the identification of accommodation seem liable to abuse and subject to the whim of the clever interpreter, and it becomes all the more apparent that even intensive efforts would still leave the prospect of accurately gleaning and cataloguing the thinking which lay behind the employment of accommodation by Christian exegetes an unrealistic one.

Therefore, it would appear that an examination of usage rather than principles will be a more fruitful way of approaching this study. Thus, the individual references to accommodation which are found in an exegete's (in this case, Calvin's) interpretive output will have to be examined if his views on the subject are to be learned.

1.3.2 The Primary Foci of this Study

Consider Luther's comments on Genesis 6: 5-6:

It is for this reason that God lowers Himself to the level of our weak comprehension and presents Himself to us in images, in coverings, as it were, in simplicity adapted to a child, that in some measure it may be possible for Him to be known by us.¹⁶⁰

The remark contains allusions to human weakness, “the level of our weak comprehension,” and “child[hood].” There is discussion of God's acting; specifically, his reacting to this weakness. “God lowers Himself” to this condition, “and presents Himself to us in images.” And there is an assertion which appears to be explanatory in nature: “[i]t is for this reason” that God responds, “that in some measure it may be possible for Him to be known by us.” These three issues make up this instance of accommodation. Putting it another way, Luther's discussion of accommodation here seems to involve his touching on these three matters: human capacity, the divine response to that capacity, and some kind of explanation.

The same can be seen elsewhere. Gregory the Great, attempting to convert the English, decides to allow them certain aspects of their customs in order to start them on the path towards worshipping the true God with the hope that their imperfections would be corrected in due course. “It was,” Gregory argues in a comment on the incident,

in this way that the Lord revealed himself to the Israelite people in Egypt, permitting the sacrifices formerly offered to the Devil to be offered thenceforth to himself instead. So he bade them sacrifice beasts to him, so that, once they

¹⁵⁹ Justin Martyr, *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, 176.

¹⁶⁰ WA 42: 294.3-5; LW, 2, 45.

became enlightened, they might abandon one element of sacrifice and retain another.¹⁶¹

This time human *captus* is only implied in the citation, but it is still of obvious importance to the event. God's response to his people's idolatry is highlighted in Gregory's discussion of God's "permitting the sacrifices formerly offered to the Devil to be offered ... to himself instead." And again the explanatory statement, which takes the form of a comment on God's purpose in this permission, is added. Similarly in this remark from Erasmus the problem of human capacity is only insinuated, while the statement focuses much more upon the divine response and the reasons behind it.

He (Christ) accommodated himself to those whom he strove to draw to himself. To serve men, he was made man; to heal sinners, he intimately associated with sinners.¹⁶²

The same is also true of this remark on cultic sacrificing by Augustine of Hippo:

The sacrifice which God had commanded was fitting in those early days, but now it is not so. Therefore, He prescribed another one, fitting for this age, since he knew much better than man what is suitably accommodative to each age (... *quid cuique tempori accommodate adhibeatur*).¹⁶³

Here, although the reference is to periods of time—"early days," "this age," and "each age"—human capacity still seems to be in view. God's response, the prescribing of sacrifices, is again present. And the explanatory remark probes God's reason behind his action.

¹⁶¹ Cited in Benin, *Footprints*, 110.

¹⁶² Cited from Hoffmann, *Rhetoric and Theology*, 106.

¹⁶³ Cited from Benin, "The 'Cunning of God'," 184.

What is becoming apparent is that accommodation commonly involves these three elements. The same can also be seen in this celebrated example from Calvin's *Institutes* 1.13.1 to which allusion has already been made in this chapter.

For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to "lisp" in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.¹⁶⁴

The slight capacity of human beings is highlighted, as is the divine response of accommodating the knowledge of God or "lispering." Further, the appended explanation declares the stooping, parental care of God for his infants.

These examples lead us to conclude that comments on divine accommodation commonly deal with these three matters. Reference to them is, it seems, simply part and parcel of what it means to speak about the idea. Accordingly, it is precisely an examination of these issues as they are handled by Calvin that will occupy this study. Stating them in the form of questions, all of which will be applied to Calvin's usage, we arrive at the following.

1. What is human capacity?
2. What is the character of the accommodating responses of God to that capacity?
3. What do Calvin's explanatory statements, which often accompany his remarks on accommodation, teach us about his accommodating God? What portrait of this God emerges from them?

¹⁶⁴ CO 2: 89-90; *Inst.* 1.13.1.

1. What is human capacity? Here it is not answers to various philosophical issues, nor questions of human responsibility (in relation to divine sovereignty), nor any such well-trodden paths that will be explored. Rather Calvin's usage of the notion of human *captus* in his treatment of accommodation will be pursued. In this regard, the nature of this *captus* shall be examined: How broad an idea is it? Does it include both mind and will or only one of these? Does it always refer to humankind generally or can it refer to particular groups of people? Is it always associated with sin or can it be used to describe traits belonging simply to humankind? Such questions will be taken up in chapter two.

2. By the "character" of God's accommodating responses, both the breadth and the various qualities associated with accommodation are intended. What are God's accommodating deeds like? How extensive are they? What qualities do they exhibit? These and similar questions are in view and will be taken up in chapter three.

3. Explanatory comments are ubiquitous and often quite impressive in Calvin's handling of the phenomenon of accommodation. Here the aim of our investigation shall be to probe the nature of the accommodating God by means of analyzing Calvin's frequent references to his motives, intentions and the like. This task shall be the subject of chapter four.

These are the issues with which the body of this dissertation shall be taken up. To be sure, they do not come close to exhausting the subject. For example, the question of influences on Calvin's use of accommodation will not be covered. But because accommodation has yet to receive extensive treatment and since genuine interpretive

differences exist even over basic matters associated with it, an analysis of these three questions shall have to suffice. From this it is hoped that a clearer understanding of divine accommodation in Calvin will result, on the basis of which other important matters related to the subject can be investigated.

Chapter Two

Human *Captus*

In the previous chapter the course for this dissertation was plotted. The first step in that course involves an examination of human capacity, which Calvin conceives of as the occasional cause of divine accommodation. But by way of introduction to this subject, attention will first be devoted to some general aspects of Calvin's teaching on human nature and the doctrine of sin.

2.1 Human Nature in Calvin

2.1.1 Calvin Studies and Calvin

Calvin apportions five chapters to fallen human nature at the beginning of book two in the 1559 *Institutes*, having discussed humanity in its uprightness in an earlier chapter in book one. Further, his treatment in book three of faith, repentance, and the nature of justification amounts to an enormous discussion of human nature in its

redeemed state.¹ Of course, the various questions associated with human nature are also dealt with on many occasions in Calvin's expositions of Scripture.

Since he devoted such deliberate attention to the subject, one would expect his position on it to be coherent and in harmony with his whole theology. But Calvin scholarship has wrestled long and hard with the reformer's views even on basic issues surrounding the *locus*, as recollection of the Barth-Brunner debate serves to remind us.² As scholars have sought to extricate themselves from the tangle of issues raised by that contest, new questions have arisen, particularly regarding the internal consistency of Calvin's anthropology. Such concerns are noted in the essays of John Leith and A. N. S. Lane,³ but Mary Potter Engel raises more serious worries in her positing of a kind of perspectivalism in Calvin which results in "inconsistent and even contradictory statements about the self."⁴ A different angle is suggested by William Bouwsma, who argues that inconsistencies in Calvin's statements on anthropological matters (as well as other *loci*) are the result of Calvin's rhetorical bent, which sought effect rather than a

¹ I am indebted to Dewey Hoytenga for this point; see, *John Calvin and the Will* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997), 45.

² This was briefly mentioned in the last chapter; see, Karl Barth, "No! Answer to Emil Brunner," 80ff; Emil Brunner, "Nature and Grace" *Natural Theology*, 20ff. We need not rehearse the matter here, but will briefly note one or two points that are pertinent to our own concerns. Barth and those who followed him taught that Calvin believed the *imago Dei* was entirely effaced from fallen human beings. Brunner and others differed from this view, teaching that Calvin held to the idea that a remnant of the divine image remains even after the fall. Susan Schreiner helpfully analyzes the situation and offers some thoughtful remedies to the impasse; see Susan Schreiner, *The Theater of God's Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 55-72.

³ John Leith, "The Doctrine of the Will in the Institutes of the Christian Religion," *Reformatio Perennis*, edit. B. A. Gerrish and R. Benedetto (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1981), 49-66; A. N. S. Lane, "Did Calvin Believe in Free Will?" *Vox Evangelica* 12 (1981), 72-90. It is not our intention to treat in an exhaustive manner the secondary literature on this multifaceted subject. Dewey Hoytenga helpfully surveys some of the current secondary literature; see, *John Calvin and the Will*, 14-21. Mary Potter Engel also reviews the matter and provides a helpful bibliography; see, *John Calvin's Perspectival*, ix-xv, 221-26.

⁴ Engel, *John Calvin's Perspectival*, 4.

clear and unerring statement of truth.⁵ But Dewey Hoitenga has again leveled the charge of “incoherence” at Calvin.⁶ His work, adumbrated in many ways by a 1990 essay from Richard Muller⁷ which takes into account a fuller array of Calvinian writings than does Hoitenga, is a very recent effort on this question, but has already been critiqued on several points by Barbara Pitkin.⁸ Thus, it seems that the matter is far from being closed.

2.1.2 Sin and the “*totus homo*”

But throughout these scholarly disagreements, no one has questioned that Calvin conceived of the fall as having had disastrous and wide-ranging effects.⁹ Calvin conceived of the nature of those to whom God accommodated himself to be fallen in their whole person (*totus homo*).¹⁰ This is concisely stated by Richard Muller, who

⁵ William Bouwsma, “Calvinism as Renaissance Artifact” in *John Calvin & the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 38-41. For a thoughtful answer to Bouwsma, see Francis Higman’s paper from the Sixth International Congress on Calvin Research; see, “I Came Not to Send Peace, but a Sword,” *CSR*, 134.

⁶ “Nothing is so obvious in Calvin’s view of the will as its incoherence. Calvin’s view of the human will is inconsistent in two quite fundamental ways: first, in his account of the relationship of the will to the intellect as God created them and second, in his account of what happened to the will when it was corrupted in the fall” (Hoitenga, *John Calvin and the Will*, 14). Hoitenga insists that while Calvin embraces an intellectualist view of human nature before the fall, he switches to a voluntarist position of post-fall and redeemed humankind.

⁷ Richard Muller, “*Fides* and *Cognitio* in Relation to the Problem of Intellect and Will in the Theology of John Calvin” in *Calvin Theological Journal* 25 (1990), 207-224.

⁸ Barbara Pitkin, “Nothing but Concupiscence: Calvin’s Understanding of Sin and the Via Augustini” in *Calvin Theological Journal* 34, no. 2 (1999), 351-2.

⁹ For completeness’ sake it should be mentioned that one could possibly argue that R.T. Kendall’s revisionist treatment of Calvin in relation to post-reformation theologians actually raised questions about the reformer’s views on the extent of the fall’s effects since Kendall laid such great stress (or claimed that Calvin laid such stress) on the intellect that he effectively excluded the will from consideration. But, since Muller’s article “*Fides* and *Cognitio*” does such a fine job of refuting Kendall’s interpretation, we will not take Kendall’s views into account in our discussion. See, R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978).

¹⁰ There is general scholarly agreement on these points; see Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 80-83; Thomas Torrance, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 90-91; Lane, “Did Calvin Believe,” 77-84; Leith, “The Doctrine of

asserts that “Calvin held that the ‘whole person’ (*totus homo*) was fallen and that sin had affected both *partes* of the soul, both intellect and will.”¹¹ As these matters are probed it will become clear that, for Calvin, sin is mixed into every human pursuit.¹²

Calvin’s position should briefly be demonstrated from his writings. First, Calvin taught the fallen character of the whole person, as can be seen, for instance, in *Institutes* 2.1.8-9. There, when defining original sin, Calvin writes that it “seems to be a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul (*in omnes animae partes diffusa*).”¹³ Extrapolating further, he declares that this means two things. First, that “we are so vitiated and perverted in every part of our nature (*omnibus naturae nostrae partibus*)”¹⁴ that we stand justly condemned before God. And second, that this perversity continually bears new fruit. Thus, Calvin concedes that the term “concupiscence” is a satisfactory one, so long as we acknowledge that “whatever is in man, from the understanding (*intellectu*) to the will (*voluntatem*), from the soul (*anima*) even to the flesh (*carnem*), has been defiled.”¹⁵ Taking up an argument against Peter Lombard, Calvin begins the next section by stating that it is not merely a lower appetite (*appetitus ... inferior*) that seduced Adam, but “impiety occupied the very citadel of his

the Will,” 51; Schreiner, *The Theater*, 65-72. Pitkin notes Calvin’s stress upon the intellect and knowledge at this point, but concurs with the view that the reformer saw the whole person as being affected by sin, see, “Nothing but Concupiscence,” 347–69.

¹¹ Muller, “*Fides* and *Cognitio*,” 213. Because it is not our intention to cover thoroughly Calvin’s view on human nature in this dissertation, we will take for granted facts concerning the reformer’s adherence to the faculty psychology of Aristotle. For discussion of this and other matters, see the article by Muller or Houtenga’s work.

¹² So vigorous is Calvin’s view on the sinfulness of humankind that it has been used by at least one scholar to aid his understanding of the reformer’s medieval context. So, Alister McGrath finds Calvin within the so-called “schola augustiniana moderna” see, “John Calvin and Late Medieval Thought: A Study in Late Medieval Influences Upon Calvin’s Theological Development” in *Archive for Reformation History* 77 (1986), 58-78.

¹³ CO 2: 182; *Inst.* 2.1.8.

¹⁴ CO 2: 182; *Inst.* 2.1.8.

mind (*arcem ... mentis*), and pride penetrated to the depths of his heart (*cor intimum*),” and it is for this reason, Calvin says, that “all parts of the soul (*cunctas animae partes*)” are possessed by sin.¹⁶ The reformer is at pains to impress his view upon his readers. Numerous citations to the same effect could be quoted not only from these sections of the *Institutes* but from his further elaboration of the matter found in chapters two and three as well. Such thoughts also make their way into Calvin’s expositions of Scripture. An impressive passage from his commentary on the Psalmist’s prayer, “Turn my eyes away from vanities” (Psalm 119: 37) is cited by Muller, in which Calvin states: “And we surely know that the guilt of original sin is not confined to one faculty of human beings (*in aliqua parte hominis*) only, but possesses the whole soul and body (*totam animam et corpus*).”¹⁷

But while this last citation further substantiates Calvin’s position concerning the extent of the fall, it also raises the important issue of whether the corruption of both parts of the soul remains in those who are redeemed. For the Psalmist’s petition, “turn my eye ...” is the petition of a saint, and Calvin clearly views it as such. Accordingly, the reformer applies the passage and its implications to himself and all believers:

... we should lay down as a first principle that seeing, hearing, walking, and feeling are God’s precious gifts; that our understanding (*iudicio*) and will (*voluntate*) with which we have been furnished are a still more excellent gift, but meanwhile there is no look of the eyes, no motion of the senses, no thought of the mind (*nullam cogitationem*) to which vice and depravity do not adhere. Since this is so, it is with good reason that the prophet surrenders himself entirely to God in order that he may begin to live a new life.¹⁸

¹⁵ CO 2: 183; *Inst.* 2.1.8.

¹⁶ CO 2: 183; *Inst.* 2.1.9.

¹⁷ CO 32: 230; CTS *Psalms*, 4, 427; slightly altered.

¹⁸ CO 32: 231; CTS *Psalms*, 4, 428; slightly altered.

It must be granted that the use of “we” and “our” by Calvin does not always clarify the group to whom he is referring. But in his exposition of this Psalm it seems clear that the pious are in view. Hence, in his statement of the *argumentum* of the Psalm, Calvin explains that its *scopus* can be summarized as follows: first, the prophet exhorts the children of God (*filios Dei*) to zeal for piety and a holy life; and second, he prescribes the rule and form of true worship in order that the faithful (*fideles*) may dedicate themselves completely to the doctrine of the law.¹⁹ Not surprisingly then, several portions of Calvin’s commentary on this Psalm bear eloquent testimony to his conviction that believers, in intellect and will, “do not” (as he says in another place) “immediately lay aside the flesh with its vices.”²⁰

But these considerations provoke the question of whether differences between believer and unbeliever exist. Perhaps they are equally sinful. Yet there is, Calvin notes, a difference between them in this regard, as can be seen in the reformer’s lecture on “the heart is deceitful above all else” (Jeremiah 17: 9). There, following his handling of the circumstances and purpose of Jeremiah’s address, Calvin poses the objection that the prophet was merely speaking of his contemporaries. Answering, he reminds his hearers that everything written in the law pertains to all (citing Romans 15: 4), and then summarizes his discussion by stating that the character of all humankind is described by Jeremiah; all humankind, that is, “until (*donec*) God regenerates his elect.”²¹ Thus, there

¹⁹ CO 32: 214.

²⁰ CO 31: 822; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 439; slightly altered.

²¹ CO 38: 271; CTS *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 2, 356.

is according to Calvin a purity in the believer which is absent from the unregenerate. He or she is not sinless, but neither are they as sinful as an unbeliever.

Thus, Calvin's general views on the subject have been canvassed. It should be noted that his position is probably more aptly registered by his comments on Psalm 119: 37 than by his interpretation of Jeremiah 17: 9. For surely his general emphasis is on the sinfulness of all, including the elect. In this regard, he is much more likely, for example, to attack the kind of perfectionism one finds in some of the *fanatici* who, he says, wrongly teach that those who are engrafted into Christ put off all corruptions and "suddenly changed their nature (*repente mutare ingenium*)," than to criticize those who divulge and condemn the sinfulness of every human being, believer and unbeliever alike.²² Therefore, although he will acknowledge the believer's piety, he will never do so if it means denying or downplaying their sinfulness.²³

2.2 Human *Captus* in Calvin's Thought in relation to Accommodation

Against this backdrop, human *captus* in the thinking of Calvin can now be investigated. This section will be divided into three parts. Scholarly opinion on the

²² CO 31: 822; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 439; slightly altered. Calvin goes on to argue that believers can commit such heinous sins that "the fear of God can seem to be suffocated (*ut videri possit suffocatus in illis Dei timor*)" (CO 31: 822; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 439); see also other places, including his sermon on David's sin with Bathsheba (SC 1: 278-85; John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel, Chapters 1-13*, trans. Douglas Kelly (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), 476-89).

²³ Both of the points being asserted are made quite forcefully in Calvin's discussion of faith in the *Institutes*. First, his definition of faith implies that both heart (*cor*) and mind (*mens*) reject God until they are renewed by the Spirit, who reveals his benevolence to the mind and seals it upon the heart. Moreover, when Calvin faces the daunting objection that faith cannot be firm and certain knowledge because believers doubt, he explains the matter by pointing to the "division of flesh and spirit" with which a believer constantly lives in this life—thus, clearly implying that the intellect and will retain their penchant for carnal unbelief throughout this life. Hence, both points are established in this one chapter; see, CO 2:

subject will be summarized, and then critiqued, after which the author's views on the matter will be set out. These tasks will occupy us for the remaining portions of this chapter.

2.2.1 Contemporary Opinion on this issue

The notion of human capacity is not restricted to the reformer's thinking on accommodation, but is an aspect of his considerations on humankind. Accordingly, mention of it is liberally sprinkled throughout his writings.²⁴ Though it is often referred to by a general noun such as "capacity (*captus, la capacité*)," Calvin also employs a large collection of adjectives when discussing various aspects of that capacity.

Even given the clear significance Calvin ascribed to the notion, he does not address it in an analytic fashion. Thus, he has left to scholars the task of organizing his understanding of the concept. Yet reflection on the matter has been sparse. This is not surprising given the fact that Dowey, Forstman, Battles and others were writing during early stages of research on the issue, nor should these scholars be criticized too harshly for this shortcoming.

Battles' discussion, "Man: Portrait of Insufficiency—Vocabulary of Weakness,"²⁵ is the only one of which we are aware that attempts explicitly to treat Calvin's thinking on human *captus*. However, its impact on contemporary

403, 413; *Inst.* 3.2.7, 18. For a discussion of Calvin's use of the terms *cor* and *mens* in relation to the will and intellect, see Muller, "Fides and Cognitio," 212-21; especially 217.

²⁴ Particularly in the *Institutes*; a characteristic example of this can be found in *Institutes* 1.1.1, where Calvin mentions numerous aspects of human capacity—ignorance, vanity, infirmity, and the like—in reference to human weaknesses; see CO 2: 31; *Inst.*, 1.1.1.

²⁵ Battles, "God Was Accommodating," 31-32.

understandings has been overshadowed by the more incisive contributions of Edward Dowey, E. David Willis and David Wright, each of which shall be briefly treated in chronological order.

2.2.1.a Edward Dowey's Contribution

Near the beginning of Dowey's treatment of accommodation he states that,

Calvin always recognizes that man was at creation and essentially remains a finite creature and that in addition he is accidentally a sinful creature. Thus, accommodation is of two varieties: (a) the universal and necessary accommodation of the infinite mysteries of God *to finite comprehension*, which embraces all revelation, and (b) the special, gracious accommodation *to human sinfulness* which is connected with the work of redemption.²⁶

This basic distinction has received general acceptance among scholars. Much of Dowey's discussion of finite comprehension focuses on Calvin's conviction that God's essence is inaccessible to us and that therefore what we receive in nature and in Scripture is an accommodated revelation not of what God is (*quid sit*) but of what God is like (*qualis sit*). When the American takes up the second variety, his treatment says little about the actual character of sinful human capacity. He speaks of the "aggravated condition" of human sinfulness, but says little to define it further. Instead, Dowey focuses on Christ and the redemptive word spoken through him, and leaves to his readers the task of discerning the sense of the elements of his distinction.²⁷

²⁶ Dowey, *Knowledge of God*, 4; italics original.

²⁷ The same slight lack of clarity, or perhaps lack of concern for precision, can be found in Dowey elsewhere. When he summarizes his own discussion of the matter in a paper given in 1982, he declares the first portion as dealing with "creation" and the second with "redemption," which again says little about the meaning of the *captus* intended in each part (Dowey, "The Structure of Calvin's Theological Thought," 140, n. 19).

2.2.1.b E. David Willis' Contribution

In Willis' paper "Rhetoric and Responsibility in Calvin's Theology,"²⁸ the Princetonian contributes to the treatment of this subject by noting the attention God pays to the human will. While this was not specifically excluded from Dowey's treatment, one could very easily miss it, but surely not in Willis.

Willis' coverage of accommodation is rather short (slightly less than five pages), and he does not specifically deal with the question of the character of the human *captus*. Nonetheless, through his emphasis on God's efforts to persuade human beings—referring to "man's persuadability"²⁹—Willis brings to the attention of scholarship the relation accommodation bears to human *voluntas* and, more generally, to the whole person.

2.2.1.c David Wright's Contribution

In the early 1990's David Wright, while not intending to draw any conclusions on the full scope of ideas associated with human capacity, qualifies the two-fold distinction bequeathed to posterity by Dowey. Reflecting particularly on his research into Calvin's commentaries on the Mosaic Harmony and Joshua, he adds a third category to these two.

But there is another sphere of divine accommodation in which the image of adapting to men and women as children applies specifically to the economy of Israel. It is important that we bear clearly in mind the distinction between these

²⁸ Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility," 43-63.

²⁹ Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility," 55.

two applications of the accommodating-to-children motif. It is my submission that if we may differentiate between forms of God's self-accommodation according to its recipients, then in Calvin it addresses first human beings *qua* finite creatures, secondly human beings *qua* sinners, and thirdly Israel as a primitive ethnos.³⁰

Wright defends this third classification against the objection that it is uncalled for by remarking, essentially, that Calvin's vocabulary requires it. For though Calvin does distinguish between Jews and Christians (via Galatians 4:1-5) in such a way that one might conclude that Dowey's distinction was sufficient, yet in describing Israel as a primitive and barbaric people, he seems also to distinguish God's accommodation to Israel from God's accommodation to sinful human beings in general.

2.2.2 Limitations of Scholarly Opinion

Given the limited treatment the subject has received, it is perhaps not surprising that gaps remain in contemporary understandings of it. In particular, these three weaknesses can be detected.

1. The range of characteristics associated with Calvin's conception of human capacity by scholars is neither sufficiently broad nor sufficiently detailed. In particular, there has been an over-emphasis on the mental side of human capacity.³¹

³⁰ Wright, "Calvin's 'Accommodation' Revisited," 178. No similar point can be found in the earlier treatment of T.H.L. Parker on "The Church in its childhood" in *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 83-90.

³¹ This is represented in the statement of Brian Gerrish which is found in his discussion of accommodation in Calvin: "it is axiomatic for Calvin that God cannot be comprehended by the human mind" (Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New*, 175). To be fair to Gerrish, his assertion is true. The reason it is flagged here is because, coming in a treatment of Calvin's conception of accommodation, it seems to suggest that mental capacity is the only problem which is addressed by Calvin's God; that human capacity

2. Tidy distinctions between different kinds of *captus* are inconsistent with Calvin's usage. This being so, the reformer's thought has been slightly misrepresented at times by those seeking to expound it. Such a misrepresentation is, it seems to this author, discernible in Dowey's assertion: "accommodation is of two varieties: ... accommodation ... *to finite comprehension*, ... and ... accommodation *to human sinfulness*."³² This is not to suggest that all distinctions are improper, but only that they should not be asserted in such a categorical manner.

3. Current distinctions do not differentiate carefully enough between the different recipients of God's accommodating activity. This shortcoming is not a serious one, as we will see. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning.

2.2.3 Human Capacity: An Introductory Survey of its Various Senses

Having critically surveyed scholarly opinion, what remains is to analyze Calvin's numerous references to human capacity. As previously noted, Calvin does not make explicit distinctions when dealing with the subject, nor does he call our attention to them or say to us, "this is a different kind of accommodation from the one I previously discussed." Sometimes this is not a problem. The differences, for example, between the human mental inability that requires God to use metaphors and the crude intractability of

is only mental capacity. It is this over-emphasis and exclusion of the will of human beings which we wish to draw attention to.

³² Dowey, *Knowledge of God*, 4; italics original.

the Israelites is not difficult to discern. However, on other occasions the differences are not as clear.

One of the most obvious aids in drawing distinctions is Calvin's vocabulary. But even here Calvin is not always as helpful as he could be. For a number of the words he uses (like *infirmitas*, *la infirmité*) bear different shades of meaning depending on the context in which they are found. But more frustratingly, the reformer not infrequently mixes a wide variety of words together, piling them one on top of another and covering a range of human problems. Accordingly, lines are blurred and the work of differentiation becomes quite a formidable task.

This in itself is actually instructive. Calvin clearly had the capability to draw his lines more plainly had he wished, but he did not. Hence, if the work of analyzing Calvin's understanding of the various senses of human capacity is to be carried out successfully, distinctions must be drawn carefully and based upon a full understanding of Calvin's discussion of the different instances. Further, it must be acknowledged that the categories being discussed are going to be slightly contrived and not mutually exclusive but overlapping. These considerations have been kept in mind in working out the categorization which is presented below.

Broader distinctions will be made later, but to begin with seven categories of human capacity will be set out. These represent the specific identifiable qualities of human capacity which are found in Calvin's thinking on the subject in relation to accommodation. The purpose in this section will be simply to set out each of these with appropriate citations from Calvin's *corpus*, providing some brief analysis in order to

clarify the sense of each quality. The seven categories, which shall be treated in turn, are:

- (1) general references to human capacity
- (2) the human condition
- (3) mental weakness respecting the knowledge of God and spiritual matters
- (4) fear, grief and doubt
- (5) lack of restraint, inappropriate desires and imperfection
- (6) sluggishness, willfulness, and hypocrisy
- (7) barbarity

2.2.3.a General References to Human Capacity

The instances in this category are not numerous. Two examples will suffice.

So then God truly hears us when he does not indulge our foolish desires, but tempers his beneficence according to the measure of our welfare (*beneficentiam suam salutis nostrae modo attemperat*), even as in lavishing upon the wicked more than is good for them he cannot properly be said to hear them.³³

And from his commentary on Isaiah 40:11, “he carries them close to his heart”:

These words describe God's wonderful condescension, for not only is he led by a general feeling of love for his whole flock, but, in proportion to the weakness of any one sheep (*sed prout quaeque ovis imbecilla fuerit*), he shows his carefulness in watching, his gentleness in handling, and his patience in leading it. Here he leaves out nothing that belongs to the office of a good shepherd. For the shepherd ought to observe each of his sheep, in order that he may treat it according to its capacity (*ut illis pro cuiusque captu consulat*); and especially they ought to be supported, if they are exceedingly weak. In a word, God will be mild, kind, gentle, and compassionate, so that he will not drive the weak harder than they are able to bear.³⁴

³³ CO 31: 731; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 249; altered (on Psalm 78: 26).

³⁴ CO 37: 15; CTS *Isaiah*, 3, 216; slightly altered.

While human welfare and human weakness are different, both are quite general and include such a wide spectrum of ideas that it is for practical purposes impossible to categorize them in a more precise way.

2.2.3.b the Human Condition

The conditions of human life, the trials of existence, weakness, sorrow and other matters including social customs and certain forms of culturally-influenced knowledge are surely neglected but nevertheless important aspects of Calvin's analysis of human capacity in relation to accommodation.

One significant focus of this category concerns the incarnate Christ, who "condescended to the mean condition of humankind (*ad hominum humilitatem demisit*),"³⁵ abased himself, being "made mortal and having a common condition with us (*une condition commune avec nous*),"³⁶ and partook of all our miseries (*de toutes nos miseres*).³⁷ In these citations is contained a large collection of qualities—as broad as can be conceived under the notion of Christ becoming incarnate. They include all kinds of external trials, "cold and heat, hunger and other wants of the body ... contempt, poverty, and other things of this kind"³⁸ to which humanity is subject and with respect to which the human body is not invulnerable. They also must have included "the affections of the

³⁵ CO 47: 195; CTS *John's Gospel*, 1, 329 (on John 8: 19).

³⁶ CO 46: 956; John Calvin, *Sermons on the Saving Work of Christ*, trans. Leroy Nixon (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950; repr. Hertfordshire: Evangelical Press, 1980), 36; slightly altered (on Luke 2: 1-14) [Henceforth *Sermons on Saving Work*, followed by page number(s)].

³⁷ CO 53: 163; John Calvin, *Sermons of M. John Calvin, on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus*, trans. L. T. (London: G. Bishop and T. Woodcoke, 1579; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 164b (on 1 Timothy 2: 5-6) [Henceforth, *Sermons on Timothie and Titus*, followed by column(s)].

³⁸ CO 55: 54; CTS *Hebrews*, 108; slightly altered (on Hebrews 4: 15).

soul (*affectus animi*), to which our nature is liable.”³⁹ “These infirmities (*Has infirmitates*) Christ of his own accord bore,”⁴⁰ Calvin writes of the “fear, sorrow, dread of death and similar passions”⁴¹ which are an unavoidable part of life. Therefore, essentially everything that may be associated with the human condition is contained here, in a general way, and with the caveat that sin is excepted.

Moving away from a focus upon Christ, and also from the general to the more particular, the quality of physical weakness and limitations may be taken up. Though not raised as frequently as other aspects, Calvin does broach the subject in relation to God’s accommodating chastising of his own, as we can see in his sermons on Job. There the reformer discusses the matter, for example, in his exposition of Job 2: 7-10, where Satan, at God’s secret behest, smites Job with sores. Treating God’s manner of trying his servants, Calvin makes a distinction between *novices* and those who are *endurcis*, by which he seems to mean accustomed, to God’s afflictions, and then explains that the former God often spares, whereas the latter he afflicts quite heavily.⁴² He spares the novices, Calvin says, in the same way as you or I would not lay as great a burden on a small child (*un petit enfant*) as we would on an adult (*un homme*).⁴³ God then has a regard for our ability to bear things (*regarde nostre portee*) and according to

³⁹ CO 55: 54; CTS *Hebrews*, 109; altered.

⁴⁰ CO 55: 55; CTS *Hebrews*, 109; slightly altered.

⁴¹ CO 55: 55; CTS *Hebrews*, 108; slightly altered.

⁴² CO 33: 118; John Calvin, *Sermons of Maister Iohn Calvin, upon the Book of Iob*, trans. Arthur Golding (London, 1574; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1993), 38a [Henceforth, *Sermons on Iob*, followed by column(s)]. In expounding this idea the reformer makes use of the same comparison he employs in *Institutes* 2.11.13, where he attempts to clarify and defend the ways of God in the face of the curious differences apparent in God’s dealings with his people in the Old and New Testaments.

⁴³ CO 33: 118; *Sermons on Iob*, 38a.

this, he sends to us either smaller or greater troubles (*petites ou moyennes*).⁴⁴ Continuing, Calvin weighs our suffering against the heavy burden Job was made to endure, and concludes that we have reason to give thanks that God considers our infirmity (*à nostre infirmité*) and scourges us according to what we are able to endure (*nous le pouvons souffrir*).⁴⁵ Although it must be granted that something more than physical limitation is probably in view here, yet as Job's sufferings are the subject of Calvin's remarks, bodily trials are surely within the scope of meaning.

Calvin also speaks of human capacity with respect to the social dimensions of human life. Here human capacity expresses itself through the societal conventions, expectations, and limitations that characterize both humankind as a whole and individual groups of people. So, with respect to Christ's assertion that "the Son of man came eating and drinking" (Luke 7: 34), Calvin notes that, in comparison to John the Baptist, "Christ accommodated himself to the customs of ordinary life (*ad communis vitae usum*)."⁴⁶ Further, regarding aspects of the information communicated by Moses in his first book, Calvin remarks: "Moses (in my judgment) accommodated his topography to the capacity of his age (*ad suae aetatis captum*)."⁴⁷ When Moses refers to a place as Bethel, Calvin writes, "Moses gives the place this name to accommodate his language to the people of his own age (*suae aetatis hominibus*)."⁴⁸ Moreover, concerning Moses'⁴⁹ account of creation, Calvin makes observations such as, "he begins the day [Genesis

⁴⁴ CO 33: 118; *Sermons on Job*, 38a.

⁴⁵ CO 33: 118; *Sermons on Job*, 38b.

⁴⁶ CO 45: 308; CTS *Synoptic Harmony*, 2, 21; slightly altered.

⁴⁷ CO 23: 40; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 119 (on Genesis 1: 10).

⁴⁸ CO 23: 182; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 356 (on Genesis 12: 8).

⁴⁹ Calvin says the same thing about David's language in the Psalms concerning creation; see, for example, CO 31: 198; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 315-6.

1:5], according to the custom of his nation (*usitatum gentis suae morem*), with the evening”⁵⁰ and “I conclude that the waters here [Genesis 1:6-7] ought to be understood as those which the rude and unlearned (*rudes quoque et indocti*) may perceive.”⁵¹ Though the last instance could perhaps have been classed under the category that has to do with mental weakness, since it has no apparent theological relevance and has to do with ideas that belong very much to a particular cultural context, it was deemed best to place it in this category. The same analysis applies for Calvin’s remark that Luke may have altered the number of family members that Joseph sent for from seventy to seventy-five [Acts 7:14] for the benefit of the rude and illiterate (*rudibus et elementariis*), who were accustomed to the Greek Septuagint rather than the Hebrew scriptures.⁵²

Thus a broad range of qualities is stretched out before us here, moving from the personal to the societal,⁵³ from the external to the internal, from the mundane to the excruciating. Although expansive, its general sense is not hard to understand. Interesting questions, however, arise from it concerning the relation of human sinfulness to the experiences mentioned above. One cannot help but wonder to what extent sin is mixed in with these aspects of human capacity. Is sin expressed, for example, in the physical weaknesses and limitations from which human beings suffer? Do the social dimensions of human life exhibit sin? What of Jesus’ condescension to human frailty? Here it would seem clear that his embracing of the human condition did not involve sin.

⁵⁰ CO 23: 17; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 77.

⁵¹ CO 23: 18; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 80; slightly altered.

⁵² CO 23: 562; CTS *Genesis*, 2, 391.

Yet with respect to some of the other examples, answers are more difficult to construct. As these and similar questions will confront us in a number of the remaining sections, it will perhaps be best if we turn aside for a moment to deal with the general issue around which these questions congregate.

2.2.3.c The Question of Sin and its Relation to Human Capacity

As treated earlier, Calvin's view on the effect of sin on the nature of fallen human beings was clear. We are "vitiating and perverted in every part of our nature."⁵⁴ There is "a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul."⁵⁵ Thus there is "no look of the eyes, no motion of the senses, no thought of the mind to which vice and depravity do not adhere."⁵⁶ As was discussed, this depravity was also a problem for the Christian as well.

The position embodied in these assertions would seem to imply that all human *captus* involved sin. Yet this implication has some problems attending it. Calvin's references to human capacity do not always mention sin. In fact, many of them do not. More importantly, at times he simply does not seem to have had sin in mind when discussing the creature's *captus*. In searching for an example, we need not look any further than *Institutes* 1.13.1.

For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to "lisp" in speaking to us? Thus such

⁵³ On the societal aspect, see also Calvin's treatise against the Anabaptists where the reformer discusses the use of oaths in relation to human/societal dishonesty, CO 7: 98; Calvin, *Anabaptists and Libertines*, 100.

⁵⁴ CO 2: 182; *Inst.* 2.1.8.

⁵⁵ CO 2: 182; *Inst.* 2.1.8.

⁵⁶ CO 32: 231; CTS *Psalms*, 4, 428; slightly altered.

forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.⁵⁷

Here sin seems to be missing not only from Calvin's language but from his thinking as well. Or to put it another way, the notion of sin is not needed in order to understand what the reformer means by "our slight capacity."

Thus, these two positions appear to be slightly at odds with one another. Although Calvin's opinion on the extent of the diffusion of sin into the human soul is plain, he seems to violate it, or at least to show a strange disregard for it, when making comments on human capacity. Nor, of course, is the instance from *Institutes* 1.13.1 the only place where such disregard appears, as should already be apparent from the material covered thus far.

The dilemma is an interesting one. It surely adds a new facet to the question surveyed earlier concerning the internal consistency of Calvin's views on hamartiology, as well as tacitly witnessing to the problems of ambiguity noted by John Leith and others which are so frequently met with by the student of Calvin.⁵⁸ Whether the reformer would (were he to be asked) refine his position by stating that sin is in fact present in all human capacity despite his failure to mention it is unknown but quite likely, in the opinion of this author. However, such a conjecture cannot be relied upon. The fact of the matter is that Calvin addresses human *captus* by means of a wide array of vocabulary, with which he chooses at one time to stress human weakness and infirmity,

⁵⁷ CO 2: 89-90; *Inst.* 1.13.1.

⁵⁸ Leith, "Calvin's Theological Method and the Ambiguity in His Theology," 106-14.

and at another time human sinfulness and corruption. With this we shall have to satisfy ourselves.

2.2.3.d Mental Weakness respecting the Knowledge of God and Spiritual Matters

Some of Calvin's simplest statements on accommodation seem to have mental frailty in mind. For example, when the Anabaptists, in order to refute Calvin's assertions concerning the wakefulness of the soul after death, make use of the Scripture, "a thousand years are a day in the Lord's sight" (2 Peter 3:8), Calvin acknowledges that the passage states truth but points out that "it must be noted that when God speaks to people he accommodates himself to their understanding (*à leur sens*)."⁵⁹ Additionally, God "accommodated himself ... to the capacity of the prophet, because, as we are mortals (*homines*), we cannot penetrate beyond the sky,"⁶⁰ "since human minds (*humanae mentes*) cannot rise to his boundless height, ... as often as God exhibited himself to the view of the fathers, he never appeared as he actually is, but as human understanding could receive (*qualis est, sed qualis hominum sensu capi poterat*),"⁶¹ "the essence of God ... is infinite (*infinie*) [and] cannot be seen by human beings, ... but he [shows] himself so far as it is expedient for us, and according to the small measure (*la mesure petit*) that is in us,"⁶² and so forth. For this reason, metaphors and other figures of speech and depictions of the Lord which are not proper, strictly speaking, but are

⁵⁹ CO 7: 117; Calvin, *Anabaptists and Libertines*, 128.

⁶⁰ CO 40: 40; CTS *Ezekiel*, 1, 78; slightly altered.

⁶¹ CO 36: 126; CTS *Isaiah*, 1, 200; altered.

⁶² CO 58: 132; John Calvin, *Thirteene Sermons of Maister John Caluine, Entreating of the Free Election of God in Iacob, and of Reprobation in Esau*, trans. John Fielde (1579; repr. Audubon, NJ: Old Paths

necessary for human minds are a constant part of the Lord's accommodating program, as Calvin and many others before him frequently observe.

This weak capacity, however, does not merely amount to a deficiency of learning or of mental acuteness. Rather, Calvin often seems to contemplate a kind of slowness and dullness of mind regarding spiritual matters. Truth, then, must not only be simplified, but the people themselves must in some sense be raised up to the consideration of spiritual matters. Hence, Calvin frequently insists that while God condescends to us, it is not for the purpose of detaining us here below (*nous retenir ici bas*),⁶³ but rather that he may draw us to heaven⁶⁴ and "lift on high our thoughts each and every time that God is mentioned."⁶⁵ This emphasis on the goal of God's work, on his straining to effect change in his people, and on his lifting, raising, and awakening labors, heightens the aspect of dullness and lethargy that Calvin associates with the human mind.

This dullness is, in Calvin's conception, an aspect of the earth-bound condition of human beings. That is to say, the mental morass of God's people is such that God must specifically stoop to the earthiness of creaturely existence. This not only means employing sacraments because his people are rude (*rudes*)⁶⁶ and seeking to bring them back to what is visible (*qui est visible*)⁶⁷ in the death of Christ, but also adjusting his

Publications, 1996), 194; slightly altered. [Henceforth *Thirteene Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, followed by page number(s)].

⁶³ CO 26: 158; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 138b (on Deuteronomy 4: 15-20).

⁶⁴ "... Dieu descend tellement à nous, qu'il nous veult attirer au ciel" (SC 8: 334; (sermon on Acts 7: 38-42)).

⁶⁵ OS 1: 406; John Calvin, *Instruction in Faith (1537)*, trans. Paul Fuhrmann (Louisville, KY: the Westminster Press, 1992), 59-60.

⁶⁶ CO 54: 575; *Sermons on Timothie and Titus*, 1225b-1226a (on Titus 3: 4-7).

⁶⁷ CO 46: 920; *Sermons on Saving Work*, 156 (on Matthew 27: 45-54).

ways by making use of senses other than hearing to try to drive home his message to his benighted people.⁶⁸

Not surprisingly, Calvin refers in this context to the “carnal” or “earthly” sense of human beings, “to the feeble capacity of our flesh (*ad carnis nostrae ruditatem*),”⁶⁹ to which God condescends. As was just remarked, such condescension is intended to lift his creatures from their creatureliness. Nevertheless, the reformer’s use of *caro* and synonyms also seems, at least to some extent, to hint at sinfulness.⁷⁰

So we can see the ignorance, mental lethargy, and carnality associated with this aspect of human capacity. To this should be added Calvin’s references to human error and superstition. Perhaps his most common remark on this subject concerns Jesus’ encounter with those who seek him because he fed them (in John 6),⁷¹ but he certainly comments on it elsewhere. So, Zephaniah speaks *ex communi hominum sensu* when he refers to those who were, in fact, false professors as “worshipping” God,⁷² and David, Calvin postulates, is probably speaking *ex communi vulgi errore* when he mentions snake charmers in Psalm 58: 4-5.⁷³ In each case, Scripture speaks “as though it granted to people their errors (*comme accordant aux hommes leur erreur*).”⁷⁴ Accordingly, the capacity to which Calvin refers involves the mind’s embracing of error and falsehood.

⁶⁸ So Calvin remarks that the Lord, in order to affect his people more profoundly, “after he has reached their ears by his word, he also arrests their eyes by external symbols, that eyes and ears may consent together” (CO 23: 210; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 402 (on Genesis 15: 2)).

⁶⁹ See, for example, CO 45: 710; CTS *Gospels*, 3, 213 (on Matthew 21: 18).

⁷⁰ CO 31: 448; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 172; here Calvin refers to the *perversa carnis imaginatio* (on Psalm 44: 23).

⁷¹ See, for example, CO 2: 316; *Inst* 2.10.6.

⁷² CO 44: 10; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 196. The text upon which Calvin is commenting reads, “... and them that worship and that swear by the Lord, and that swear by Malcham” (Zephaniah 1: 5).

⁷³ CO 31: 561; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 372.

⁷⁴ CO 26: 84; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 102a; slightly altered (on Deuteronomy 3: 23-25).

The conjoining of intellect and will in Calvin's thinking should be apparent. Indeed, words like "dullness" clearly refer as much to the affections as to the mind. Not surprisingly, they will be repeated in later categories.

2.2.3.e Fear, Grief and Doubt

All of the remaining categories emphasize the will and human affections. Fear, grief, and doubt are, of course, representative of a range of emotions referred to by Calvin; the point being that God takes human feelings into account and alters his behavior with them in mind. They are often referred to by the word "infirmity" (*infirmitas, la infirmité*),⁷⁵ though Calvin may also mention a troubled and confused (*troublees et confuses*) state,⁷⁶ "anxiety (*anxietati*)" and "grief (*dolorem*),"⁷⁷ "present sorrow (*praesentis tristitiae*),"⁷⁸ and other emotions, additional examples of which can be found in this citation from *Institutes* 1.14.11.

Therefore he makes use of angels to comfort our weakness (*ad solatium nostrae imbecillitatis*), that we may lack nothing at all that can raise our minds to good hope, or confirm them in security. ... [it should be enough that God is our protector] ... But when we see ourselves beset by so many perils, so many harmful things, so many kinds of enemies – such is our softness (*mollities*) and frailty (*fragilitas*) – we would sometimes be filled with trepidation (*trepidatione*) or yield to despair (*desperatione*) if the Lord did not make us realize the presence of his grace according to our small capacity (*pro modulo nostro*).⁷⁹

⁷⁵ See, for example, CO 24: 179; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 292 (on Exodus 17: 8), where Calvin refers to "*imbellis turbae infirmitati*," which the CTS translates as "the cowardice of this unwarlike mob."

⁷⁶ CO 46: 946; Calvin, *Saving Work of Christ*, 188 (on Matthew 28: 1-10).

⁷⁷ CO 40: 638; CTS *Daniel*, 1, 230-1 (on Daniel 3: 24).

⁷⁸ CO 23: 193; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 375; slightly altered (on Genesis 13: 14).

⁷⁹ CO 2: 125; *Inst.* 1.14.11; slightly altered.

Imbecillitas, mollities, fragilitas, trepidatio, and desperatio, all defining the general notion of *modulus noster*, are piled one on top of the other by Calvin to make his point.⁸⁰

Of these various affections, doubt is worth lingering on because of Calvin's tendency to treat it in two slightly different ways. The reformer seems, at times, to construe doubt as an aspect of human feebleness, while on other occasions it is for him an example of human sinfulness. So, regarding Israel's doubt prior to their entering the promised land, Calvin acknowledges that the promise of possessing the land should have been sufficient, "yet the Lord is so very indulgent to their weakness (*suorum infirmitati*), that, for the sake of removing all doubt (*dubitationis causa*), he confirms what he had promised by experience."⁸¹ He speaks of the doubts (*dubitatio*) of Moses, and reflecting on the situation, remarks on how doubts "enfeeble and hold back our minds (*animos ... retardet ac debilitet*) with anxiety and care."⁸² And concerning the prophets, Calvin notes their habit of frequently repeating themselves, and remarks that this was done "in order to strengthen feeble minds (*ad fulciendos debiles animos*), that [the people] might be more fully convinced of what was otherwise incredible."⁸³

But Calvin also calls believers depraved (*pervers*) because they do not believe God's simple word but require him to swear an oath in order to convince them that he

⁸⁰ Calvin's sensitivity to psychological concerns has been acknowledged in a general way by several scholars, especially respecting his exegetical work; see, George Stroup, "Narrative in Calvin's Hermeneutic" in *John Calvin & the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 158-71; Wright, "Calvin's Pentateuchal Criticism," 46; James Luther May, "Calvin's Commentary on the Psalms: the Preface as Introduction," in *John Calvin & the Church: A Prism of Reform*, 195-204.

⁸¹ CO 25: 445; CTS *Joshua*, 55 (on Joshua 2: 24).

⁸² CO 24: 39; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 66; slightly altered (on Exodus 3: 7).

⁸³ CO 37: 301; CTS *Isaiah*, 4, 186 (on Isaiah 56: 8).

speaks truthfully.⁸⁴ He makes the same point in a sermon on Genesis 26:1-5 where, berating human arrogance, he identifies the distrust (*la defiance*) to which his people are always inclined as the reason for God's oath.⁸⁵ Similarly, Calvin declares that Moses must repeat himself numerous times because we do not believe promptly (*nous ne croyons pas si promptement*) as we ought.⁸⁶

Without wishing to prolong these reflections, it should be noted that the difference just pointed to may simply be the difference between Calvin the commentator and Calvin the preacher—the latter, harsher examples all being found within the reformer's sermonic output.⁸⁷ But whether this is so or not, both accents do not seem inappropriate. Moreover, with respect to both, Calvin's God attempers himself; and not only respecting doubt, but also a wide range of human emotions and conditions as well.

2.2.3.f Lack of restraint, Inappropriate desires and Imperfection

In prayer, Calvin says, God's children often make utterances which are “too free (*liberius*)” in their pouring forth of feelings.⁸⁸ They are expressions “with little modesty (*parum modeste*).”⁸⁹ It is largely this sense that is intended here, with an additional significance which shall be added momentarily. This quality, often found by Calvin in

⁸⁴ CO 26: 199; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 158b (on Deuteronomy 4: 27-31).

⁸⁵ CO 58: 97; *Thirteene Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, 136.

⁸⁶ CO 26: 235; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 176b (on Deuteronomy 4: 44-5: 3).

⁸⁷ That Calvin could be harsh—perhaps excessively so—and berating in his preaching has been recently noted by Randall Zachman in an unpublished paper entitled, “Expounding Scripture and Applying it to our Use: Calvin's Sermons on Ephesians” which was given at the Calvin Studies Colloquium at Columbia Theological Seminary on March 1, 2, 2002. What Zachman showed with respect to Calvin's preaching on one particular book of the Bible, William Naphy demonstrates regarding Calvin's pulpit exposition generally, see, *Calvin and the consolidation of the Genevan Reformation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 154ff.

⁸⁸ CO 43: 496; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 18 (on Habakkuk 1: 3).

⁸⁹ CO 23: 209; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 401 (on Genesis 15: 2).

the Psalms and the prophetic writings, both seemed to embarrass him and yet was found by him being frequently catered to by the self-adapting Lord. It ranged in signification from unrestraint to a kind of impropriety or indecency in the things desired by God's people.

The imperfection which is referred to in the heading has to do with a believer's obedience. Calvin observes that human obedience is never pleasing to God *per se* or, it might be said, *de congruo*. Rather, human works deserve to be refused by him, because they are imperfect (*imparfaites*).⁹⁰ Nevertheless, "[h]owever defective (*vitiosa*) the works of believers may be" they are still pleasing to God, says Calvin, and this is by accommodation as shall be seen more plainly in the next chapter.⁹¹ This is, it should be noted, a fault peculiar to God's people. By contrast, the works of unbelievers, which are performed in their own power, are nothing but *vilenie et rebellion*.⁹²

2.2.3.g Sluggishness, Willfulness, and Hypocrisy

With this collection of qualities human *captus* becomes crueler, harder, more obstinate. Yet not all is willfulness and defiance, but rather in some of the milder expressions to be included here the stress is not so much on rebellion as on sloth and laziness. So when Christ raises his eyes to heaven—an action which expresses the serious and vigorous affection of prayer (*serium ac vehementem precandi affectum*)—he chooses, says Calvin, not to disregard the appointed outward forms which are so “useful

⁹⁰ CO 33: 499; *Sermons on Job*, 187b (on Job 10: 16-7).

⁹¹ CO 25: 13; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony* 3, 214 (on Leviticus 26: 3).

⁹² CO 33: 499. Slightly more will be said in chapters four and five regarding the relationship between these issues and justification by faith; so, see for example, CO 2: 589-98; *Inst.* 3.17.1-10, and specifically,

to aid human weakness (*infirmitati*)” and “sloth (*tarditati*)”⁹³ Likewise David’s pious resolution in Psalm 119: 81 is uttered in order to awaken believers because they are so “dull (*hebetez*).”⁹⁴ Similar aspects of sluggishness, and lethargy are, in fact, quite a regular focus of God’s appointing of external aids to worship.

When the discourses of the prophets are turned to, though Calvin’s language does not change significantly, the sense of human incapacity seems to become harsher. The reformer observes that “because an unadorned style would be too cold, [Isaiah] contrived new modes of expression, that by means of them he might shake off our torpor (*torporem nostrum*).”⁹⁵ Human indolence requires new inventions, says Calvin. Not only that, but it also necessitates extra efforts.

The prophet tells us here that he had again aroused the leaders as well as the whole people. For unless God frequently repeats his exhortations, our alacrity (*alacritas*) relaxes. Therefore although they had all attended to God’s command, nevertheless it was necessary that they should be strengthened (*confirmari*) by a new promise. For there is no better method for people to be encouraged (*animandis*), and their indifference corrected (*torpori eorum corrigendo*) than when God offers and promises his help. Accordingly, this was the way in which they were encouraged, ‘I am with you.’”⁹⁶

Here the sheer amount of maintenance that God’s people require, lest they atrophy, poignantly displays the apathy that characterizes human nature.

Calvin’s remark, “[a]part from God’s good pleasure Christ could not merit anything” (CO 2: 387; *Inst.* 2.17.1).

⁹³ CO 45: 439; CTS *Gospels*, 2, 235 (on Matthew 14: 19).

⁹⁴ CO 32: 608; John Calvin, *Two and Twentie Sermons of Maister Iohn Calvin, in which Sermons is most religiously handled, the hundred and nineteenth Psalme of David, by eight verses aparte, according to the Hebrew Alphabet*, trans. Thomas Stocker (London, 1580; repr. Audubon, N.J.: Old Paths Publications, 1996), 216 [Henceforth, *Sermons on the hundred and nineteenth Psalme*, followed page(s)].

⁹⁵ CO 36: 263; CTS *Isaiah*, 1, 417-18 (on Psalm 13: 9-10).

⁹⁶ CO 44: 95; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 343; altered (on Haggai 1: 13-14).

But not infrequently sluggishness becomes willfulness, and God's flock show that they are capable of considerably lower and more base levels of behavior. Here Calvin refers to God's labors on account of "our thickness (*pro nostra crassitie*)" and "stupor (*stuporem*),"⁹⁷ to "unyielding people (*prae fracto illo populo*)" who are "perversely addicted to their sins (*pervicaciter addicti sunt suis peccatis*),"⁹⁸ to the "malice (*malitia*)," which keeps people from considering God's grace,⁹⁹ to those who are reminded "of their forgetfulness (*oblivionis*), or their sloth (*socordiae*), or their fickleness (*levitatis*)" by God's accommodating measures that are so plainly designed to rouse them from their "languor (*languorem*)" and "inactivity (*segnitiem*),"¹⁰⁰ and to the "so great senselessness (*tanta ... vecordia*)" of the people that moves God to use such extreme measures.¹⁰¹ With an expansive vocabulary, Calvin describes the capacity of those who are stiff-necked and recalcitrant.

One additional matter must be dealt with, having to do with the fact that some of Calvin's assertions distinguish between the unbelieving and sinful believers and make it clear that God's accommodation is directed at those with the capacity of the former. The two plainest statements of which this author is aware to this effect both appear in commentaries. The first, on Isaiah 24: 19-20, runs as follows.¹⁰²

We have formerly said that the prophet explains the same thing in various ways, and for the purpose of striking and a rousing those minds which are naturally very sluggish (*ut animos ... natura tardissimos excitet*). For carelessness of the

⁹⁷ CO 31: 230; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 376; altered (on Psalm 22: 17-18).

⁹⁸ CO 44: 86; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 328; altered (on Haggai 1: 5-6).

⁹⁹ CO 31: 178; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 275-6 (on Psalm 18: 15).

¹⁰⁰ CO 25: 508; CTS *Joshua*, 167 (on Joshua 11: 6).

¹⁰¹ CO 43: 501; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 27; altered (on Habakkuk 1: 6).

¹⁰² Two additional examples are: CO 31: 288; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 478 (on Psalm 29: 3-4); CO 31: 495-96; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 259-60 (on Psalms 50: 1). Other instances can be found in Calvin's *Isaiah* commentary.

flesh (*carnis securitas*) produces contempt for God—which we see in ourselves as well as others. For this reason the prophets adorn their discourses. Not because they desire to appear eloquent, but in order that they may render their hearers more attentive, and that they may prick their hearers' hearts. Hence, the illusions, the splendid words, the threats and terrors, etc ... it is all present so that secure men (*securi homines*) will be shaken. Now this doctrine ought to be limited to the impious. This is not because the pious are immune from these evils (*horum malorum*), for they are afflicted as well as other people. But it is because when the pious take refuge in God and rely thoroughly on him, they are not shaken but remain firm and stable against all assaults. However the impious, who despise the judgments of God, are terrified and alarmed and never find rest.¹⁰³

And from his commentary on Psalm 18: 25, 26:

It is not without the best reason that the Holy Spirit employs this manner of speaking that he may awaken hypocrites and the gross despisers of God (*hypocritas et crassos Dei contemptores*) from their sleep. ... Accordingly, this brutish and ... monstrous stupidity (*brutus et quasi prodigiosus stupor*) compels God to invent new forms of speaking and as it were cloth himself with a foreign guise. ... This is what stubborn people (*prae fracti homines*) gain by their obduracy (*sua duritie*) that God hardens himself. ... Another reason which we may assign for this manner of speaking is that the Holy Spirit, when addressing his discourse to the wicked (*ad impios*), commonly speaks according to their own apprehension (*ex eorum sensu*).¹⁰⁴

There are, to be sure, curious aspects to these remarks and a certain amount of ambiguity, particularly in the first citation. For instance, it is not entirely clear whether the reference to the Spirit speaking “according to their own apprehension” is identical to the reformer’s comments, mentioned in the earlier treatment of mental weakness, on John 6 and Jesus’ encounter with those who sought him because he fed them (though this would seem quite likely). Nonetheless, it is plain in both that the reformer conceives of a difference between the capacities of believers and unbelievers, even if he

¹⁰³ CO 36: 409; CTS *Isaiah*, 2, 182-3; altered (on Isaiah 24: 19-20).

may often use virtually identical language to discuss both. Both are hard and far from praiseworthy, but they are not identical.

2.2.3.h Barbarity

This final class of instances is distinguished from the previous one in that it refers particularly to Israelite barbarity as an example of ancient-near-eastern barbarity and is therefore confined to a particular time and people as well as to a particular kind of behavior. In this regard, Calvin speaks of God as responding “to the people’s hardness (*ad populi duritiem*),”¹⁰⁵ and of Israel’s acts as “wholly barbarous (*prorsus barbarum*).”¹⁰⁶ The vocabulary clearly suggests the crude and primitive character of the people; a people like their pagan neighbors in far too many ways.

But Calvin’s description of the influence this barbarous *captus* has on God, as is indicated by God’s response to it, is perhaps as significant for understanding this category as is the reformer’s vocabulary. As these responses shall be discussed in the next chapter, they shall not be taken up here. Suffice it to say that Calvin depicts God as one who must operate within circumstances with which he does not appear to be at all content and which seem to tax his powers to their limit. Thus, though in many cases the people’s hardheartedness is not entirely incurable, it is very nearly so.

¹⁰⁴ CO 31: 183-4; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 286-7; altered.

¹⁰⁵ CO 24: 688; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 140 (on Exodus 22: 1-4).

2.2.4 The Various Senses Reviewed

The range of characteristics associated with Calvin's conception of human *modulus* is clearly broad. Numerous aspects can be seen: the social dimensions of human life as these are exhibited both in individual and corporate contexts, the mental inability which now hampers human beings in their acquiring and grasping of the knowledge of God and spiritual things, fear, grief, and other emotions, improper desires and the failings which cling to human endeavor, stubbornness and hypocrisy, and the intractability and barbarity which characterized Old Testament Israel, again both in an individual and a corporate sense. Though there is a discernible sophistication to the reformer's thinking on the subject, it also often bears a kind of *ad hoc* character. Calvin clearly gave careful consideration to individual instances of creaturely *captus*. Nonetheless, his treatment is far from systematic in style. Nor does he attempt to provide his readers with answers to every question which might arise in their mind.

This sometimes results in perceived problems. This appeared in the above discussion, where it was discovered that Calvin's handling of the various features associated with human capacity seemed to differ in character from his expressed views on human sinfulness. In his hamartiology, as set down in the *Institutes*, he clearly asserts that sin is mixed into every human thought and action. But in his approach to human *captus* he discusses human nature in such a way that he implies that this might not be so. Whether these two aspects of Calvin's teaching are actually in contradiction is a question which we will not attempt to answer. However, the fact that such a question may legitimately be asked demonstrates that here, in Calvin's reflections on

¹⁰⁶ CO 24: 650; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 81; altered (on Exodus 21: 7-11).

God's accommodation to human *captus*, we may very well be dealing with an issue which cuts its own distinctive path in Calvin's theology, and one which does not always keep in step with the rest of his thinking.

2.3 Analyzing Calvin's Teaching on Human *Captus*: the recipients of Accommodation

The seven categories treated above, it will be remembered, represent the specific identifiable qualities of that *captus* to which Calvin's God accommodates himself. As these are examined, relationships between various of them appear. This suggests the appropriateness of combining some of them under broader *topoi*, similar to those which have previously been suggested by Dowey and Wright, who discussed accommodation according to its recipients. In this analysis, their two-fold and three-fold divisions respectively, will not be discarded. An attempt will, however, be made to refine them somewhat. Accordingly, this four-fold division of the recipients of God's accommodating actions is offered. God accommodates,

first to human beings as creatures
secondly to human beings as sinners
thirdly to Israel as a primitive nation
and fourthly to human beings as the wicked and the godly

2.3.1 Human beings as creatures

This first classification, which is based on the findings of section 2.2.3b, is perhaps broader than the similarly-named category which appears in the treatments of Dowey and Wright. It includes not only the finitude essential to human nature on

account of which God must simplify the knowledge of himself (see, *Institutes* 1.13.1), but also two other sub-categories. Culture—both cultural knowledge and customs—must be included within the scope of this classification. This is testified to in Calvin’s comments on Moses’ calling a place Bethel in accommodation to the knowledge of “the people of his own age,”¹⁰⁷ on Luke altering the number of family members which Joseph sent for from seventy to seventy-five in accommodation to those who were accustomed to the Greek Septuagint,¹⁰⁸ and on Christ accommodating of himself “to the customs of ordinary life.”¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, the human condition in its breadth—or, what Calvin calls “the mean condition of humankind” to which Christ condescended—is also embraced here.¹¹⁰ This condition comprises the variety of human infirmities mentioned earlier when discussing Christ’s incarnation as well as those creaturely frailties alluded to in Calvin’s sermons on Job.¹¹¹ Hence, general creatureliness as well as that ontological finitude which corresponds to the divine infinitude is included under this first classification.

2.3.2 Human beings as sinners

Little elucidation is required here, except to note the breadth of the category. It includes everything from the mental weakness characterized by sluggishness and lethargy (sect. 2.2.3d) to fear, grief and doubt (sect. 2.2.3.e) to willfulness and hypocrisy

¹⁰⁷ CO 23: 182; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 356 (on Genesis 12: 8). See also Calvin’s comments on Moses’ description of creation, CO 23: 17; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 77 (on Genesis 1: 5).

¹⁰⁸ CO 23: 562; CTS *Genesis*, 2, 391.

¹⁰⁹ CO 45: 308; CTS *Synoptic Harmony*, 2, 21.

¹¹⁰ CO 47: 195; CTS *John’s Gospel*, 1, 329 (on John 8: 19).

¹¹¹ CO 33: 118; *Sermons on Job*, 38b (on Job 2: 7-10).

(2.2.3.g). The inclusion of knowledge in both this grouping and the first one bears witness to the difficulty inherent in any attempt to distinguish between different kinds of *captus*. It was this which moved us to criticize, albeit mildly, Professor Dowey for distinguishing in too tidy a manner between different expressions of human capacity.

2.3.3 Israel as primitive nation

As this category has not undergone any change from its treatment by Wright, no discussion of it is needed.

2.3.4 Human beings as the wicked and the godly

As a category, sinfulness includes a broad scope of ideas. This seems to suggest the need for some differentiation between different kinds of sinfulness. One might consider the work of Wright on the barbarity of Israel as an instance of such appropriate differentiation.¹¹² Yet even taking his labors into account, this category of human capacity seems to bear a wide range of senses.

At times Calvin seems virtually oblivious to this breadth. Naturally, his vocabulary varies somewhat as he deals with different kinds of *captus*—whether weakness, fear, petulance or something else. But he usually fails to distinguish in any fundamental way between various expressions of sinfulness. There are, however, occasions on which he does. Perhaps the most basic of these distinction is between unbelievers and believers.

This was seen in the comments registered earlier (see 2.2.3.g) in which Calvin clearly set apart the wicked for God's special treatment on account of their capacity. "This doctrine," the reformer stated in remarks on Isaiah 24: 19-20, "ought to be limited to the impious." The reason is not because wickedness is exclusive to them. "But it is because when the pious take refuge in God and rely thoroughly on him, they are not shaken but remain firm and stable against all assaults. However the impious, who despise the judgments of God, are terrified and alarmed and never find rest."¹¹³ The difference, then, which causes him to limit the doctrine to the impious, seems to be found in the character of their *captus*. Similarly, when the Holy Spirit addresses his discourse "to the wicked (*ad impios*)," he commonly speaks "according to their own apprehension (*ex eorum sensu*)," Calvin said on Psalm 18: 25, 26.¹¹⁴ These are apparently *sensus* which do not characterize the godly. Thus, at least in some cases, God perceives a difference in the capacity of the unbeliever and the believer, and treats the former in a different way accordingly.

But what of believers? Here as well Calvin sometimes makes a distinction. He detects, for instance, occasions on which the recipients of God's accommodation are specifically and solely the godly. This can be discovered in Calvin's thinking on the imperfection of human capacity (see 2.2.3.f) in relation to good works. So, the picture of the child of God bringing his or her gift to the Father who then accepts and rewards this obedience even though it is imperfect is one which can only be true of the

¹¹² Though Wright's contention is based on a discernible difference in vocabulary, this does not seem to this author to be the only grounds upon which such a differentiation can be made.

¹¹³ CO 36: 409; CTS *Isaiah*, 2, 182-3; altered (on Isaiah 24: 19-20).

¹¹⁴ CO 31: 183-4; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 286-7; altered.

believer.¹¹⁵ This is, at least in part, because the works of the unbeliever are not merely imperfect but wholly repugnant to the Almighty.¹¹⁶ In fact, when Calvin declares: “since some fault (*aliquid vitii*) always adheres to our works, it is not possible that they can be approved, except as a matter of indulgence (*cum indulgentia*),”¹¹⁷ he is stating something which could not be said of an unbeliever for two reasons: first because the unbeliever can only produce works which are wholly blameworthy; and secondly because God does not accept and approve of their works in any sense but completely rejects them. In contrast to this, God accepts the believer’s faulty works *per concessionem*. While there are disputes as to whether this position is consistently taught by Calvin, it is certainly asserted in some places in his *corpus*.¹¹⁸

One place where Calvin argues this most plainly is in his sermon on Job 10: 16-17. He declares the faithful to be “righteous in our works,” because God accepts believers into his favor. But their works “always deserve to be refused” by their heavenly Father. Here, Calvin reminds his hearers, he is not speaking of the works of unbelievers. These are characterized by nothing but rebellion. Yet, the reformer says, even when someone is governed by God’s Spirit, their works are “imperfect (*imparfaites*)” and God might cast them away if he wished. Nevertheless God receives them, “even as a father receives that which comes from his child, though it is

¹¹⁵ CO 2: 597-98; *Inst.* 3.17.10.

¹¹⁶ Conversely, Calvin seems to concede to Rome the presence of a real righteousness in the believer in respect of their works, declaring that they possess an uprightness, which is nonetheless “partial and imperfect” (CO 2: 602-03; *Inst.* 3.17.15).

¹¹⁷ CO 23: 129; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 266 (on Genesis 7: 1).

¹¹⁸ Issues of consistency and ambiguities in Calvin’s teaching on this subject have recently received attention in the following: George Hunsinger, “A Tale of Two Simultaneities: Justification and Sanctification in Calvin and Barth” and A.N.S. Lane, “The Role of Scripture in Calvin’s Doctrine of Justification by Faith.” Both are unpublished papers given at Calvin Studies Colloquium.

worthless.”¹¹⁹ So then, the recipients of this form of God’s accommodating actions are always believers, whose *captus* is discernibly different from that of the wicked.

Although the lines which mark out the lineaments of this category of recipients are not perfectly apparent, they seem clear enough to justify its inclusion as a separate classification. Perhaps further investigations will clarify matters further. Yet for the purposes of this chapter, this discussion will have to suffice.

2.3.5 A note on ambiguity within Calvin’s thinking on *captus*

The *ad hoc* quality of Calvin’s treatment of human capacity has already been noted. Here a more serious shortcoming will be identified; namely, an inconsistency which clings to his discussion of the subject.

God ought not to be considered changeable merely because he accommodated diverse forms to different ages, as he knew would be expedient for each. ... [the examples of a farmer and a householder are set out] ... Why, then, do we brand God with the mark of inconstancy because he has with apt and fitting marks distinguished a diversity of times? ... Paul likens the Jews to children (*pueris*), Christians to young people (*adolescentibus*). What is irregular in this regimen of God that he confined them to rudimentary teaching commensurate with their age (*pro aetatis modulo*), but has trained us through a firmer and, so to speak, more adult discipline?¹²⁰

The basic thrust of this example from *Institutes* 2.11.13 is that human capacity improves, advances, matures over time, and therefore God’s self-adaptation does as well.¹²¹ Calvin and others insisted that the ancient people were kept under the *puerilia* of the Old

¹¹⁹ CO 33: 499; *Sermons on Job*, 187b.

¹²⁰ CO 2: 338-39; *Inst.* 2.11.13; slightly altered.

¹²¹ Interestingly, we know of no place where Calvin explicitly attributes this improvement to the work of God. Calvin very rarely discusses this idea.

Testament because their capacity was childish and infantile relative to that of the more advanced New Testament believer. Further, the full character of this old covenant *captus* is exposed by the reformer's use of terms such as "barbarity" to describe Israel.

Calvin is, however, not always consistent in his reflections on the relationship between old and new covenant culture and piety. Indeed, it is not hard to find categorical statements to the effect that sixteenth-century society is more corrupt than the culture of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So on Rebekah's receiving jewelry from Abraham's servant (Genesis 24: 22), Calvin writes:

Should anyone object that it is abhorrent to the modesty of a virtuous and chaste young girl to receive ear-rings and bracelets from a man who was a stranger ... In the first place ... [perhaps Moses passes over much of their conversation by which Rebekah became acquainted with the man, or maybe the prophet relates first what was last in order] ... We must also take into account the simplicity of that age (*saeculi illius integritas*). Whence does it arise that it was not disreputable for a maid to go alone out of the city, unless that then the morals of humankind (*mores hominum*) did not require so severe regard for the preservation of modesty?¹²²

How Calvin can speak in this way and then argue that the capacity of the New Testament church is fundamentally more mature is not clear. To be sure, not all of the examples are this impressive, but the incongruity is at times quite obtrusive.

The cause of such an inconsistency is difficult to determine. One is compelled to ask whether there is not a kind of convenience to Calvin's sociological judgments; or, in contrast to such skepticism, one might ponder whether perhaps Calvin's views are in fact sophisticated enough to account for these apparent discrepancies. There is scope

¹²² CO 23: 336; CTS *Genesis*, 2, 21-2.

here for a study of Calvin's relevant comments on the issue, but this cannot be taken up here.

2.4 Conclusion

As a first step in this examination of Calvin's thinking on the fundamental components of accommodation, this chapter has analyzed his thought on the nature of human capacity. Beginning with Calvin's teaching on human nature, we then moved on to examine his handling of human capacity. Scholarly opinion on the subject was critically surveyed, after which a survey and analysis of the reformer's treatment of creaturely *captus* were undertaken. The four-fold division presented in the last section was suggested as a refinement of the model bequeathed to scholarship by the labors of Dowey and Wright.

These findings will be built upon in the next chapter. Accordingly, the second question posed in chapter one should now be taken up. Having seen what human capacity is, it must now be asked: What is the character of the accommodating responses of God to this capacity?

Chapter Three

God's Accommodating Responses to Human *Captus*

In the following pages an analysis of the character of God's accommodating responses to human capacity will be undertaken. This entails pursuing two closely-related objectives.

Previously it was shown that Calvin spoke of human *captus* as wide-ranging in character, which suggests quite strongly that he construed God's responses to that capacity as similarly broad. One of the aims of this chapter will be to confirm this. The second will be to inspect the qualities which characterize these divine responses.

In pursuit of these two objectives, a survey in the form of a taxonomy of God's self-adapting measures will be constructed. It will be organized on the supposition that these measures appear in different spheres of the divine-human relationship. Each of these spheres will be taken up in turn. But before this is begun, a review of scholarly opinion on this particular topic will be produced.

3.1 A Review of Contemporary Opinion on this particular issue

It will be remembered that God's main purpose in accommodation, according to most Calvin scholarship, is to reveal himself by simplifying the knowledge of himself and spiritual truths and, in those who follow Willis and Battles, to persuade people of the certainty of these things. Accordingly, scholarly examination of the works of the self-adapting God has been somewhat cursory in the sense that it has not sought to probe in any kind of exhaustive manner the particulars of (what is being termed in this chapter) the various spheres of divine accommodation. Believing that Calvin's conception of accommodation was homogeneous in its understanding of God's purpose and, effectively, in its characteristics as well, these authorities seem to have seen little need to scrutinize the distinctive qualities of God's accommodating responses.

There are exceptions to this general rule. As has already been noted, Battles and Bru argue for the breadth of God's accommodating acts. So Battles declares, "accommodation has to do not only with the Scriptures and their interpretation, but with the whole of created reality."¹ Significantly, he also identifies the themes of father, teacher, and physician as important to Calvin's understanding of the accommodating God, adumbrating in this way (that is, through his construal of divine offices or roles) the treatment which will be given to the subject in this chapter.² Moreover, de Jong

¹ Battles, "God was Accommodating," 21; see also, Bru, who refers to Battles' interpretation, "La Notion D'Accommodation Divine," 85-6;

² Although the above statement regarding Battles' adumbration of aspects of this chapter's overall approach is true, we should acknowledge that it was not Battles' treatment which inspired our own. Rather, we were moved to construct the chapter in this way—that is, through this idea of spheres of activity, or (as shall be mentioned momentarily in the text) the roles of the Almighty—by Heiko Oberman's discussion of several "roles" of God; see, Oberman, "Initia Calvini," 126. Furthermore, it

identifies divine providence as accommodation, thus enlarging the scholarly purview.³ However, although these authorities acknowledge this need for enlargement, none of them allows their observations to expand their conception of divine accommodation sufficiently. Furthermore, their treatments contain only a small number of citations, and do not focus their efforts sufficiently on inspecting the areas within which Calvin's God employs accommodation. They appear to see these different categories in a vague way, but not as clearly as they ought.

The same judgment should probably not be applied to Wright, who sees more plainly the need for and significance of an approach which takes into account the different characteristics of God's accommodating works. However, his findings, coming as they do in essays and conference papers, are not substantial enough to satisfy the need in this area. Nor, in our judgment, does he articulate a broad enough vision of the range of God's accommodating reactions or of the different arenas into which they penetrate.⁴ Accordingly, a thorough examination of these things has yet to be carried out.

should be noted that although Battles does speak of roles or portraits of God, he does so—at least in part—because of the frequent appearance of these themes in discussions of accommodation found in the fathers, and to a limited extent, Calvin as well. Our construal of these roles, however, is based on the appearance of individual accommodating practices which, when observed and contemplated, seem to suggest that God behaves like a teacher or like a lawgiver and so forth.

It should also be acknowledged that Battles also includes Judge as one of the themes found in Calvin's approach to the accommodating God. Yet, because he provides virtually no coverage of this theme, it was deemed unnecessary to include it in the list above.

³ de Jong, *Accommodatio Dei*, 187-92. See the adjudication of contemporary views in chapter one for a fuller explanation of scholarly opinion.

⁴ His thoughts on this matter are probably most clearly articulated in Wright, "Calvin's Accommodating God," 3-19.

3.2 A Survey of the Spheres of God's Accommodating Relationship with his Creatures and People

Though common, accommodation cannot be found in all of the Lord's actions.⁵ Rather, as God's interaction with his creatures is reviewed certain arenas emerge within which God often takes accommodating measures—responsive, reactive, and in some cases almost retaliatory—towards men and women, which can be quite diverse in character. When one steps back and surveys these arenas, one begins to see that Calvin's God assumes a number of different roles in his relations with his subjects based upon the sphere in which he is acting. The purpose of this extended section is to sketch the contours of these diverse roles (and spheres) through listing and discussing some of the individual accommodating actions which make them up.

3.2.1 When God instructs: pedagogical accommodation

The first sphere of God's self-limiting responses to receive attention is the one most commonly referred to by Calvin and contemporary scholars, namely, pedagogical accommodation and God's role as teacher.

⁵ The question of how the reformer's general and seemingly all-inclusive statements on God's accommodating response to humankind relate to his comments on specific instances of divine attempering is an extremely difficult one. Nor shall an entirely satisfactory answer to it be produced at this stage in research, it seems certain. During the period between 1952 and the late 1980's it was easy enough to declare that all knowledge of God is accommodated knowledge. Such an answer was, for the time, sufficient. But as the subject has been examined more carefully, and divine accommodation has been seen to be more and more expansive and to involve non-verbal/non-revelatory matters, the word "all" has become a much more difficult word to use in relation to the phenomenon. For, as Wright has argued in regards to the subject of rhetoric ("Was John Calvin a 'Rhetorical Theologian'?", 59-63), if everything is accommodation, then nothing is; the designation loses its significance. Our opinion on the question, pending further research into it, is that Calvin is simply not concerned enough with his use of the idea to carefully monitor it so as to ensure that his usage is perfectly consistent. At times, he employs it in a general way to apply to the works of God and especially to God's revealing of himself in sacred Scripture; while at other times, he applies it to a particular work of God.

3.2.1.a God Reveals himself through his Works⁶

The works of God, Calvin observes, are accommodated to human frailty so that his divine nature, which is incomprehensible, may in some way be perceived. He states this generally concerning all the Lord's labors.⁷ He also declares it specifically about God's creating of the world in six days,⁸ explicitly denying the suggestion that Moses might have simply distributed the work of an instantaneous moment into six days for the purpose of teaching.⁹ Rather, it was God's deliberate choice to work in that way so that his children might meditate more profitably on his works. But it also served an additional purpose. For the beauty and revelatory potency of such handiwork also means that fallen men and women are without excuse.¹⁰ For, though they cannot be brought to a right knowledge of God by it, its power is such that even in their fallen state they cannot deny the Lord's existence nor their duty to worship him. Further issues and

⁶ While her work deals with other issues as well, the revelation of God in nature receives attention from Schreiner, *The Theater of his Glory*, *passim*. For a briefer summary of some important points related to this subject, see Randall Zachman, "The Universe as the Living Image of God: Calvin's Doctrine of Creation Reconsidered" in *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 61/4 (1997), 299-312.

⁷ "For God, otherwise invisible (as we have already said) clothes himself, so to speak, in the image of the world (*mundi imaginem ... induit*), in which he presents himself to our observation ... let the world become our school if we desire rightly to know God" (CO 23: 7-8; CTS *Genesis*, "Argument").

⁸ CO 48: 270; CTS *Acts*, 1, 484 (on Acts 12: 10).

⁹ CO 23: 17-8; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 78 (on Genesis 1: 5). But we shall see later that Calvin leaves a place for Moses' accommodating of his account of creation. Calvin mentions accommodation quite often in his commentary on the early part of Genesis and on various places which touch on the creation and movement of the spheres (in addition to the Genesis reference, see CO 33: 417-30; *Sermons on Job*, 155a-600b (on Job 9: 6-15)). This moves one to wonder to what extent he may have been influenced by, or simply interested in, the wranglings over various scientific questions which were sparked by Copernicus' *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* in 1543. On this issue and the use of accommodation to defend Copernicus' assertions, see Irving Kelter, "The Refusal to Accommodate: Jesuit Exegetes and the Copernican System," in *Sixteenth Century Journal* 26/2 (1995), 273-83.

¹⁰ CO 2: 41-2; *Inst.* 1.5.1.

specifically the question of whether Calvin left a place in his thinking for “natural theology” are outside of the realm of this dissertation.¹¹

3.2.1.b God Speaks

Not only in the “theater of his glory,”¹² but also in his verbal revelation God “makes himself small.”¹³ This appears in a number of different ways and is ultimately grounded in the eternal word, the second person of the Trinity,¹⁴ the one apart from whom no knowledge of God can be had. Thus, Christ the revealer must be treated, but in due course. First, the simplification apparent in the spoken and inscripturated word must be covered.

God delivers this word in an accommodated manner. What this first means is that God chooses to reveal himself through human beings rather than by his own voice, since this will be easier for frail creatures to accept.

We have seen already how God, having respect to our frailty, has vouchsafed to use this way to draw us to himself, that is, that we should be taught in homely fashion by mortal men like ourselves, and in this he also shows that he had an eye to what might be fittest for his own.¹⁵

¹¹ See Barth, “No!,” 80ff, and Brunner, “Nature and Grace,” 20ff. Ever since their debate, the subject has been one of immense interest. For a sampling of the literature, see: John T. McNeill, “Natural Law in the teaching of the Reformers” in *Journal of Religion* 26 (1946), 168-82; Archur C. Cochrane, “Natural Law in Calvin” in *Church-State Relations in Ecumenical Perspective* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1966), 176-211; Paul Helm, “Calvin and Natural Law” in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 2 (1984), 5-21; *id.*, “John Calvin: The *Sensus Divinitatis*, and the Noetic Effects of Sin,” in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43, no. 2 (1998), 87-107; Muller, *PRRD* 1, 167-93. In our opinion, Susan Schreiner’s treatment of the whole issue is probably the most helpful of those which we have read; see, *The Theater of God’s Glory*, 55-72; also mentioned in *Where Shall Wisdom*, 246, n. 94.

¹² CO 8: 294; this reference is from Susan Schreiner.

¹³ SC 8: 334. (sermon on Acts 7: 38-42).

¹⁴ CO 23: 471; CTS *Genesis*, 2, 242 (on Genesis 35: 13).

¹⁵ CO 51: 565-7; *Sermons on Ephesians*, 376-7 (on Ephesians 4: 11-14); CO 26: 397; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 254a-b (on Deuteronomy 5: 23-7); CO 35: 52-3; *Sermons on Job*, 578a (on Job 33: 8-14). Interestingly, Calvin also calls this same concession a test whereby God will test their obedience by

Whether, in Calvin's judgment, God always employs human spokespersons is unclear. The reformer, for example, criticizes Luther's suggestion that God employed a prophet to communicate the message of Genesis 13: 14ff ("And the Lord said to Abram ..."). But he does not expressly declare how God conversed with the patriarch, if not by means of a prophet.¹⁶ Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to assume that Calvin believed this to be God's normal *modus operandi*. This belief, though, never keeps Calvin from introducing God¹⁷ and the Holy Spirit¹⁸ as the communicators of truth. In fact, it is his custom to speak in this way.

The Lord's delivery of his word bears an additional mark of accommodation as well. He simplifies the divinely-inspired sermons and writings of his messengers, expressing eternal verities in a straightforward and "homely" manner.¹⁹ He employs metaphors and other figures of speech²⁰ to make his prophet's messages more perspicuous to dull men and women.²¹ Throughout Genesis, the prophets, and the Psalms such can be seen.

having them listen to human preachers rather than revealing his word from heaven (see, CO 44: 94-5; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 342). This form of accommodation—that is, the appointing of human preachers or pastors—finds rare mention in E. David Willis-Watkins, "Calvin's Theology of Pastoral Care" in *Calvin Studies VI: Papers Presented at a Colloquium on Calvin Studies at Davidson College and Davidson College Presbyterian Church, January, 1992*. ed. by John Leith, 137, 39; see also Gerrish, *The Old Protestant and the New*, 175-76.

¹⁶ See, CO 23: 193; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 375.

¹⁷ CO 26: 236-7; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 176b-177a (on Deuteronomy 4: 44-5: 3).

¹⁸ CO 31: 483; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 239 (on Psalm 49: 4).

¹⁹ CO 35: 624; John Calvin, *Sermons on Isaiah's Prophecy of the Death and Passion of Christ*, trans. and ed. by T.H.L. Parker (London: James Clarke & Co., 1956), 71 (on Isaiah 53: 4-6) [henceforth, *Sermons on Isaiah's Prophecy*, followed by page number(s)].

²⁰ CO 37: 19; CTS *Isaiah*, 3, 223 (on Isaiah 40: 18).

²¹ Calvin also occasionally remarks on the individual styles of particular prophets; see, for example, his utterances on Moses (CO 23: 22-23; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 86-7 (Genesis 1: 16)), David (CO 31: 174-5; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 268-9), and especially on Ezekiel: "... our prophet is more verbose than Isaiah and even than Jeremiah, because he had accustomed himself to the form of speech which was then customary among the

Not merely the form, though, but the content of revelation is also adjusted.²² This is true of the Scriptures generally.²³ Further, specific truths about God—his triune nature,²⁴ power,²⁵ patience,²⁶ goodness,²⁷ faithfulness,²⁸ his will²⁹ and other qualities—are disclosed in a tempered guise. When God tells his people that he loves them,³⁰ when he speaks angrily to them,³¹ expresses his grief³² (or, generally, shows himself subject to emotions³³), testifies to his nearness,³⁴ confirms that his children belong to him,³⁵ reproves them for their ungratefulness³⁶ or reveals the mystery of his gospel,³⁷ he alters

exiles. Therefore, he is neither precise nor polished. ... [the people] had degenerated as much from the purity of the language as from that of their faith; hence the prophet purposely bends aside from elegance of language" (CO 40: 83; CTS *Ezekiel*, 1, 139; slightly altered (on *Ezekiel* 3: 10-11)).

²² Wright raises questions which touch on this distinction between accommodated (or perhaps rhetorically-fashioned) presentation and accommodated content, and briefly introduces some of the issues involved in the latter. Through this exercise he clearly wishes to press home the implications of accommodation (as Calvin spoke of it) upon the very substance of Christian doctrine; see, "Was John Calvin a 'Rhetorical Theologian'?", 59-63. Although the treatment we have given here of pedagogical accommodation does include that kind of accommodation which merely alters the statement of truth, it seems undeniable that at times, indeed often, this also involves the alteration of content as well.

²³ See, CO 7: 169; Calvin, *Anabaptists and Libertines*, 214; see also, CO 31: 483; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 239 (on Psalm 49: 4); CO 31: 722; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 229 (on Psalm 78: 3). For sixteenth-century alternatives to Calvin's conception of the clarity of Scripture, one may consult Priscilla Hayden-Roy's comparison between Sebastian Franck and Martin Luther on this question; see, "Hermeneutica gloriae vs. hermeneutica crucis; Sebastian Franck and Martin Luther on the Clarity of Scripture" in *Archive for Reformation History* 81 (1990), 50-67. On the issue generally—that is, not specifically treating Calvin's position but the reformation period broadly considered—see Muller, *PRRD* 2, 340-57.

²⁴ CO 2: 89-90; *Inst.* 1.13.1

²⁵ CO 24: 102; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 167 (on Exodus 8: 19).

²⁶ CO 37: 284-5; CTS *Isaiah*, 4, 160; CO 23: 116; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 247 (on Genesis 6: 5).

²⁷ CO 31: 163; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 245 (on Psalm 17: 8).

²⁸ CO 23: 149; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 300 (on Genesis 9: 15).

²⁹ CO 8: 300-1; John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J.K.S. Reid (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1961), 106; see also, CO 33: 579-80; *Sermons on Iob*, 218a-b (on Job 12: 7-16). Calvin speaks in different ways about the will of God and does not always mention accommodation when discussing it; compare CO 2: 155; *Inst.* 1.17.2 with CO 26: 687-9; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 398a-99a (on Deuteronomy 9: 13-4).

³⁰ CO 38: 677; CTS *Jeremiah*, 4, 108-9; see also CO 27: 694; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 1121a (on Deuteronomy 32: 8-11).

³¹ CO 26: 260-1; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 189a; see also, CO 31: 692; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 161.

³² CO 42: 443; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 1, 402 (on Hosea 11: 8-9).

³³ SC 6: 21-2; John Calvin, *Sermons on Jeremiah*, trans. Blair Reynolds (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 1990), 37-8 (on Jeremiah 15: 6-19).

³⁴ CO 31: 208; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 335 (on Psalm 20: 2).

³⁵ CO 25: 685; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 41a (on Deuteronomy 1: 29-33).

³⁶ CO 25: 684; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 40b.

his manner of dealing with them in order to suit human infirmities. Furthermore, various historical and spiritual truths: the creation account,³⁸ as well as many scientific matters,³⁹ assorted portions of history (especially, it seems, in Genesis),⁴⁰ the discussion of specific doctrines such as election,⁴¹ providence,⁴² and marks of the church,⁴³ and testimonies to the word itself⁴⁴—all these are crafted by the Almighty with human *captus* in mind. On top of this, God attends to cultural norms,⁴⁵ and even submits to human errors⁴⁶ in his attempering of his holy truth. All of this is aimed at making his word clearer and more intelligible.

This can be seen in Calvin's remarks on John 3: 12. People, he says, are interested in "lofty and abstruse speculations," on account of which they hold the gospel in less estimation because what they find in it is so plain and straightforward. But,

³⁷ "... if God has appointed nothing in vain, it follows that we will not be losers by listening to the gospel which he has appointed for us, for he accommodates himself to our capacity in addressing us" (CO 49: 337; CTS *Corinthians*, 1, 104; slightly altered (on 1 Corinthians 2: 7)); see also, CO 2: 368-9; *Inst.* 2.16.2; CO 33: 536; *Sermons on Iob*, 201a (on Job 11: 7-12); CO 52: 286; CTS *Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 86 (on 1 Timothy 1: 14-5).

³⁸ CO 2: 119; *Inst.* 1.14.3. This is in distinction to the Lord accommodating his creative work to human capacity. For a discussion of how Calvin's views on this subject affected later debates about cosmology, see, R. Hooykaas, *G.J. Reticus' Treatise on Holy Scripture and the Motion of the Earth, with translation, annotations, commentary and additional chapters on Ramus-Reticus and the development of the problem before 1650* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing, 1984), 176-8.

³⁹ "For even though the other planets, it is true, also have their motions ... it would have been lost time for David to have attempted to teach the secrets of astronomy to the rude and unlearned. Therefore, he reckoned it sufficient to speak in a homely style ..." (CO 31: 198; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 315; altered (on Psalm 19: 4)).

⁴⁰ CO 33: 57-70; *Sermons on Iob*, 14-19 (concerning the activities that take place in the heavenly realm); see also, CO 23: 77-8; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 181 (on Genesis 3: 21 - concerning the fall of Adam and Eve).

⁴¹ OS 1: 87; *Inst.* (1536), 79.

⁴² CO 31: 833-4; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 462 (on Psalm 90: 2).

⁴³ CO 2: 753; *Inst.* 4.1.8.

⁴⁴ CO 2: 410-1; *Inst.* 3.2.15. See also, CO 31: 129-30; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 177 (on Psalm 12: 6).

⁴⁵ CO 23: 17; CTS *Genesis*, 77-8 (on Genesis 1: 5 - regarding Moses beginning the day with evening); CO 31: 668; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 109 (on Psalm 72: 8; regarding David's reference to the boundaries of Christ's kingdom spreading "from sea to sea" in accommodation to the people's conception of the world); CO 31: 628; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 26 (on Psalm 68: 18; regarding Paul's following of the Septuagint).

⁴⁶ CO 38: 18; CTS *Jeremiah*, 1, 445 (this instance concerns the possibility of snakes being charmed, which Calvin says is impossible but was a belief commonly held to which the prophet refers *ad hominem*).

Calvin insists, it is a sign of terrible perversion that “we yield less reverence to God speaking to us, because he condescends to our ignorance (*ruditatem*).”⁴⁷ It is just this—this attempt to reduce inaccessible truth to suit human simplicity, roughness, and unskillfulness—that characterizes the responsive labors of God here.

These responsive labors also include the implementing of external signs as a concession to human weakness.⁴⁸ Enormous are the issues involved with signs, sacraments and the like. Hence, they can only be touched on here. Through signs, God reveals himself more familiarly to his people,⁴⁹ strengthens their reception of his word,⁵⁰ and “raise us upwards (*sursum*).”⁵¹ This applies to all kinds of signs from both Old and New Testament periods—visions,⁵² dreams,⁵³ miracles,⁵⁴ and sacraments,⁵⁵ as well, of course, as the Lord's Supper and baptism.⁵⁶ The fact that a thinker like Peter Martyr

⁴⁷ CO 47: 61; CTS *John's Gospel*, 1, 119.

⁴⁸ It is, in part, this fact which has led Randall Zachman to argue (in our view, erroneously) that Calvin is an analogical theologian; see, “Calvin as Analogical Theologian” in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51 (1998), 162-187.

⁴⁹ CO 31: 210; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 339 (on Psalm 20: 9).

⁵⁰ OS 1: 118; *Inst.* (1536), 118.

⁵¹ CO 32: 345; CTS *Psalms*, 5, 150 (on Psalm 132: 7).

⁵² CO 48: 230; CTS *Acts*, 1, 418 (on Acts 10: 9-10).

⁵³ CO 40: 595-6; CTS *Daniel*, 1, 171 (Daniel 2: 31-35).

⁵⁴ CO 24: 194; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 316.

⁵⁵ “And surely God does accommodate himself to our rudeness thus far, that he shows himself visible, after a sort, under figures; for there were many signs under the law to testify his presence. And he comes down to us even at this day by baptism and the supper and also by the external preaching of the word” (CO 48: 153; CTS *Acts*, 1, 291 (on Acts 7: 40)). Circumcision might also be specifically mentioned; see, CO 23: 241; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 453 (on Genesis 17: 11).

⁵⁶ OS 1: 505; *Tracts and Letters*, 2, 166. Of course, there is a wealth of literature on Calvin and the sacraments; particularly concerning his controversial views on the eucharist. Some of the best recent work on the Lord's supper has been done by Thomas Davis; see *The Clearest Promises of God: the development of Calvin's Eucharistic Teaching* (New York: AMS Press, 1995). For a historical summary of the study of Calvin's position on the Lord's supper, see Brian Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). For sheer compilation of material on the sacraments from Calvin's *corpus*, Ronald Wallace's study is still helpful, *Calvin's Doctrine of Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1953; reprinted 1995). For a brief but interesting handling of some of the ambiguities found in Calvin's views, see George Hunsinger, “The Dimension of Depth: Thomas F. Torrance on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper” in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 (2001), 155-76. In addition to these there are still numerous pieces which

Vermigli expressed similar views seems to indicate something of the commonality of many aspects of the material being rehearsed here.⁵⁷

3.2.1.c God Discloses Himself in Christ

God's disclosure of himself reaches its zenith in the sending of his only Son into the world.

There is no other way in which God can be known but through Christ ... we cannot comprehend God in his majesty ... Therefore he lowers himself to our weakness, gives himself to us through Christ, by whom he makes us partakers of wisdom, righteousness, truth, and other blessings.⁵⁸

It was perhaps remarks such as these which moved a host of scholars to argue that the incarnation is for Calvin the supreme or epitomizing act within the repertoire of accommodating acts. Perhaps most famously, Battles declares it to be "the accommodating act par excellence."⁵⁹ Before him, Clinton Ashley made the observation.⁶⁰ Rogers and McKim,⁶¹ Anthony Baxter,⁶² Stephen Benin,⁶³ David

could be referred to; among them see, Gordon Pruet, "A Protestant Doctrine of the Eucharistic Presence" in *Calvin Theological Journal* 10 (1975), 142-74; Jill Raitt, "Three inter-related principles in Calvin's unique doctrine of infant baptism" in *Sixteenth Century Journal* 11 (1980), 51-62; Robert Letham, "Baptism in the Writings of the Reformers" in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 7 (1989), 21-44; Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

⁵⁷ Vermigli declares that Christ "should be called *figurator* above all, for while we dwell here he heeds our infirmity through his kindness, by symbols" (Cited by McLelland in Martyr, *The Life, Early Letters & Eucharistic Writings*, 134).

⁵⁸ CO 36: 421; CTS *Isaiah*, 2, 201-2; slightly altered (on *Isaiah* 25: 9). Perhaps the best known passage on the subject is from the *Institutes*: "In this sense, Irenaeus writes that the Father, himself immeasurable, becomes finite in the Son, for he has accommodated himself to our little measure, lest our minds be overwhelmed by the immensity of his glory" (CO 2: 252; *Inst.* 2.6.4; slightly altered); see also, CO 53: 92-3; *Sermons on Timothy and Titus*, 91b-92a (1 Timothy 1: 17-19).

⁵⁹ Battles, 'God Was Accommodating,' 36.

⁶⁰ "Man's fullest knowledge of God is given him in the Person of Christ Jesus. In a word, Christ Jesus is the ultimate expression of divine condescension to the capacity of man" (Ashley, "John Calvin's Utilization of the Principle of Accommodation," 88-89).

Wright,⁶⁴ Timothy George,⁶⁵ Vincent Bru,⁶⁶ John Witvliet,⁶⁷ Thomas Davis,⁶⁸ and Suzanne Selinger⁶⁹ all make similar utterances; and before all of these, Edward Dowey alludes to the idea when he refers to “the final accommodation to human sinfulness, the Incarnation.”⁷⁰

Such a sentiment has a number of considerations which commend it. However, we have come to consider the position difficult, if not impossible, to credit. For, can there be a single, epitomizing act among such a diverse collection of deeds? If, as shall be demonstrated in this dissertation, in addition to self-lowering, accommodation can also be begrudging allowance, compromise, raw practicality, and savvy persuasion, then can any one of these behaviors epitomize all of them? None of these authorities defends their assertion, but to be fair most of them only make it as a passing comment. Therefore, although statements to this effect are understandable, since they concern a

⁶¹ Citing Battles, they declare, “in Jesus Christ’s taking on human form, we see God’s divine condescension ‘par excellence’” (Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 99).

⁶² “[t]he ultimate example of divine condescension occurred, for Calvin, in the incarnation of Christ” (Baxter, “What Did Calvin Teach?,” 21).

⁶³ “perhaps the sublime example of accommodation was for Calvin, ..., the Incarnation” (Benin, *The Footprints of God*, 191).

⁶⁴ Wright refers to “the supreme accommodation of God ... in the incarnation” (Wright, “Calvin’s Pentateuchal Criticism,” 44 (see also 50)).

⁶⁵ George calls the incarnation “the supreme example of God’s accommodating of Himself to human capacities” (Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988), 217).

⁶⁶ “De même, pour Calvin, l’Incarnation constitue l’acte de condescendance et d’accommodation par excellence de Dieu envers l’humanité pécheresse” (Bru, “La Notion d’accommodation,” 86).

⁶⁷ “[Battles] discusses in greater detail scripture and the incarnation as the examples *par excellence* of God’s accommodation” (John Witvliet, “Images and Themes in Calvin’s Theology of Liturgy: One Dimension of Calvin’s Liturgical Legacy” in *The Legacy of John Calvin; Papers Presented at the 12th Colloquium of the Calvin Studies Society April 22-24, 1999*, ed. David Foxgrover (Grand Rapids: CRC Product Services, 2000), 148).

⁶⁸ Davis simply cites Battles’ statement in a footnote; see, Thomas J. Davis, “Not ‘Hidden and Far off’: the Bodily Aspect of Salvation and its Implications for Understanding the Body in Calvin’s Theology” in *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (1994), 416, n. 32.

⁶⁹ “[T]he Incarnation and the Cross are the maximum accommodation and the epitome of lowering” (Selinger, *Calvin Against Himself*, 67).

truth which is so evidently at the center and pinnacle of redemptive history, they seem indefensible or, at best, undefended.

Nevertheless, the Lord's accommodating of himself in the incarnation still seems to be of considerable importance to Calvin and the unquestioned highpoint of this sphere of attempering activity. Accordingly, observations such as the one cited above and the one with which this brief treatment will conclude are not surprising.

There are two reasons why faith could not be in God except Christ intervened as mediator: first the greatness of the divine glory must be taken into account and at the same time the smallness of our capacity. ... all knowledge of God without Christ is a vast abyss ... Hence it is clear that we cannot trust in God except through Christ.⁷¹

This well-known quote from the reformer's commentary on 1 Peter confers on Christ the greatest significance as accommodating revealer of the otherwise inscrutable God. This is an accurate summary of the crucial place he holds in this aspect of redemption, according to Calvin. Revealing, though, is not the sum total of Christ's work. Since this is so, the Mediator's self-limiting work will also be dealt with in the treatment of a later category.

3.2.1.d God's Unaccommodated Revelation to his People in Glory

In these various ways God adapts his truth to suit humanity's need for a more familiar, less horrific mode of dealing. However, this adaptation will not continue

⁷⁰ Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 17. Whether Dowey's comments amount to a full-blown declaration of what we find in Battles' essay is difficult to say.

⁷¹ CO 55: 226-7; CTS *Catholic Epistles*, 53-4; slightly altered (on 1 Peter 1: 21). See also, CO 23: 471; CTS *Genesis*, 2, 242 (on Genesis 35: 13); CO 23: 622; CTS *Genesis*, 2, 491 (on Genesis 50: 24); CO 32: 51; CTS *Psalms*, 4, 78 (on Psalm 99: 5).

forever. Though not the subject of prolonged scrutiny, this issue is occasionally raised by Calvin. His commentary on 1 John 3: 1-3 provides us with one such instance. When the apostle declares that “we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3: 2), Calvin observes that right now God presents himself to be seen by his children “not such as he is, but such as our small measure can comprehend him (*non qualis est, sed qualem modulus noster eum capit*).”⁷² However, in this verse, John refers to “a new and an ineffable manner of seeing him, which we do not enjoy now.”⁷³ According to this new vision, God’s people will not be able “to comprehend all that God is,” for even then the distance between God and his own will be even “very great,” but they will be able to see him in what would seem to be an unaccommodated way; though, naturally, the particulars of this transformation are shrouded in mystery.⁷⁴

Such considerations are striking, and may ultimately raise more questions than they answer.⁷⁵ It must be said, though, that similar remarks from the reformer are rare. Thus, treatment of them and of the unaccommodating of God (so to speak) will not be found in the coverage of every modality, nor will they play a significant part in this chapter’s treatment of divine attempering.

⁷² CO 55: 331-32; CTS *The Catholic Epistles*, 206.

⁷³ CO 55: 331-32; CTS *The Catholic Epistles*, 206; slightly altered.

⁷⁴ “... yet the perfection of glory will not be so great in us, that our seeing will enable us to comprehend all that God is; for the distance between us and him will be even then very great ... But when the Apostle says, that we shall see him as he is, he intimates a new and an ineffable manner of seeing him, which we enjoy not now; for as long as we walk by faith, as Paul teaches us, we are absent from him. And when he appeared to the fathers, it was not in his own essence, but was ever seen under symbols. Hence the majesty of God, now hid, will then only be in itself seen, when the veil of this mortal and corruptible nature shall be removed.” (CO 55: 331-32; CTS *The Catholic Epistles*, 206).

⁷⁵ A very recent article discusses the issue of the after life and condition of the believer in it; see, Carl Mosser, “The greatest possible blessing: Calvin and deification” in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55/1 (2002), 36-57.

This, then, is a sketch of God's responses to human capacity within *l'ecole de Dieu*. The focus here has been—and shall be throughout this chapter—on drawing out, cataloguing, and briefly discussing these responses in order that the lineaments of each sphere of accommodating activity can be made clear. To be sure, overlap exists between this and others roles of the accommodating God. Further, the reformer has a number of purposes in mind (polemicizing, encouraging, and so forth) in the different citations referred to in this section. Nevertheless, throughout Calvin's God can be seen to take self-limiting courses of action intended to effect the pedagogical ends which he has in mind.

3.2.2 When God Legislates and Commands

In this second section, which treats God's role as lawgiver/commander, his accommodating responses involve a more radical set of procedures. Here it is not so much a matter of simplification, but rather limitation, reduction, and concession manifest themselves. The issues handled under this head raise several points which, though touched on in this chapter, will be pursued more thoroughly in the next.

3.2.2.a God's Moral Law

God accommodates his "true and eternal rule of righteousness"⁷⁶ at various levels, with each successive stage increasing, or rather deepening, the impact of this

⁷⁶ CO 2: 1105; *Inst.* 4.20.15.

attempting.⁷⁷ First, God does accommodate his moral precepts in a way similar to what was seen in the last section; that is, by simplifying them. For example, he comprehends a whole command under one head so as to train his people as if they were child-like.⁷⁸ Thus, he labors to make his law accessible to his subjects. In addition to this, he uses language which is deliberately intended to scare,⁷⁹ and appends threats and promises in order to provoke his lazy servants to action.⁸⁰ These persuasive endeavors, not entirely unlike the work of simplification, are naturally appropriate to the application of moral commands to a people unwilling to receive them. Yet, because such considerations open up new vistas, the discussion of them shall be delayed until a later section.

In addition to these labors, the Lord also accommodates his law by altering its content. This can be seen, for instance, in Calvin's exegesis of the fourth commandment. First, God requires that animals are to keep the Sabbath in accommodation to human hardness.⁸¹ But secondly, and more importantly, he enjoins only one day of worship on his children, as a concession to their callousness and

⁷⁷ This arena of accommodation raises interesting and thorny questions about the nature of God's righteousness, and provides rich avenues for inquiry. Generally, because of the numerous issues which can easily occupy an author regarding Calvin and the law, such questions have not been probed—nor has the specific issue of accommodation been examined as thoroughly as it perhaps should be. This is even true in excellent works, such as T.H.L. Parker's volume, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*. His treatment of Calvin's exposition of the law (see Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament*, 122-75) does not broach accommodation in any significant manner. The same can be said of I. John Hesselink's work on the law. For, although his discussion is quite comprehensive and exceptional in many ways, he does not discuss accommodation. Significantly, he does not examine the material found in the reformer's sermons on Job, thus effectively excluding altogether one aspect of divine attempering which is dealt with in those sermons much more clearly than in any other source; see, I. John Hesselink, *Calvin's Concept of the Law* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1992). See also, *id.*, "Law and Gospel or Gospel and Law? Calvin's Understanding of the Relationship" in *Calviniana. Ideas and Influences of Jean Calvin*, ed. Robert Schnucker (Kirksville, MO: 1988), 13-32; Edward Dowey, "Law in Luther and Calvin" in *Theology Today* 41 (1984), 146-53; David Wright, "The Ethical Use of the Old Testament in Luther and Calvin: a comparison" in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 (1983), 463-85.

⁷⁸ CO 26: 310; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 213a (on Deuteronomy 5: 16).

⁷⁹ CO 26: 335; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 224b (on Deuteronomy 5: 18).

⁸⁰ CO 26: 356; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 234a (on Deuteronomy 5: 19).

inflexibility. In this way, God releases his stiff-necked people from the more rigorous requirement which he could have laid upon them;⁸² providing us with a glimpse of the direction in which we are heading.

Yet, the content of the eternal precepts is accommodated by God in a much more radical way, as may be seen most poignantly in Calvin's sermons on Job.⁸³ In this enigmatic book, Job, though vindicated by God (Job 42: 7), suffers horribly (Job 1: 13-2: 9 *et passim*), complains that not even the pure can stand before God (Job 4: 17-9), asserts his own integrity before his friends and God (Job 12: 4 *et passim*), and repents at the end (Job 42: 6). To make sense out of all this, Calvin posits the notion of a two-fold or double righteousness in God.⁸⁴ God, he argues, possesses in himself a righteousness which is secret, infinite, incomprehensible to humans, and higher even than the righteousness of angels.⁸⁵ But to his creatures the Lord has revealed an accommodated

⁸¹ CO 26: 299-300; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 208a (on Deuteronomy 5: 13-15).

⁸² CO 26: 298; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 207b (on Deuteronomy 5: 13-15); CO 26: 294; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 205a (on Deuteronomy 5: 12-14).

⁸³ The works on Calvin's sermons on Job which shall be focused on here are treated by Susan Schreiner and shall be cited throughout the section. For other treatments of these sermons, see Paul Lobstein, *Études sur la pensée et l'oeuvre de Calvin*, ed. Lobstein (Neuilly: Éditions de "La Cause," 1927), 51-67; Richard Stauffer, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans le prédication de Calvin* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1978); and Derek Thomas, "Incomprehensibilitas Dei: Calvin's Pastoral Theology in the Sermons on Job" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wales, 2000). The latter, though recent, is decidedly pastoral in intent (see his thesis statement), and says nothing of relevance to our subject which is not found in Schreiner's research.

⁸⁴ The accommodation which will be discussed here is raised or at least alluded to elsewhere in the reformer's *corpus*. Schreiner mentions the reformer's 1558 treatise *De occulta Dei providentia* as a place where the concept of double justice is referred to (see CO 9: 310). It is also alluded to in *Institutes* 3.12.2. And, in Calvin's commentary on Colossians from 1548, the reformer refers to the righteousness of the angels as not being so absolutely perfect as to put them in good stead with God and exclude them from the need of pardon (see CO 52: 88; CTS *Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, 156 (on Colossians 1: 20)); see Schreiner, "Exegesis and Double Justice," 322-3; Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom*, 105-6.

⁸⁵ CO 33: 202; *Sermons on Iob*, 72a (on Job 4: 12-9); CO 33: 726; *Sermons on Iob*, 273a (on Job 15: 11-6).

form of his own justice in the Ten Commandments (more broadly, the moral law).⁸⁶ Unlike the first, this “ordinary” righteousness—which is in reality only “half”⁸⁷ a righteousness, says Calvin—is tempered to the reason God has given to human beings, and thus is understandable to them.⁸⁸ It is a justice which is bound or confined (*compassee*) within the measure of human beings.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, Calvin affirms that it is still properly called perfect, so long as it is realized that this perfection is in relation to creatureliness (this does not mean humankind in its sinful state but in its unfallen state.⁹⁰ Furthermore, this includes angelic creatures as well).⁹¹ Moreover, though lowered in this way, the law is still too high for humans to attain to, and thus no living creature can keep it perfectly.⁹²

Exactly how God's righteousness is circumscribed (the mechanics of it, that is), Calvin does not make clear. His statements on the subject are always general, and betray a reticence to probe the issue. So, for example, in describing God's revealed justice, Calvin will call it “manifest,” note that it is expressed in the law, and observe that it “has some agreement with [our] reason,”⁹³ but that is as far as he will go. His relative silence here is probably due to several factors, most notably the fact that his

⁸⁶ CO 33: 496; *Sermons on Iob*, 186a (on Job 10: 16-7); CO 33: 636-7; *Sermons on Iob*, 239b (on Job 13: 16-22). The question of whether, in Calvin's opinion, the law had actually been inscripturated at the time in which Job lived is one which Susan Schreiner deals with. She concludes that, although he posits opinions on aspects of the question at various points in his treatment of the text, yet “[o]n a regular basis Calvin simply assumes the Law in his exegesis of the Joban text”; see Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom*, 235-6.

⁸⁷ CO 33: 457; *Sermons on Iob*, 170b (on Job 9: 29-35).

⁸⁸ CO 34: 335; *Sermons on Iob*, 413b (on Job 23: 1-7).

⁸⁹ CO 33: 459; *Sermons on Iob*, 171b (on Job 9: 29-35); CO 33: 725; *Sermons on Iob*, 273a.

⁹⁰ CO 34: 336; *Sermons on Iob*, 414a (on Job 23: 1-7).

⁹¹ CO 33: 458; *Sermons on Iob*, 171b (on Job 9: 29-35); CO 33: 496; *Sermons on Iob*, 186a (on Job 10: 16-7).

⁹² CO 33: 455-6; *Sermons on Iob*, 170a (on Job 9: 29-35).

⁹³ CO 34: 447-8; *Sermons on Iob*, 455b (on Job 27: 1-4).

practical and apologetic interests to elucidate to his hearers the confusing ways of God in afflicting a pious man like Job did not require him to go into detail on the issue. Thus, he does little more than inform his hearers that that which God sets out in his law is an “average justice (*justice moyenne*).”⁹⁴

Significantly, though, he does indicate that this accommodation affects the substance of the law and reduces the level of righteousness found in it. This was seen in his reference to the law being only “half”⁹⁵ a righteousness. It is also apparent from his observation that the justice of the law falls “far short” of God’s higher justice.⁹⁶ Therefore, though it is not clear how the righteousness of the infinite God has been tampered with (so to speak) to produce the expression of rectitude embodied in the moral law, it is plain that considerable differences mark the relationship between the two. Huge questions are raised by these considerations, a number of which are treated by Susan Schreiner in *Where Shall Wisdom be Found*. Further reflection upon some of these issues awaits us in chapter four.⁹⁷

3.2.2.b God’s Old Testament Case Laws

So, in these ways Calvin’s God responds to his people’s *captus*. But in addition to attempering the moral law, God also accommodates his case laws and the individual commands which he issues to his people. Yet here, as he applies his moral strictures to

⁹⁴ CO 33: 725; *Sermons on Iob*, 273a (on Job 15: 11-6).

⁹⁵ CO 33: 457; *Sermons on Iob*, 170b (on Job 9: 29-35).

⁹⁶ CO 33: 496; *Sermons on Iob*, 186a.

⁹⁷ See Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom*, 91-155; esp. 121-55.

the particulars of Israel's situation, the Lord stoops well below even the "average" righteousness enshrined in the moral law.

First, it is to be noted, God plays the part of the casuist; that is to say, he drafts case laws for his ancient church, and thus reveals something of the political dimensions of accommodation. This legislation takes into account their primitive condition. More precisely, as Calvin indicates in this general comment on the issue, he makes concessions to his people's brutish character in these laws by not requiring of them the standard of moral purity which he might have demanded.

But the fact, that God did not carry out the political laws to their full perfection (*leges politicas Deus ad solidam perfectionem non exegit*), shows that by this leniency he wished to reprove the people's perverseness, which could not even bear to obey so mild a law. Whenever, therefore, God seems to pardon too easily, and with too much clemency, let us recollect that he designedly deviated from the perfect rule (*ab optima regula*), because he had to do with an intractable people.⁹⁸

This concessionary program is quite comprehensive, touching on numerous aspects of Israelite life. From what food the Israelites should and should not eat⁹⁹ to allowances regarding divorce¹⁰⁰ and men having multiple wives,¹⁰¹ from a concession

⁹⁸ CO 24: 624; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 39-40; slightly altered (on Leviticus 24: 18). In addition to the careful exposition of Wright, the broader constructs of the political dimensions of accommodation are briefly addressed by Ford Lewis Battles; see, "God Was Accommodating," 33-34.

⁹⁹ God's accommodation involved indulging them so as not to weigh them down with too great a burden, while also seeking to keep them from delighting in monstrous (*monstris*) food and keeping them from the intemperance of the heathen nations ... "for there was a danger lest, by devouring filthy animals they should harden themselves to join in various other corruptions" (CO 24: 350; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 66 (on Leviticus 11: 13)).

¹⁰⁰ CO 24: 657-58; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 93-94; slightly altered (on Deuteronomy 24: 1-4).

¹⁰¹ CO 27: 667; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 750a. Interestingly, this text (Deuteronomy 21: 15) provokes a long discussion of marriage, its original intent and eventual corruption by the patriarchs, within which Calvin's comment on accommodation can be found. But in the reformer's commentary on the passage (CO 24: 709-10; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 174-5), his remarks are brief and do not refer to divine accommodation.

for mourning for the dead¹⁰² to permitting the selling of one's child into slavery;¹⁰³ from the use of the Urim and Thummim for help in decision-making¹⁰⁴ to lenient penalties for those who brawl¹⁰⁵—everything from the petty to the gravely serious comes under the shadow of God's attempering influence, who involves himself (or so it would seem) in profound wickedness on behalf of his debased servants. Hence, what Calvin refers to as the need for the laws of a land to be accommodated to “the conditions of time, place, and nation” is taken by God to extremes which far exceed its apparent meaning.¹⁰⁶ Nor, though, is this the only way in which God seems to exceed the bounds of expectation.

3.2.2.c God's *ad hoc* Commands given to Israel

On top of the case laws, God also tempers the *ad hoc* commands he gives to his people with their barbarity in mind. Consider, for instance, the occasion when Joshua punishes five kings and hangs their dead bodies on gibbets. In his comments on this incident, recorded in Joshua 10: 15ff, Calvin first justifies these actions by falling back

¹⁰² “Nor can we doubt but that the mourning was improper, which God permitted as an indulgence; [but God regarded their weakness] lest immoderate rigor drive them to passionate excess” (CO 24: 449; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 229).

¹⁰³ CO 24: 650; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 80-1.

¹⁰⁴ “What Scripture sometimes relates, as to the inquires made by the Urim and Thummim, it was a concession made by God to the rudeness of his ancient people. The True Priest had not yet appeared, the Angel of His Almighty counsel, by whose Spirit all the prophets spoke ...” (CO 24: 430-1; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 198). In very typical fashion, Calvin, though commenting upon the accommodated character of the Urim and Thummim in this place, can refrain from mentioning it on other occasions; see, CO 29: 133-8; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 1198a-1201a.

¹⁰⁵ CO 24: 623-4; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 39-40.

¹⁰⁶ In addition to this, Calvin mentions that the Lord, in taking upon himself the duties of lawgiver to Israel, had a special concern for them when drafting their code of conduct (CO 2: 1106-7; *Inst.* 4.20.16). The relationship between these remarks and the reformer's exegesis of Old Testament law certainly warrants further study as, more broadly, does Calvin's legal background. For a good starting point to such investigations (in relation to the whole reformation period and not Calvin specifically) see Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, 117-290. Yet, returning to Calvin's point cited in the text, little in Calvin's treatment of the last four books of the Pentateuch is adumbrated by either his remarks in

on the divine command, without which “it would argue barbarous atrocity and boundless arrogance (*barbara ... atrocitas et immanis superbia*)” and would have been “contrary to the feelings of humanity.”¹⁰⁷ But following this he goes on to give some explanation for God’s decision by briefly noting several facts, some of which point to the accommodated character of the injunction. For instance, it can be seen to some extent in the Lord’s using of this dreadful sight to “[strike] terror” into the Israelites, and therefore keep them “from imitating the manners of nations whose crimes they had seen so severely punished.”¹⁰⁸ Thus, just as Calvin had noted, respecting an earlier passage, that the hanging of criminals was useful “lest the people should become accustomed to barbarity,”¹⁰⁹ so here it served the same purpose. But its appearance is much more obvious in this: that God’s command was an expedient by which the Israelites might learn the “inexorable rigor” God expected from them.¹¹⁰ Such a contrivance was, Calvin says, intended to combat the “perverse affection of clemency”¹¹¹ which existed in the people and might have tempted them to spare the lives of the kings. For it was the will of the Lord that all should be destroyed, but “[h]ad he not stimulated them strongly to

Institutes 4.20 or his treatment of the similarities and differences between the Old and New covenants in *Institutes* 2.10-11; see, Wright, “Accommodation and Barbarity,” 416.

¹⁰⁷ CO 25: 502; CTS *Joshua*, 159; slightly altered. See the similar example, CO 25: 479-80; CTS *Joshua*, 116-8 (on Joshua 7: 24); see also, Hesselink, *Calvin's Concept of the Law*, 19-24. Calvin’s assertions here seem to raise questions, both ethical and philosophical, such as those associated with the Euthyphro dilemma. Calvin’s discomfort with this brand of accommodation is acknowledged by Wright, who points to his “wriggl[ing] uncomfortably to evacuate this concession to barbarity of its offensiveness” (Wright, “Accommodation and Barbarity,” 419).

¹⁰⁸ CO 25: 503; CTS *Joshua*, 159.

¹⁰⁹ CO 25: 487; CTS *Joshua*, 130.

¹¹⁰ CO 25: 503; CTS *Joshua*, 159.

¹¹¹ CO 25: 503; CTS *Joshua*, 159.

the performance of [this command], they might have found specious pretexts for giving pardon.”¹¹²

In an additional example, God's order to burn the city appears, Calvin says, to be “a concession to the grief of the people (*populi dolori*).”¹¹³ In this way, the reformer rather crudely observes, the taking of vengeance on this occasion would wipe out Israel's remembrance of their earlier disgrace. Other examples of similarly crude and shocking accommodation can be found, especially in Calvin's Pentateuch harmony and Joshua commentary.

Yet the discourse thus far—both on the case laws and the commands—has, perhaps, given the impression that God was pleased with or at least undisturbed by these concessive measures. Such was not the case. His disagreement was expressed in different ways, but was always present. Hence, he begrudged his people these concessions, Calvin was in the habit of saying. For now this treatment will have to suffice. Thus, having broached the issue of the Lord's response to situations in this arena, it seems appropriate to say a word about his response to his children's obedience to his law—that is, about God's rewarding of good works.

3.2.2.d God's Rewarding of Obedience

God need not reward his subjects for their obedience. He, of course, owes them nothing, but may exact from them whatever obedience he wishes.¹¹⁴ Here Calvin,

¹¹² CO 25: 503; CTS *Joshua*, 159.

¹¹³ CO 25: 483; CTS *Joshua*, 123 (on Joshua 8: 1-12).

¹¹⁴ CO 26: 103; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 111b (on Deuteronomy 4: 1-2); CO 24: 378-9; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 111 (on Exodus 20: 5).

though citing it infrequently, relies heavily upon Luke 17: 10. We are all, he is convinced, worthless servants.¹¹⁵

Hence, God is not obliged to reward people, but does so in accommodation to their frailties. "God, of his own liberality, acknowledges as just those who aspire to righteousness, and repays them with the reward of which they are unworthy,"¹¹⁶ and "God stoops (*condescend*) to people's rudeness" says Calvin, when he commits himself to recompensing a believer's works "even though he is not bound to do so,"¹¹⁷ and "since some fault (*aliquid vitii*) always adheres to our works, it is not possible that they can be approved, except as a matter of indulgence (*cum indulgentia*)."¹¹⁸ But Calvin expresses himself most to the point when he declares, against the Papists, that rewards do not indicate that God is beholden to his children, but rather that he wishes to win them to himself by gentleness and "as it were, to break their hearts;" God's meaning, then, "is to show us that he is ready to accommodate himself to us after a human manner (*s'accommoder à nous à la façon des hommes*)."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ He does cite Luke 17: 10 occasionally. In a lengthy statement, he writes: "For, although God might in His own right simply require what He pleased, yet such is his kindness to humankind, that he chose to entice them by promises to obey him freely. Since, therefore, we are naturally attracted by the hope of reward, we are slow and lazy, until some fruit appears. Consequently God voluntarily promises, in order to arouse them from their sloth, that if men obey his law, he will repay them. Nor is this an ordinary act of liberality that he prefers to agree with us for the payment of a recompense, rather than simply to command by his sovereignty. For we must bear in mind the declaration of Christ, that when we have fulfilled the whole law, we still deserve nothing; since God claims for himself our entire services (Luke 17:10)" (CO 25: 6; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 203 (on Deuteronomy 27: 11-26)). He also recalls this text from Luke in a sermon on Deuteronomy 26: 5-12, after which he suggests to his hearers an interesting prayer to God asking him to accept his people's weak and imperfect service; see CO 28: 262-3; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 900b (on Deuteronomy 26: 5-12).

¹¹⁶ CO 40: 438-9; CTS *Ezekiel*, 2, 237-8 (on Ezekiel 18: 17).

¹¹⁷ CO 26: 480-1; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 295a; slightly altered (on Deuteronomy 6: 15-9).

¹¹⁸ CO 23: 129; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 266 (on Genesis 7: 1).

¹¹⁹ CO 26: 417; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 264a; slightly altered (on Deuteronomy 5: 28-33). The statement is admittedly a kind of strange one. He is clearly contrasting this accommodation with the idea that God is obliged to reward his servants. Yet it would have been very nice if Calvin had chosen to spell out his meaning a bit more. See as well Calvin's discussion in CO 6: 248-50, 336-38; Calvin, *The*

One of Calvin's more enlightening statements addresses this recompensing in connection with God's double righteousness.¹²⁰ Declaring the promise "the one who does these things will live by them" (Lev. 18: 5) to be a divine concession and the pledge made in it to be gratuitous, Calvin explains that the offer of life in return for obedience is actually a part of that average righteousness with which "God contents himself simply because it pleases him to do so."¹²¹ In this way, God attempers himself to his children's weakness, for his rewards are never truly earned, but given freely and by divine decision in exchange for the trifling service which his children offer to him. Life, then, even when it is offered in the law and earned (so to speak) through obedience to that law, is a gift. But, as is well-known, Calvin does not restrict this truth to the sons of Adam. Rather, the notion of merit is even foreign, strictly speaking, to the work of Christ. For in no way can God be truly indebted to a human being¹²²—for Calvin, this is axiomatic.

Having thus decided freely to reward works, God still could refuse to recompense those efforts which through sin fall short of the already-accommodated

Bondage and Liberation, 26-28, 151-4. Two points should be briefly noted. First, as has already been alluded to earlier, God also accommodates himself by accepting the righteousness embodied in the moral law, rather than requiring his creatures to serve him according to his secret and higher righteousness (CO 34: 334; *Sermons on Job*, 413a (on Job 23: 1-7)). Second, regarding rewards, Calvin expresses concerns regarding the idea that rewards may make God's children haughty or possibly detract from the primacy of God's mercy, and explains that they do not, or should not; see CO 26: 482; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 295b, and also CO 31: 593; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 432 (on Psalm 62: 11-2). Yet even with such statements before us, it is apparent that Calvin's concern about the Christian becoming boastful and proud because of works usually outweighs his belief that works do not produce pride. Hence, he pounces on every occasion to rid people of any cause for boasting.

¹²⁰ CO 33: 491-506; *Sermons on Job*, 184a-89b (Job 10: 16-7). The same argument is nicely presented in the reformer's lecture on Ezekiel 20: 11; see, CO 40: 481-3; CTS *Ezekiel*, 2, 296-99.

¹²¹ CO 33: 496; *Sermons on Job*, 186a-b; slightly altered.

¹²² CO 2: 386-92; *Inst.* 2.17.1-6. On the question of whether Calvin is indebted to John Major or some other aspect of his medieval past in his holding of this position, see McGrath, "John Calvin and Late Medieval Thought," 58-78; Oberman, "*Initia Calvini*," 121-23.

standards. But, of course, all the works of God's people without exception are blackened in this way. Therefore, although his promises are reliable, were he to demand perfect compliance to his commands, none of his creatures would ever obtain rewards.

Yet the Lord does not attempt to extract such perfection, but indulgently receives and rewards his church's labors even though they are tarnished with *aliquid vitii*.¹²³ This he can do, being free: worth, merit, fault, and blame all seem almost meaningless in this context.¹²⁴ Calvin regularly comments on this indulgence, both in general remarks¹²⁵ and in comments on specific episodes, such as Rebecca's deception,¹²⁶ Zipporah's circumcizing of her son,¹²⁷ Rahab's lie,¹²⁸ and the lie of the Hebrew women.¹²⁹ Furthermore, he applies the same analysis not only to obedience to the law, but also to repentance¹³⁰ and, as shall be seen in a later section, to weak and imperfect prayers.¹³¹

¹²³ CO 23: 129; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 266 (on Genesis 7: 1). Calvin's reasoning on this issue is slightly peculiar. The passage just cited on Genesis 7: 1 argues that it is because "some fault" clings to human works that God need not feel indebted to reward them, while the passages cited from the sermons on Job and the *Institutes* (on the obedience of Christ) argue that even perfect obedience can not demand payment from God. The issue is difficult and cannot be addressed here, but is well worth attention.

¹²⁴ See Hunsinger, "A Tale of Two Simultaneities" and Lane, "The Role of Scripture," for additional thoughts on this theme. A question revolving around these issues of worth, merit, the imperfection of the believer's obedience, and Calvin's consistency in treating these matters was briefly alluded to in chapter two.

¹²⁵ CO 27: 98; *Sermon on Deuteronomie*, 464b; CO 40: 438-9; CTS *Ezekiel*, 2, 237-8 (on Ezekiel 18: 17); CO 31: 593; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 432 (on Psalm 62: 11-2); CO 24: 258; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 414 (on Deuteronomy 30: 11-4); CO 23: 358; CTS *Genesis*, 2, 59-60 (on Genesis 26: 1-4).

¹²⁶ CO 23: 374-5; CTS *Genesis*, 2, 84-7 (on Genesis 27).

¹²⁷ CO 24: 65-6; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony* 1, 107-8 (on Exodus 4: 24-31).

¹²⁸ CO 25: 440-1; CTS *Joshua*, 47-8 (on Joshua 2: 4-6).

¹²⁹ CO 24: 19; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 35. The fact that the majority of these have to do with mendacity, suggests that it may have been a particularly relevant issue in Calvin's day. Concerning the subject in Calvin and the sixteenth century, see Perez Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution, and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

¹³⁰ "Not that anyone perfectly renounces himself or his sin, but through indulgence that impenitence is acceptable to God, which might justly be rejected on the ground of its deficiencies" (CO 24: 593-4; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 460-1 (on Leviticus 23: 27-8)).

¹³¹ Stepping back, a number of issues for discussion appear. First, it should simply be noted that God can and frequently does use the promise of recompense as a stimulant in accommodation to the sluggishness of his people. This shall be examined more fully later. But also, the question of Calvin's relation with medieval Roman Catholicism is raised by these considerations. Recently, Joseph Wawrykow has argued

3.2.2.e The Duration of these forms of Accommodation

The reformer does not speak to all of the expressions of accommodation treated in this section, but he does address one of them, namely, the moral law.¹³² One such instance is found in a sermon on Job 9: 29-35. When distinguishing the ordinary righteousness embodied in the law “which angels and human beings ought to yield to God” from the perfect righteousness which humankind is “not able to attain to,” Calvin explains that such inability clings to human beings only in the present.¹³³ For when the

that the reformer held to a kind of condign merit (Joseph Wawrykow, “John Calvin and Condign Merit” in *Archive for Reformation History* 83 (1992), 73-90). Calvin can, of course, vehemently deny that believers “in any sense, merit what is bestowed upon them,” (CO 31: 593; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 432 (on Psalm 62: 11-2)). Yet scholars have begun to point to apparent ambiguities in the reformer’s statements (We are referring especially to the papers by George Hunsinger and Tony Lane). He can, after all, speak of meriting salvation in a certain sense (see, for instance, CO 2: 578-79; Inst. 3.14.21; this reference was brought to my attention by George Hunsinger and Tony Lane). Lane also observes: “Trent was not crass enough to state that works cause justification. Yet Calvin says as much of works, albeit as inferior causes (of eternal life)” (Lane, “The Role of Scripture,” 13). Could it be that Calvin’s true position, when more accurately understood, allies him more closely with Roman than had hitherto been conceded? In this regard, it is perhaps worth noting an interesting remark by Calvin on Jeremiah 10: 24 (where the prophet requests moderation in chastening). After noting that humankind cannot bear God’s strict rigor, and that therefore their only asylum is in his mercy, Calvin goes on to say: “not that he should pardon us altogether (*ignoscat nobis in totum*), for it is good for us to be chastised by his hand; but that he may chastise us only according to his paternal kindness” (CO 38: 93; CTS *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 2, 63). Further light may be shed on these questions by Lane in his forthcoming work, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: an Evangelical Assessment* (Edinburgh and New York: T & T Clark, 2002). For a general summary of some theological developments concerning the *meritum de congruo* see Oberman’s essay, “Duns Scotus, Nominalism, and the Council of Trent” in *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 204-33; esp. 211-225.

¹³² It should be noted, of course, that the Old Testament case laws were temporary and applicable only to the people for whom they were originally drafted. While they can still instruct God’s people in a general way, they no longer apply because they have served their purpose. Calvin makes numerous statements on the general abrogation of the shadowy and childlike portions of the law, but one of the clearest statements he makes about the civil law in particular is found in *Institutes* 4.20.14, 15 and 16. Introducing the common division of the law into moral, ceremonial and civil, he argues that the Old Testament civil law “imparted certain formulas of equity and justice” to Israel “by which they might live together blamelessly and peaceably,” but goes on to make it clear that it has been abrogated and that nations are now left to make such laws and they see to be profitable. Probing the matter further, he explains that the law of Moses is not “dishonored when it is abrogated and new laws preferred to it.” Rather, this is a necessity, given the “condition of times, place, and nation.” He even goes on to state that these laws “were never enacted for us” (CO 2: 1104-6; *Inst.* 4.20 14-6).

¹³³ CO 33: 458; *Sermons on Job*, 171b; slightly altered.

church is made like him and knows that glory which is hidden now, since “we see in a glass darkly” (by which Calvin refers to 1 Corinthians 13: 12), they will be very different from what they are now.¹³⁴ At that time, then, this accommodated form of legislation will pass away. Again, all, or any, of what this entails is unknown.

Hence, it can be seen that as in the arena of teaching so also in that of legislating and commanding, when God exercises his authority over his people his behavior is characterized by self-accommodation. Yet this time it is of a more radical sort. For this reason it cannot help but approach towards and make inroads (as it were) into the very citadel of the divine character.

3.2.3 When God sanctions religious rites and practices, and receives the worship of his people

Within the cultic arena, God accommodates himself to his children both in his work of sanctioning the practices which are to characterize his people's worship and in his reception of their acts of devotion.¹³⁵ This two-fold division of the subject will provide the structure for this section.

¹³⁴ CO 33: 458; *Sermons on Job*, 171b; slightly altered.

¹³⁵ Calvin's views on worship have recently received treatment from Elsie Anne McKee; see, “Context, Contours, Contents: Towards a Description of the Classical Reformed Teaching on Worship,” *Princeton Theological Seminary Bulletin* 16 (1995), 172-201. Also recent and noteworthy is: Carlos Eire, *War Against the Idols: the reformation of worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). For one of the many older treatments, see Brian Gerrish, “The Reformers' Theology of Worship” in *McCormick Quarterly* 14 (1961), 21-29. And for more on the matter, the bibliography provided in the first footnote of John Witvliet's paper is helpful; see, “Images and Themes in Calvin's Theology of Liturgy,” 130. In this paper Witvliet notes the lack of attention to the theme of liturgy which is apparent in studies on accommodation.

3.2.3.a God's Accommodating of the practices sanctioned in worship

God accommodates himself in the realm of worship by adjusting the “diverse forms” of cultic practice to the “different ages” of the church without altering the doctrine or making himself subject to change—so Calvin argues in his well-known statement on the subject in *Institutes* 2.11.13.¹³⁶ This declaration has received a skeptical review from David Wright, who suggests that it is difficult to credit and goes on to posit his distinction between a “primitive ethnos” and “sinners”.¹³⁷ Although Wright's observations on Jewish primitiveness are based on Calvin's comments on God's civil regulations and military activities, it will be shown below that the Lord also tempered his cultic directives with Ancient-Near-Eastern primitiveness in mind.

3.2.3.a.1 The worship God requires

The breadth, magnitude, and sheer complexity of God's accommodating campaign are monumental. Hence Calvin can, when discussing Jewish worship, refer to an accommodated *gubernatio*,¹³⁸ and is able, when comparing Moses with Christ, to generalize as follows: “Moses was different from Christ in this respect, that while the love of the gospel was not yet known he kept the people under veils, and ... in short,

¹³⁶ CO 2: 338-39; *Inst.* 2.11.13, cited on page 95 above. He is, of course, not the only theologian to assert this view, as was seen in chapter one. Further, it should be conceded that Calvin's declaration comprehends more than worship, being a commentary on the relation between the two testaments. But the objections with which he is dealing in this place focus particularly on the character of worship. So Calvin expresses the thoughts of his antagonists, which prompt his comments, as follows: “But it is remarkable, they say, that [God] now despises and abominates animal sacrifices and all the trappings of the Levitical priesthood that of old delighted him” (CO 2: 339; *Inst.* 2.11.13).

¹³⁷ This material was considered in chapters one and two. See, Wright, “Calvin's ‘Accommodation’ Revisited,” 177-8.

¹³⁸ CO 36: 40; CTS *Isaiah*, 1, 59 (on Isaiah 1: 14).

accommodated himself to the capacity of ignorant people.”¹³⁹ Hence also, numerous particulars within the regimen of Old covenant worship can be pointed to which reveal God's accommodating manner: the building of altars,¹⁴⁰ various ceremonies,¹⁴¹ and sacrifices,¹⁴² the forms of prayer handed down for the people,¹⁴³ as well as the most basic elements of symbol and imagery employed by the prophets,¹⁴⁴ and even seemingly insignificant details such as the zeal of a Nazarite,¹⁴⁵ the requirement to wear fringes,¹⁴⁶ and God's covering of the ark with gold¹⁴⁷—all are eloquent examples of the responsive measures taken by the accommodating God in appointing means and setting down requirements for his worship.

One instance which might be noted because of its impressive tenderness can be seen in God's appointing of the shewbread. Here was an especially remarkable occasion on which God “descended familiarly to them, as if,” Calvin says, “he were their messmates.” Thus, he stoops to his children in their smallness to be intimate with them and to show them his special favor, “as if coming to banquet with them.”¹⁴⁸ At other times his accommodation would not be quite so gentle.

¹³⁹ CO 55: 89; CTS *Hebrews*, 167 (on Hebrews 7: 12).

¹⁴⁰ CO 23: 366; CTS *Genesis*, 2, 71 (on Genesis 26: 25).

¹⁴¹ CO 52: 108; CTS *Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, 189 (on Colossians 2: 14).

¹⁴² CO 24: 439; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 212 (on Exodus 29: 28-35).

¹⁴³ CO 43: 564; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 132 (on Habakkuk 3: 1ff). This lasted throughout the Old covenant period, as we see from the fact that John the Baptist is included as one who handed down forms of prayer: “... John gave his disciples a particular training, and ... a settled form and fixed hours of prayer. Now, I reckon those prayers among outward observances. For, though calling on God holds the first rank in spiritual worship, yet that method of doing it was adapted to the rudeness of human beings (*ad hominum ruditatem*), ...” (CO 45: 253; CTS *Gospels*, 1, 406; slightly altered (on Matthew 9: 14)).

¹⁴⁴ CO 36: 343-4; CTS *Isaiah*, 2, 73 (on Isaiah 19: 19); see also, CO 31: 453; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 182 (on Psalm 45: 6).

¹⁴⁵ CO 24: 304; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 487 (on Numbers 6: 1-21).

¹⁴⁶ CO 24: 226-7; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 365 (on Numbers 15: 37-41).

¹⁴⁷ CO 24: 404; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 152 (on Exodus 25: 8-22).

¹⁴⁸ CO 24: 488; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 291 (on Leviticus 24: 5-9).

Through these various means, then, the Lord considers the rude condition of his people and contextualizes the worship of himself appropriately, training them through these things to contemplate the grace which would come with the arrival of their savior.¹⁴⁹ In the same way God tempers himself when sanctioning the rites and ceremonies which are employed by his New Testament church (though these are fewer in number¹⁵⁰). So when discussing the matter, Calvin can move quite smoothly between the Jews and their ceremonies and the Christians and theirs. For example in a sermon on Deuteronomy 12: 3-7, he discusses sacrifices, burnt offerings, vows, and the like and then declares to his hearers that *nous soyons exercez* by the sacraments and by ceremonies, which were instituted because “we are gross and rude.”¹⁵¹ Thus, both covenants witness to the divine penchant for accommodation.

3.2.3.a.2 *Worship and Barbarity in Israel*

Though this summary reveals something of the scope of divine self-limitation, issues of greater moment regarding divine attempering in worship appear only when the subject is probed more deeply. For in several areas of Jewish worship, God makes concessions to his people and their tendency to be influenced by their pagan neighbors. These bear a similar character to those seen in the legal arena. So, on 2 Samuel 6: 14, which concerns David's dancing in a linen ephod before the Lord, Calvin remarks:

¹⁴⁹ CO 2: 331; *Inst.* 2.11.3.

¹⁵⁰ SC 1: 155; *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 267 (on 2 Samuel 6: 14).

¹⁵¹ CO 27: 172; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 499a-b. See also OS 1: 467; *Tracts and Letters*, 1, 39. Of course, the fact that the sacraments figure both in this sphere and in the earlier, pedagogical, sphere simply demonstrates how integrated these different spheres are.

Well, we may find this very strange indeed, but let us note in the first place that God permitted his people to have many things in common with the pagans (*beaucoup de choses communes avec les payens*). Now it was customary for the pagans to leap and dance while worshipping their idols. God guided his people in that matter, indeed, so that they would not give themselves to wicked superstitions, nor say: 'We lack this; we must have it like the others.' ... But there was also another reason, for it is certain that he wanted to withdraw his people from all sacrilegious and dissolute joys so that they might learn to rejoice in him ... [it is our nature to rejoice too wildly] ... he holds an appropriate remedy for us, namely, that we may learn to rejoice in him. ... [this is why David was permitted to dance] ... Be that as it may, it was done in accordance with the times (*selon le temps*), which we must always remember.¹⁵²

What these "many things" are is not clear. But in addition to dancing, another of them seems to have been the use of music and musical instruments in worship.¹⁵³ Calvin alludes to this in at least two places. First, in a sermon on 1 Samuel 18: 6 he mentions that timbrels (or tambourines or tabrets) and other musical instruments were common in eastern regions, and later declares that, on account of the puerility of the Jews, musical instruments "were tolerated (*fuisse toleratam*)"—though he makes it clear that God's people did not use them to sing dissolute songs.¹⁵⁴ Secondly, in a curious remark on Miriam and the women singing and playing the tambourine (Exodus 15: 20), Calvin, saying nothing of God's ordaining of such practices, declares: "the beating of tambourines may appear absurd to many, but the custom of the nation excuses it (*eam mos gentis excusat*), which David attests to have flourished in his time as well."¹⁵⁵ In addition to these considerations, it should be noted that such criticisms by Calvin of the use of tambourines, dancing, and the like in Jewish worship are not uncommon, and

¹⁵² SC 1: 155; *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 267.

¹⁵³ Aside from the points which shall be rehearsed here, this assertion is further strengthened by the fact that Calvin seems often to treat music and dancing as intimately related, as can be seen from the examples cited in this section.

¹⁵⁴ CO 30: 259.

seem further to indicate a conviction on his part that these must have come into divine worship through a concession on God's part. So, Calvin declares these things to be "immoderate and unsuitable (*insolens et absonum*),"¹⁵⁶ "absurd (*absurdum*),"¹⁵⁷ and "very strange (*fort estrange*),"¹⁵⁸ and even goes so far as to say, in comments on Jeremiah 31: 4,¹⁵⁹ that "it is the tendency of all dances and sounds of tambourines to benumb profane people."¹⁶⁰ Thus, even at his most gentle, Calvin can only bring himself to describe music and singing as "many restraints and constant exercises (*multis fraenis atque assiduis exercitiis*)." ¹⁶¹

But Calvin can also speak of affinities between Jewish and pagan worship on a broader and more general scale.

Although between the Jews and Gentiles there were great affinities and likeness (*affinitas ac similitudo*) as regards the external form of their worship of God (*colendi Dei*), yet the end (*finis*) of each differed greatly.¹⁶²

Here the reformer clearly implies that a range of practices could be found in the worship of both groups which were identical. Indeed, so true is this that similarities between

¹⁵⁵ CO 24: 162; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 263; altered (on Exodus 15: 20).

¹⁵⁶ CO 30: 258.

¹⁵⁷ "... as absurd as it may appear to us, it was customary then for the women to play [the timbret]" (CO 31: 631; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 33; slightly altered (on Psalm 68: 27)); and also CO 24: 162; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 263.

¹⁵⁸ SC 1: 155; *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 267.

¹⁵⁹ The text reads: "you shall again be adorned with your tambourines, and shall go forth in the dances of those who rejoice (*adhuc ornaberis tympanis tuis, et exibis in chores ludentium*)" (CO 38: 646. English translation: CTS *Jeremiah*, 4, 60).

¹⁶⁰ CO 38: 646; CTS *Jeremiah*, 4, 60-1; slightly altered). This is also apparent in his sermon on 1 Samuel 18: 6 (see, CO 30: 258-61). It should also be noted that he is quite strong in his criticism of the contemporary use of music and dancing, the latter especially. Ronald Wallace's *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* contains a helpful treatment of Calvin's views on activities such as enjoying music and dancing for the Christian disciple; see Ronald Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), 174ff.

¹⁶¹ CO 32: 442; CTS *Psalms*, 5, 320; altered (Concerning David's exhortation, "Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, ... praise him with tambourine ..." (Psalm 150: 3-5)).

Israelite and pagan practices could on many fronts only be differentiated by considering internal matters. We see this in respect of the subject already treated: musical instruments were used by pagans and were common, "I confess ... to the church of God, and in fact by divine command, but the intention (*ratio*) of the Jews and the Chaldeans was different."¹⁶³ This can be seen elsewhere as well. When he explains the use of sackcloth among God's people, Calvin observes that it was common practice for them and that "we know also that the orientals were addicted beyond all others to ceremonies."¹⁶⁴ Even when discussing the sacrificing of animals, he asserts that the Gentiles seemed to satisfy their gods by simply offering victims, but Jewish offerings were acceptable "because they were exercises of repentance and faith."¹⁶⁵ So, he asserts, the law instructed the Jews "in the spiritual worship of God and in nothing else (*ad spiritualem solum Dei cultum*)," but it was clothed with ceremonies which agreed with "the requirements of the age (*ut ferebat temporis ratio*)"—implying again that the only differences were internal and that to accommodate to the age meant to be like the

¹⁶² CO 24: 404; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 154; altered (on Exodus 25: 1-22).

¹⁶³ CO 40: 625; CTS *Daniel*, 1, 212; altered (on Daniel 3: 2-7). In this passage, Calvin goes on to describe in some detail the internal differences which would have differentiated Jewish worship from that of the Chaldeans.

¹⁶⁴ CO 31: 299; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 496 (on Psalm 30: 11). Noting further the influence of pagan culture, Calvin, in a sermon on Deuteronomy 9: 15-21, seems to argue that the Israelites who danced before the golden calf were taking up a pagan custom: "dancing ... according to the manner of Idolaters;" see, CO : 690-702; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 400-6.

¹⁶⁵ CO 24: 404; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 154. This emphasis on the internal nature of worship is standard for Calvin. Even when the text of Scripture states categorically that God was pleased with an offering, as when we read, "the Lord smelled a sweet aroma" (Genesis 8: 21)-- "*odorem quietis*"—a pleasing aroma or an aroma of rest (CO 23: 139), Calvin denies it: "nothing can be more absurd than to suppose that God should have been appeased by the filthy smoke of entrails and flesh" (CO 23: 139; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 282; slightly altered). The sacrificial rite was merely another of those rudimentary elements which God's people required, and which God effectively overlooked. "[W]e must regard the end of the work (*finem operis*) and not confine ourselves to the external form" (CO 23: 139; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 283). The same point is argued in a longer passage in a sermon on Deuteronomy 12: 3-7; see, CO 27: 172; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 499a-b).

Gentiles in outward form.¹⁶⁶ Thus in Calvin's conception there was clearly a level of collusion between Jew and Gentile which was profound. This surely carries us closer to a conception of what the "many things" to which Calvin referred may involve. For although an itemized list cannot be drawn up and explicit declarations from Calvin on the matter are rare, it seems apparent that the accommodating God made concessions to his people on numerous issues by specifically sanctioning as part of divine worship those religious rites and practices which would have been familiar to Israel because they were part of the public domain (so to speak).

So then, the pervasiveness of God's attempering responses—or rather the invasiveness or even insidiousness of Ancient-Near-Eastern culture—in this area can be discerned. The latter clearly shaped the structure and content of cultic life, particularly, of course, in the experience of Israel.

3.2.3.b God's Accommodating of the Reception of Worship

In a way similar to what was seen earlier regarding the divine rewarding of obedience to the law, it goes virtually without saying that the worship which the Lord receives from his people is received *per concessionem*. Indeed a defense of this proposition is already implicit in the discussion just completed. So when Calvin announces that God did not enjoin the playing of the harp "as if like ourselves he took pleasure in the melody," but for the sake of the underage Jews, the reformer is

¹⁶⁶ CO 24: 404; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 154; slightly altered. A page earlier, Calvin insists that the legal rites of Israel must not be understood as farces "in imitation of the Gentiles." He explains this point further by pointing to the internal issues to which we have been alluding (CO 24: 403-4; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 153).

effectively declaring at least this aspect of public worship to be something which God accepts only by gracious dispensation.¹⁶⁷ Nor is this the only element of cultic life about which this same argument could be made. From these considerations the truth of the stated proposition becomes increasingly clear. This being so, however, there are still two specific areas which receive individual attention from the reformer, and which ought, therefore, to be briefly examined.

3.2.3.b.1 Vows and Prayers

Vows (and oaths)¹⁶⁸ aptly demonstrate God's concessionary acceptance of the people's worship, actually, in two ways. First, in Calvin's comments on the proclamation, "I will pay my vows to the Lord" (Psalm 116:14) accommodation is discovered. God's people are weak, unsure, lacking in assurance. Emphasizing the practicality of the divine response, Calvin insists that vows are not a method by which approval from God may be procured through flattery, but rather they are an aid to the household of faith. God "condescends" to allow his children "in their infirmity" to use his name as a support to strengthen their confidence in the divine promise.¹⁶⁹ In this way, the Lord virtually alters the focus of worship (or what one might presume was the focus of worship) so that its very institution is a kind of accommodation.

¹⁶⁷ CO 32: 11; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 495; altered (on Psalm 102: 3-4).

¹⁶⁸ The question of whether vows are part of worship is directly answered by Calvin when he states: "[i]t is nothing strange that [Zephaniah] connects swearing with worship, for it is a kind of divine worship" (CO 44: 11; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 198 (on Zephaniah 1: 5)). God understands the use of his name in swearing as a service to him, Calvin says in another place; see, CO 26: 271; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 194b (on Deuteronomy 5: 11).

¹⁶⁹ CO 32: 199; CTS *Psalms*, 4, 371.

Secondly, the greatness of the divine name becomes a vehicle through which an additional aspect or nuance of the accommodation of God may be seen. For God's willingness to grant to his people the use of a thing as holy as his name moves Calvin to remark on the divine condescension.

Is it not an inestimable goodness that our God humbles himself in this way and permits us to use his name? And why? For it is certain that the majesty of God is so precious that it ought not to be abased so low (*qu'elle ne doit point estre abbaissee iusques là*). But he wishes to accommodate himself to us.¹⁷⁰

Here accommodation reveals the humble God.

So it is with prayer as well. It is, of course, a most holy act and one which ought not to be entered into flippantly or as if it were a conversation between a believer and an ordinary human being.¹⁷¹ Nevertheless, God's managing of his interactions with his people looks once more to their *captus* for direction.

The Lord allows his people to conduct themselves in his presence in a manner hardly befitting a meeting with the Almighty. Some of these episodes are relatively harmless, while others strike at the very heart of what prayer is. So, God accommodates the forms of prayer recorded in Scripture to human understanding.¹⁷² He establishes fixed hours for prayer out of regard for believers' frailties.¹⁷³ He designs prayer so as to

¹⁷⁰ CO 26: 271; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 194a; altered. Calvin also declares: "For it is a singular indulgence on the part of God that he allows us to take up his name when there is any controversy among us, ... it is surely a great favor, for how great is the sanctity of that name though it also serves even earthly concerns? Nevertheless, God accommodates himself so far to us, that it is lawful for us to swear by his name" (CO 44: 11; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 198, slightly altered).

¹⁷¹ CO 2: 628; *Inst.* 3.20.5.

¹⁷² CO 31: 133; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 184 (on Psalm 13: 3).

¹⁷³ CO 31: 542; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 339 (on Psalm 55: 16).

allow his children to approach him familiarly.¹⁷⁴ Thus, he permits petitioners to present arguments before him to substantiate their requests, though this is superfluous.¹⁷⁵ He concedes to them the right to pour out their feelings to him,¹⁷⁶ ask him to consider their infirmity,¹⁷⁷ and even to urge him to wake up¹⁷⁸ or make haste.¹⁷⁹ He allows them to dispute with him,¹⁸⁰ to utter ridiculous statements¹⁸¹ and make a variety of foolish requests of him.¹⁸² Given these impressive facts, it is not surprising to find Calvin again comparing believers with gentiles, for here as well they conduct themselves in ways which outwardly appear identical. Although the reformer notes that believers distinguish themselves by the sincerity and piety which tend to characterize even their cries and complaints, it is difficult to see how in fact this can be the case, at least on some occasions¹⁸³—a consideration which helps to capture something of the spirit of the Lord's attempering manner.

¹⁷⁴ CO 31: 640; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 53 (on Psalm 69: 6); CO 23: 469; CTS *Genesis*, 2, 238 (on Genesis 35: 7).

¹⁷⁵ "As then we flee to God, whenever necessity urges us, so also we remind him, like a son who unburdens all his feelings in the bosom of his father. Thus in prayer the faithful reason and expostulate with God, and bring forward all those things by which he may be pacified towards them; in short, they deal with him after the manner of men, as though they would persuade him concerning that which yet has been decreed before the creation of the world: but as the eternal counsel of God is hid from us, we ought in this respect to act wisely and according to the measure of our faith" (CO 38: 203-4; CTS *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 2, 244).

¹⁷⁶ CO 23: 209; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 401 (on Genesis 15: 2).

¹⁷⁷ CO 23: 442-43; CTS *Genesis*, 2, 198 (on Genesis 32: 26).

¹⁷⁸ CO 31: 566; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 382 (on Psalm 59: 2).

¹⁷⁹ CO 31: 828-29; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 454 (on Psalm 89: 47).

¹⁸⁰ CO 33: 613; *Sermons on Job*, 230a.

¹⁸¹ CO 31: 67; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 55 (on Psalm 5: 4 in which the Psalmist declares that God is not a God who delights in wickedness).

¹⁸² CO 31: 269; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 447 (on Psalm 26: 9 in which the Psalmist asks God not to gather his soul with wicked people).

¹⁸³ CO 39: 531; CTS *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 5, 338 (on Lamentations 1: 20). See also CO 26: 77; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 98b.

3.2.3.c The End of Accommodated Worship

On the subject of the rescinding of God's accommodated managing of worship, the reformer's opinions are left to be inferred. For example, he states:

Although full vision (*plena visio*) will be deferred until the day of Christ, a nearer view of God will begin to be enjoyed immediately after death, when our souls, set free from the body, will have no more need of outward ministry or other inferior helps (*aliis inferioribus subsidiis*).¹⁸⁴

The crux of the assertion certainly suggests some kind of radical change. Though the scope of the phrase "inferior helps" may be impossible to determine precisely, as also the nature of the glorified believer's worship, yet this full vision to which Calvin refers seems clearly to consist of a hitherto unrealized sense of unaccommodated immediacy. Beyond this it is difficult to proceed.

3.2.4 When God pastors his flock

Having treated three dimensions of God's accommodating behavior, a fourth—shepherding—will now be taken up. "We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture" (Psalm 100: 3), writes the Psalmist.¹⁸⁵ God is called the shepherd of his flock. As indicated in remarks such as the following on the words, "he shall carry them in his

¹⁸⁴ CO 49: 515; CTS *The Corinthians*, 1, 431; slightly altered. The reference to the beautiful vision raises tantalizing questions about the relation between Calvin and Aquinas, for which see, Arvin Vos, *Aquinas, Calvin, and contemporary Protestant thought: a critique of Protestant views on the thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington: Christian University Press, 1985).

¹⁸⁵ Cited from *NRSVB*, 564.

bosom” (Isaiah 40: 11),¹⁸⁶ Calvin’s construal of God’s fulfilling of this role involves accommodation.

These words describe God’s wonderful condescension, for not only is he led by a general feeling of love for his whole flock, but, in proportion to the weakness of any one sheep, he shows his carefulness in watching, his gentleness in handling, and his patience in leading it. Here he leaves out nothing that belongs to the office of a good shepherd. For the shepherd ought to observe each of his sheep, in order that he may treat it according to its capacity; and especially they ought to be supported, if they are exceedingly weak. In a word, God will be mild, kind, gentle, and compassionate, so that he will not drive the weak harder than they are able to bear.¹⁸⁷

The activities mentioned by Calvin—watching, handling, and leading—begin to sketch out for us the boundaries of this section. Here God’s responses are marked not so much by concession as by condescension and tenderness. That having been said, stern measures to persuade the recalcitrant will also figure in this section. But a full exposition of this sphere awaits a more careful examination of Calvin’s *corpus*.¹⁸⁸

3.2.4.a God cares for, leads, and protects his people

For God even to call himself a shepherd (as, for instance, in Psalm 23) is, Calvin says, an example of his stooping as well as a sign of his profound concern for his church.¹⁸⁹ Accordingly, a variety of the Lord’s occupations towards his fold

¹⁸⁶ “*sinu suo portabit*” (CO 37: 15; ET: CTS *Isaiah*, 3, 216).

¹⁸⁷ CO 37: 15; CTS *Isaiah*, 3, 216; slightly altered.

¹⁸⁸ As much of what will be dealt with here concerns God’s governing of providence, it is worth recalling the fact that de Jong also acknowledged this as an aspect of God’s accommodating behavior; see, *Accommodatio Dei*, 187-92.

¹⁸⁹ “As this is a lowly and homely manner of speaking, he who does not disdain to stoop so low for our sake must bear a singularly strong affection towards us” (CO 31: 238; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 392 (on Psalm 23: 1)).

demonstrate this accommodating concern. He condescends to feed his children,¹⁹⁰ and to take care of their lives.¹⁹¹ He stoops to provide for their needs, to be the guardian of their salvation,¹⁹² and to adorn his people with glory.¹⁹³ He lowers himself to fight, as a mortal man would, for the cause of his church and to ensure their safety.¹⁹⁴ He does not mind taking care of the smallest detail which concerns his people's advantage,¹⁹⁵ and always directs them with their capacity in mind.

This directing often involves God in helping his children through difficulties. In such cases, he either eases or simply removes their trial or burden depending on his assessment of their ability to manage it. When his people, brooding outside the promised land, are beside themselves with anxiety, God sends spies from among their number to search it, bring back a report, and settle their minds.¹⁹⁶ Reflecting on the episode, Calvin observes that God often "gives us means suited (*convenables*) to our infirmity."¹⁹⁷ Following Israel's grumbling over the bitter waters at Marah, he gives in *per concessionem* to their dissatisfaction and moves them to Elim.¹⁹⁸ Additionally, as his people would have been gripped with no small fear, God "spared the weakness of his people (*pepercit Deus suorum infirmitati*)" by delaying the alliance formed by the kings who combined to fight against Israel.¹⁹⁹ And similarly, he causes the kings of the Amorites and Canaanites to be terrified by Israel as a concession so that victory might be

¹⁹⁰ CO 31: 738; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 265. Verbs such as *descendere*, *se demittere*, and *se submittere* are commonplace in the reformer's remarks.

¹⁹¹ CO 31: 302-3; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 502.

¹⁹² CO 31: 330; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 548.

¹⁹³ CO 31: 91; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 100 (on Psalm 8: 4).

¹⁹⁴ CO 42: 583; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 2, 116 (Joel 3: 1-3).

¹⁹⁵ CO 32: 411; CTS *Psalms*, 5, 269-70.

¹⁹⁶ CO 25: 664; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 31a (on Deuteronomy 1: 22-28).

¹⁹⁷ CO 25: 664; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 31a; slightly altered.

easier for his people, because “they had already proven themselves to be far too sluggish and cowardly.”²⁰⁰ The same point is noted in God’s sending of such a large number of Israelites to fight against Ai.²⁰¹ And when Jabin and a whole host of nations are providentially delayed from federating, this is done “in assisting [Israel’s] weakness by kindness and indulgence:” God was, Calvin says, “unwilling to press beyond measure his own, who were otherwise feeble (*praeter modum suos alioqui debiles*), lest the excessive numbers of the enemy should strike them with terror and drive them to despair.”²⁰²

But even with these concessions, believers still find that their trials overwhelm them at times. Hence, God accommodates himself to hear their cries and complaints, and invites them to unburden themselves to him (as was seen earlier). He listens to their requests, granting many of them, but keeping from his flock those things which would be given only to their detriment.²⁰³ Aware of their frailty, he strives to encourage believers,²⁰⁴ and constantly offers them his protection and help: “God condescends to gather under his wings the mortal offspring of Adam.”²⁰⁵ In these general ways, then, God’s guardianship demonstrates his condescension.

¹⁹⁸ CO 24: 164; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 267 (on Exodus 15: 27).

¹⁹⁹ CO 25: 490-1; CTS *Joshua*, 136 (on Joshua 9: 1-2).

²⁰⁰ “Thus God spared their weakness (*eorum infirmitati pepercit Deus*), as if he had opened up the way by removing obstacles, since in other respects they had already proven ...” (CO 25: 458; CTS *Joshua*, 77; slightly altered (on Joshua 5: 1)).

²⁰¹ God had regard for their infirmity (*eorum infirmitati consuluit*); see, CO 25: 483; CTS *Joshua*, 122 (on Joshua 8: 1-12).

²⁰² CO 25: 507; CTS *Joshua*, 166; slightly altered (on Joshua 11: 1-5).

²⁰³ “In fact, God thus attempers (*temperat*) his bounty towards us, lest we should be too much taken up with earthly prosperity” (CO 24: 14; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 27); see also, CO 31: 731; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 249 (on Psalm 78: 26).

²⁰⁴ CO 25: 429; CTS *Joshua*, 26 (on Joshua 1: 1-2).

3.2.4.b God employs angels

One way in which he facilitates this care for his flock and for the universe is by using angels in his governing of providence.²⁰⁶ Of course, Calvin explains, the power of God alone is completely sufficient to govern all things²⁰⁷ (a point which is implicitly testified to by the fact that God also stoops to care for the angels²⁰⁸). He is, therefore, not compelled by necessity to employ angels, but does so out of consideration for human capacity.²⁰⁹ Hence, the very presence of angels in redemptive history is a kind of accommodation to human fear and frailty.

So also is virtually every thing we know about them. Indeed, a fact as seemingly insignificant as God's refraining from mentioning them in the history of creation is attributed to divine accommodation.²¹⁰ Equally, that they are depicted in Scripture as winged creatures having bodily form (though they are, of course, spirits who lack such form), and are designated by the names cherubim and seraphim, are both adjustments made on account of the believer's feeble comprehension.²¹¹ Even when God gives them names—Michael, Gabriel and so forth—these, as may be discerned from their meanings, are given on account of human frailty.²¹²

²⁰⁵ CO 31: 363; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 11 (on Psalm 36: 7).

²⁰⁶ For a useful treatment of Calvin's views on the subject of angels in its patristic and medieval context, see Schreiner, *The Theater of his Glory*, 39-53. She does not deal with accommodation in this discussion. Nor does T.H.L. Parker in his discussion of angels in *Calvin; An Introduction*, 36-8.

²⁰⁷ CO 31: 339; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 562-3 (on Psalm 34: 7).

²⁰⁸ "... the prophet not only commends his mercy to human beings ... but he reminds us that, by right, he is able to despise ... the angels as well, except that, moved by fatherly love, he condescends to embrace them in his care" (CO 32: 178; CTS *Psalms*, 4, 333; altered).

²⁰⁹ "... God, although he cannot stand in need of auxiliaries, has seen fit, in accommodation to our infirmity, to employ a multitude of [angels] in the accomplishment of our salvation" (CO 31: 542; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 340; on Psalm 55: 18).

²¹⁰ CO 2: 119; *Inst.* 1.14.3.

²¹¹ CO 23: 79-81; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 185-6 (on Genesis 3: 23).

²¹² CO 2: 123; *Inst.* 1.14.8.

Turning attention to the divine employment of angels, God sends them as his messengers, governs the universe through them, and especially commissions them for the accomplishment of the salvation of his people, all in accommodation to their weakness.²¹³ Angels are specifically mentioned and their activities recounted for the encouragement of the saints.²¹⁴ God sends them to his servants to bolster their courage and comfort them.²¹⁵ In fact, the appearance of angels is usually an indication of the severe state into which God's servants have fallen, as can be seen, for example, with Mary at the tomb.²¹⁶ Accordingly, it is not surprising that angels should appear to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego,²¹⁷ Daniel,²¹⁸ and Christ,²¹⁹ each of whom stood in need of this accommodated assistance. Angels accommodate their discourses.²²⁰ Even the questions asked by an angel can be intended to rouse the pious from their lethargy.²²¹ They are normally marked with signs in accommodation to human stupidity, as was the case, for example, with Hagar,²²² Daniel,²²³ and Mary.²²⁴ And finally, the consolation provided by angels is given more permanent significance by the presence of the two cherubim on the ark, who indicate that God dwells familiarly with his people.²²⁵ In all

²¹³ "He provides for our infirmities by bringing us help by means of his angels, who act like hands to execute his commands" (CO 41: 215-6; CTS *Daniel*, 2, 266 (on Daniel 10: 21)).

²¹⁴ CO 31: 626; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 23 (on Psalm 68: 17).

²¹⁵ CO 32: 5-7; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 484-85, 487 (on Psalm 91: 11-12); see also, CO 36: 642; CTS *Isaiah*, 3, 145-6 (on Isaiah 37: 36).

²¹⁶ CO 47: 430-1; CTS *John's Gospel*, 2, 255 (on John 20: 12).

²¹⁷ CO 40: 638; CTS *Daniel*, 1, 230-1 (on Daniel 3: 24-25).

²¹⁸ CO 41: 104-5; CTS *Daniel*, 2, 104-5 (on Daniel 8: 13-14).

²¹⁹ CO 45: 726; CTS *Gospel*, 3, 237 (on Matthew 26: 42).

²²⁰ CO 45: 75; CTS *Gospels*, 1, 116 (on Luke 2: 11).

²²¹ CO 41: 106; CTS *Daniel*, 2, 107 (on Daniel 8: 13-14).

²²² CO 23: 227; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 430 (on Genesis 16: 7).

²²³ CO 41: 198-9; CTS *Daniel*, 2, 241-3 (on Daniel 10: 5-6).

²²⁴ CO 46: 950; *Sermons on Saving Work*, 192 (on Matthew 28: 1-10).

²²⁵ "... as often as [God] manifested himself to believers by angels, he in a manner extended his hand to them. ... On this ground, David, and other prophets, in order to encourage themselves to confidence in prayer, often speak of God as dwelling between the cherubims, as much as to say, that he conversed

these ways, God makes use of this host of angelic servants in his endeavors to guide, protect, and care for his flock.

3.2.4.c God rouses, threatens, tests, and chastens

But God's children and all humankind often need a firmer kind of guidance. For this reason, the divine shepherd and physician employs a number of sterner means to try to extricate them from their lethargy, put a stop to their disobedience, or call them back from their declension.

In the most gentle of these, the Lord strives to entice and arouse his people. Unlike his pedagogical endeavors, which normally involve the Almighty making himself more like his creatures, here he often manifests something of his incomparable majesty to his children in order to awaken them.²²⁶ Though this is by no means its only expression, it gives us a sense of the character of the actions being discussed under this head. A constant element in the preaching of his prophets,²²⁷ these attempts to stimulate are also present in God's crafting of the law (as was seen earlier), the gospel message,²²⁸ in his instituting of sacraments,²²⁹ and is almost as likely to appear in more unexpected

familiarly with his people, since his virtue exercises itself by his angels" (CO 24: 406; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 157 (on Exodus 25: 18)).

²²⁶ "What follows in the next verse, 'say unto the children of Israel, I am the Lord,' is intended to remove their doubts. It was a thing as impossible to human apprehension, to tear way this weak and unwarlike people from their cruel tyrants, as to rescue sheep from the jaws of wolves,... therefore God begins by declaring his incomparable power, to show that there is no difficulty with him in performing anything whatever, although incredible" (CO 24: 79; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 129 (on Exodus 6: 5)). Also, Isaiah 1:20: "to arouse people from a deep slumber, he reminds them that these words were not spoken by a mortal man but by the mouth of God" (CO 36: 48; CTS *Isaiah*, 1, 72).

²²⁷ See, for example, CO 43: 499; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 23-4 (on Habakkuk 1: 5); CO 37: 230-1; CTS *Isaiah*, 4, 72 (on Isaiah 51: 7); CO 32: 608; *Sermons on the hundred and nineteenth Psalme*, 216.

²²⁸ CO 2: 368-9; *Inst.* 2.16.2-3.

²²⁹ CO 26: 157-8; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 138b (on Deuteronomy 4: 15-20).

places, such as in the beauty which the Lord gave to the baby Moses.²³⁰ Even God's governing of the times and seasons falls into this category. So, when the days of winter and summer differ in length, the temperature changes in each of the various seasons, and storms, snow, and sunny appear so randomly from one day to the next, "God rouses us up, that we may not grow torpid in our grossness."²³¹ Towards this end, as was seen earlier in relation to the law and worship, the Lord also offers rewards, by which he "allures his people to obedience."²³² In short, Calvin's God is incessantly trying to quicken his sluggish people to a more heartfelt discharging of their duties.²³³

Increasing the intensity, God employs threats in order to startle those who pay no heed to his words. Not only are they appended to his commandments,²³⁴ but they regularly appear in God's dealings, as a comment on Daniel 9: 13 explains:

He gently and mercifully invites both bad and good by his word, and adds promises as well with which he may entice them. Then, when he observes them either slow or refractory, he uses threats that they might awaken them.²³⁵

And, in an individual example, God holds out the danger of plagues to Pharaoh so that, even if he does so unwillingly, he will be compelled to obey; "for so must the stubborn

²³⁰ "... God had adorned him with this beauty, in order the more to influence his parents to preserve him; as it sometimes happens that when God sees his people slow in the performance of their duty, he spurs on their inactivity by allurements" (CO 24: 23; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 42 (on Exodus 2: 2)).

²³¹ CO 40: 577; CTS *Daniel*, 1, 145 (on Daniel 2: 21).

²³² CO 24: 241; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 388 (on Deuteronomy 8: 5); see also, CO 25: 21; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 228 (on Deuteronomy 12: 28).; CO 23: 176-76; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 346 (on Genesis 12: 2); CO 25: 214; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 345 (on Deuteronomy 5: 32); CO 24: 241; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 388 (on Deuteronomy 8: 5).

²³³ E. David Willis' emphasizing of this aspect of accommodation has already been discussed in chapter one, and the strengths and weaknesses of it discussed there as well; See, Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility," 53-5.

²³⁴ So Calvin declares in his exegesis of the third commandment that a threat is added "whereby we see human dullness (*la stupidité*)" (CO 26: 277; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 197a).

²³⁵ CO 41: 148; CTS *Daniel*, 2, 168; slightly altered (on Daniel 9: 13).

be dealt with.”²³⁶ But such treatment is by no means reserved for the wicked.²³⁷ As Calvin notes: “God also sometimes threatens his own servants in order to stimulate their laziness;” a fact which finds ample substantiation within the Calvinian *corpus*.²³⁸ Though the reformer continues this sentiment by declaring that God is “more severe” with the perverse than with his people,²³⁹ his comments elsewhere clearly contradict this. Calvin frequently asserts that God is harsher towards his own precisely because he loves them more. To offer one example, in a sermon on Deuteronomy 7: 11-15 he declares that the just often languish in misery while the wicked prosper precisely because God works towards their salvation.²⁴⁰ For the reformer, then, threats, trials, and temptations are part and parcel of the believer’s life on earth. Indeed, in this fact Calvin almost seems at times to revel.²⁴¹

²³⁶ CO 24: 97; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 158 (on Exodus 8: 1-4).

²³⁷ Calvin makes it plain that while God wishes to arouse the wicked with his threats, he also intends to prepare them for judgment. So, in commenting on 1 Peter 4: 17, Calvin explains that God so tempers “his judgments (*iudicia sua ... temperat*)” in this life that he fattens the wicked for the day of judgment; see, CO 55: 282; CTS *Catholic Epistles*, 139.

²³⁸ CO 24: 97; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 158. Many examples could be cited, especially from the prophets, to show God’s use of threats. Calvin specifically comments on the need for them in respect to human *captus* quite often: “But because our sluggish flesh (*carnis pigrities*) needs to be spurred, threats are also added to inspire terror” (CO 25: 23; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 231 (on Leviticus 26: 14)); see also, CO 24: 202; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 329 (on Exodus 19: 21-2); CO 33: 603-4; *Sermons on Iob*, 226b-227a (on Job 12: 17-25); CO 44: 25; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 222 (on Zephaniah 1: 14).

²³⁹ CO 24: 97; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 158.

²⁴⁰ CO 26: 540-41; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 324b-325a.

²⁴¹ Hence, Calvin’s comments on Psalm 73 and on Jeremiah 12: 1 plainly acknowledge the prosperity of the wicked in comparison to the righteous in this life; see, CO 31: 675-6; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 125-6; CO 38: 127-8; CTS *Jeremiah*, 2, 118. See also a sermon on Job 42: 6-8, in which Calvin says that we daily find that “the state of the faithful is more miserable than the state of those who despise of God” and goes on to explain the matter (CO 35: 492; *Sermons on Iob*, 743a; slightly altered). See also, CO 33: 205; *Sermons on Iob*, 365b (on Job 21: 1-6). This is all nicely stated by Calvin in the following: “And this sentence deserves to be specially noticed; for we are reminded, that though the Lord does not indeed spare unbelievers, he yet more closely observes us, and that he will punish us more severely, if he sees us to be obstinate and incurable to the last. Why so? Because we have come nearer to him, and he looks on us as his family, placed under his eyes; not that anything is hid or concealed from him, but the Scripture speaks after a human manner” (CO 43: 160-61; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 2, 390-91; slightly altered (on Amos 9: 4)). Not surprisingly, then, Susan Schreiner declares: “Calvin is acutely aware that the faithful always suffer” (Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom*, 121).

But here we have already begun to touch on the subject of chastisements, which God inflicts when his threats fail to work. So, the reformer's analysis of Daniel 9 continues as follows:

But when threats produce no effect, he goes forth in arms and chastises the sluggish people. Should these stripes produce no improvement, the desperate character of the people becomes apparent.²⁴²

At times, this discipline is brought against the wicked, though for the sake of God's children. "When God perceives that we are so slow in considering his judgments, he inflicts upon the ungodly judgments of a very severe kind ... in order thereby to correct our dullness."²⁴³ But, very often, this punishment is inflicted by God on his own sons and daughters.²⁴⁴

The accommodation present in such scolding is expressed in two different ways. First, God attempers himself to human dullness and hardness by applying correction to his unresponsive people. "We need not," Calvin pontificates, "be surprised if God often strikes us with his hand, since the result of experience proves us to be dull and ... utterly

The Lord's use of threats raise underlying questions about the integrity of the divine word with which Calvin must deal. How can God declare that Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days and then not follow through with this? Calvin normally declares that threats such as Jonah's proclamation to Nineveh simply have an implied condition; see, CO 43: 250-1; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 3, 99-100 (on Jonah 3: 5). Yet, the reformer is not averse to lumping such a situation in with his discussion of those places in Scripture in which God is described as changing his mind. On these occasions, he treats the whole matter as an accommodation to human understanding; see, CO 2: 164-6; *Inst.* 1.17.12-13.

²⁴² CO 41: 148; CTS *Daniel*, 2, 168; slightly altered (on Daniel 9: 13). On the general topic of providence and specifically the role of difficult providences and their relation to the Christian life, a sound treatment can be found in John Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 107-45.

²⁴³ CO 31: 684; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 146; slightly altered; see also, CO 33: 559; *Sermons on Iob*, 210b (on Job 12: 1-6).

²⁴⁴ The question of how God could inflict punishment on his sons and daughters for whom Christ died and whose misdeeds have, thus, already been fully paid for does not seem to have occurred to Calvin. Or, at least, we are not aware of any place where he addresses the issue.

slothful.”²⁴⁵ Such severity can be seen with equal clarity in God’s bringing of tests and trials on his own throughout the course of their lives. Thus, because the Lord’s people are so indolent, he cannot allow them to be at ease in this life but must continually send afflictions to them or they will never think of heaven but will set their hearts on earth.²⁴⁶ So Calvin can write: “if it were not for our vices, God’s temporal kindness would shine more brightly upon us.”²⁴⁷

But God’s accommodation expresses itself in another way as well. For, Calvin points out that when the Lord chastens humankind, and this applies exclusively (it would seem) to his church, he is sensitive to their capacity so that he does not afflict them too severely. This was addressed in chapter two, where the reformer’s sermon on Job 2: 7-10 was cited.²⁴⁸ It can be seen elsewhere as well. In chastening, the Almighty does not look, says Calvin, to “what our sins require, but what we are able to bear (*mais ce que nous pouvons porter*),”²⁴⁹ regulating his treatment of his church according to what he knows of their infirmities²⁵⁰ (and he knows our infirmities better than we do²⁵¹). Accordingly, he tempers his discipline, pitying his children’s feebleness (*foiblesse*).²⁵² Therefore, believers have reason to give thanks that God “regards our infirmity (*regard à nostre infirmité*) when he punishes us only according to that which he sees us able to

²⁴⁵ The comments concern Nebuchadnezzar’s ascription of glory to God (in Daniel 4: 1-3), but they address the believer’s situation; see, CO 40: 649; CTS *Daniel*, 1, 245. The extremity of these measures will be probed further in the next chapter.

²⁴⁶ CO 33: 403; *Sermons on Job*, 150a-b (on Job 8: 13-22).

²⁴⁷ CO 32: 172-3; CTS *Psalms*, 4, 322 (on Psalm 112: 2-3).

²⁴⁸ See CO 33: 116-17; *Sermons on Job*, 38a-b.

²⁴⁹ CO 33: 268; *Sermons on Job*, 97b (on Job 5: 17-8).

²⁵⁰ CO 34: 614; *Sermons on Job*, 518a (on Job 30: 21-31).

²⁵¹ “... *il cognoist nos infirmités mieux que nous*” (CO 34: 614; ET: *Sermons on Job*, 518a).

²⁵² CO 33: 270; *Sermons on Job*, 98a.

endure.”²⁵³ Moving outside of the Joban material, we find this sensitivity appears in the law also. Calvin states concerning a chastisement enjoined in Leviticus 19: 20-22 that “in consideration of the people’ s infirmity, the punishment is mitigated.”²⁵⁴ Nor is it absent from the prophets either, as Calvin’s thoughts on Jeremiah’s prayer, “correct me, but with judgment (*in judicio*)” (Jeremiah 20: 24) indicate: “God, then, so indulges (*ita indulget*) miserable sinners, that he regards what they can bear (*ut respiciat quid ferre queant*), and not what they deserve.”²⁵⁵ And the same is seen in relation to all of life’s trials and afflictions. Accordingly, Calvin explains that although a “continual warfare” of cross-bearing is enjoined upon God’s people by divine appointment, yet “sometimes, it is true, a truce or respite is granted to us, because God has compassion upon our infirmity.”²⁵⁶ In these ways, then, God alters his conduct towards his children so that their suffering will not overwhelm them.

In sum, the pastoring dimension of God’s accommodating program reveals a variety of divine employments. From God’s stooping to deal with his people, care for their needs, and protect them, to his commissioning of angels, to his easing of burdens, rousing, threatening, testing, and chastening—in all these ways, he tempers his involvement with his creatures and especially his household with their weakness in mind. Much of this is by its very nature going to end with the parousia. Yet, Calvin’s discussion of this fact does not add substantially to our knowledge of his position on the Lord’s accommodating ways, and therefore shall be passed over.

²⁵³ CO 33: 118; *Sermons on Job*, 38b; slightly altered.

²⁵⁴ CO 24: 650; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 80.

²⁵⁵ CO 38: 93; CTS *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 2, 63; slightly altered.

²⁵⁶ CO 31: 447; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 170; slightly altered (on Psalm 44: 22)..

3.2.5 When God comes to earth: incarnational accommodation

When God comes to earth, he also attempts himself. That a full section should be devoted to his endeavors in this area ought not to seem strange given the significance of the incarnation and its place in redemptive history.²⁵⁷ But, as the issue is probed, it will be discovered that Calvin's assertions on this subject are themselves justification for giving careful treatment to the topic. Here then a summary of God's accommodating work as it appears within this sphere of activity will be produced.

Not only, as was seen earlier, is Christ himself an accommodated expression (as it were) of the knowledge of God, but also his life and work exhibit the divine penchant for such self-limitation. First of all, accommodation can be seen with respect to Christ's incarnation itself. In becoming a man and taking upon himself our condition, Christ has lowered himself and condescended far below his majesty.²⁵⁸ "God himself condescended to become earth (*Deus ipse terra fieri dignatus est*)."²⁵⁹ This fact finds perhaps its most eloquent testimony from Christ's own mouth. On many occasions Christ's references to himself are interpreted by Calvin as attestations to his lowly state. For instance, when Christ states, "I am one who testify concerning myself, and the Father who sent me testifies concerning me" (John 8: 17-18), Calvin observes:

²⁵⁷ There is much too much work done on this subject to mention here. Standard treatments of the subject would include, John Jansen, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Work of Christ* (London: J. Clark, 1956) and Paul Van Buren, *Christ in Our Place: The Substitutionary Character of Calvin's Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957). So far as we are aware, there is no treatment of accommodation in relation to Jesus Christ which was not mentioned in chapter two. The scholarly community views God's accommodation in Christ according to its revelatory character, as was discussed in the treatment of pedagogical accommodation earlier in this chapter.

²⁵⁸ "God in Christ condescended to the mean condition of men, so as to stretch out his hand" (CO 47: 194-5; CTS *John's Gospel*, 1, 329 (on John 8: 19)); see also, CO 46: 956; *Sermons on Saving Work*, 36 (on Luke 2: 1-14).

²⁵⁹ CO 32: 51-2; CTS *Psalms*, 4, 78 (on Psalm 99: 5).

As to his distinguishing himself from his Father, by doing so he accommodates himself to the capacity of his hearers, and that on account of his office (*idque pro officii ratione*), because he was at that time a servant of the Father, from whom, therefore, he asserts that all his doctrine has proceeded.²⁶⁰

On top of this, Christ's life and behavior display accommodation. So, when he abases himself to become nothing,²⁶¹ lowers himself to the state of being willing to serve, and shares in all the miseries of humankind,²⁶² he descends from his regal status to a position far below it. "It is ... surprising that Jesus Christ should be the servant of human beings; that the Son of God, who had equal glory with his father ... should lower himself even to the state of being willing to serve us."²⁶³ Such lowering of himself can also be seen in a bevy of specific activities: Christ's using of the things of ordinary life,²⁶⁴ his manner in prayer,²⁶⁵ his willingness to take the position of a suppliant,²⁶⁶ his many discourses,²⁶⁷ and even his conceding to the superstitions of the people by healing the woman who touched his garment²⁶⁸—in all these things, the Son of God tempers himself to the human condition. Accordingly, in a fascinating comment on the text, "He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets" (Matthew 12: 19), Calvin writes:

²⁶⁰ CO 47: 194; CTS *John's Gospel*, 1, 328 (on John 8: 17-8). Such statements are also, occasionally, concessions to the fact that his hearers think of him as a mere man; see, for example, CO 47: 333-4; CTS *John's Gospel*, 2, 99 (on John 14: 24).

²⁶¹ CO 35: 600; *Sermons on Isaiah's Prophecy*, 35.

²⁶² CO 53: 163; *Sermons on Timothy and Titus*, 164b (on 1 Timothy 2: 5-6).

²⁶³ CO 35: 666; *Sermons on Isaiah's Prophecy*, 125.

²⁶⁴ CO 45: 307; CTS *Gospels*, 2, 20 (on Luke 7: 33).

²⁶⁵ CO 45: 439; CTS *Gospels*, 2, 235 (on Matthew 14: 19).

²⁶⁶ CO 35: 683; *Sermons on Isaiah's Prophecy*, 145.

²⁶⁷ CO 47: 146; CTS *John's Gospel*, 1, 252 (on John 6: 38).

²⁶⁸ CO 45: 445; CTS *Gospels*, 2, 244 (on Matthew 14: 36).

The general meaning is that the coming of Christ will not be attended by noise, ... And it is surely an astonishing display of human foolishness that their sentiments with regards to Christ are less respectful because he mildly and voluntarily accommodates himself to their capacity. Were Christ to appear in his glory, what else could be expected but that it would altogether swallow us up? What wickedness then is it to be less willing to receive him, when on our account he descends from his height?²⁶⁹

Though these are broad categories, when taken together they clearly reveal that in innumerable daily activities, many of them mundane if not irksome to Christ, he adapted his behavior to the capacity of the immediate public with whom he was interacting and with humankind generally.

Thus, it can be seen that Christ's life was in many ways infused with accommodation. But also behind this life, accommodation appears, namely, as an element of the thinking which went into the decision to send the eternal Son of God. This sending, Calvin insists, was not a necessity in the absolute sense. "Rather it has stemmed from a heavenly decree, on which human salvation depended."²⁷⁰ Furthermore and more precisely, Christ's advent was not an essential prerequisite for the granting of forgiveness. Because God's righteous judgment does not insist upon being compensated or avenged, he could have forgiven believers without the intercession of Christ. But, as Calvin explains, human lethargy made the appearance of the Son of God a virtual necessity.

Not that God demands vengeance in the same way as human beings. A man who is angry will want reparation made for the injury and some amends, and punishment meted out, so that he may be avenged. God has not passions like these. But all the same, in order that we may be the more horrified by our sins

²⁶⁹ CO 45: 332; CTS *Gospels*, 2, 61 (on Matthew 12: 19).

²⁷⁰ CO 2: 340-41; Inst. 2.12.1.

and that we may learn to detest them, he wishes us to be aware of His righteousness and the severity of his judgment. If God pardoned us without Jesus Christ interceding for us and being made our pledge, we should think nothing of it. We should all shrug our shoulders and make it an opportunity for giving ourselves greater license. But when we see that God did not spare His only Son, ... it is impossible for us, unless we are harder than stone, not to shudder and be filled with [fear] ... This, then, is why it was necessary for all the correction of our peace to be laid upon Jesus Christ ... ²⁷¹

So, because human lethargy and hardness is so profound, God was compelled to execute his only child in this horrific way in order to awaken it. Though the presence of accommodation here is, perhaps, slightly veiled, it is nonetheless present. Hence, from the very beginning, from its very source and fountainhead, the Mediator's life exhibited the accommodating work of the sovereign Lord.

3.2.6 When God Covenants

The coverage of this last dimension of attempered behavior will be fairly brief. As with a number of the categories mentioned above, there is overlap between this sphere and others. Nonetheless, this divine activity seems to hold its own place within the accommodating repertoire.²⁷²

²⁷¹ CO 35: 625; *Sermons on Isaiah's Prophecy*, 72; slightly altered. This position on the necessity of the death of Christ—or rather, the non-necessity of it—is also set forth in the reformer's commentary on John 15: 13: "God might have redeemed us by a single word, or by a mere act of his will, if he had not thought it better to do otherwise for our own benefit, that, by not sparing his own well-beloved Son, he might testify in his person how much he cares for our salvation. But now our hearts, if they are not softened by the inestimable sweetness of divine love, must be harder than stone or iron" (CO 47: 344-5; CTS *Gospel of John*, 2, 116); see also, CO 50: 293; (on Galatians 1: 3-5). Again, the essay by McGrath, "John Calvin and Late Medieval Thought: A Study in Late Medieval Influences Upon Calvin's Theological Development," 58-78 is worth referring to, since the author attempts to cover issues related to Calvin's philosophical resources which touch on this point. Further philosophical questions—one in particular—shall be taken up in the conclusion of this dissertation. Again, as far as we are aware there has been no mention of this aspect of accommodation in scholarly dialogue—on Calvin, that is.

²⁷² This topic again contains far too many issues to be covered in a kind of brief bibliography. It has been taken up with reference to the discussions of whether Calvin was a Calvinist; see, for example, R.T.

To begin with, Calvin calls God's willingness to be in relation with his people a condescension.²⁷³ God condescends when he covenants with his children.²⁷⁴ He stoops to offer himself to them,²⁷⁵ to be reconciled with them,²⁷⁶ to set his heart upon them ("though they are only a few obscure people"),²⁷⁷ to stretch out his hand "as far as hell itself to reach them,"²⁷⁸ to make their enemies his own,²⁷⁹ and to make them perceive his love for them.²⁸⁰ In fact, he must of necessity stoop, says Calvin, because he is great beyond any reckoning.

Kendall, *Calvin and the English Calvinists to 1649* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); M. Charles Bell, "Was Calvin a Calvinist?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36/4 (1983), 535-40; Paul Helm, "Was Calvin a Federalist?" in *Reformed Theological Journal* 10 (1994), 47-59; *id.*, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982). For some later reflection on these things, see Richard Muller, "Calvin and the Calvinists': Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities between the Reformation and Orthodoxy, Part I" in *Calvin Theological Journal* 30/2 (1995), 345-75; "Part II," *Calvin Theological Journal* 31/1 (1996), 125-60. On the issue of the covenant itself, probably the best work is, Peter Lillback, "The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology" Ph.D. dissertation; Westminster Theological Seminary, 1985.

²⁷³ See, Calvin's comment on Psalm 144: 3: "Who am I, that God should deign to condescend (*se dimittere*) to me?" (CO 32: 408; CTS *Psalm*, 5, 262). As is common, the descent being discussed here seems to encompass issues of both finitude and sinfulness. So Calvin declares: "... we might be troubled by thoughts such as these: 'And who am I? Would God really deign to stoop to me? I am nothing but an earthen vessel – made of dust and ashes, and full of rottenness and decay. Furthermore, there is a bottomless pit full of sin within me, and yet I claim that God has come to seek me!'" (CO 50: 526; John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, trans. Kathy Childress (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 303). See also, CO 42: 564; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 2, 89 (on Joel 2: 27). However, a national sense must also be acknowledged; that is, God can be said to stoop in covenanting with the Hebrews instead of other nations. Yet, this does not receive the same amount of attention as the other senses—of finitude and sinfulness. For, when interpreting texts which seem to suggest such a sense, like, "The Lord did not set his love on you nor choose you because you were greater in number than all other nations (for you were the smallest of all)" (Deuteronomy 7: 7), Calvin seems generally to be so quick to universalize its significance that nationality is essentially lost and the other senses accentuated. This can be seen, for example, in his sermon on the passage just mentioned (CO 26: 516-19; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 313a-14b. It can also be seen, though to a lesser extent, in his commentary on the same passage; see, CO 24: 219-21; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 355-7).

²⁷⁴ CO 26: 242; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 180a (on Deuteronomy 4: 44-5: 3).

²⁷⁵ CO 32: 485; *Sermons on the hundred and nineteenth Psalme*, 8 (on Psalm 119: 1-8).

²⁷⁶ CO 32: 79; CTS *Psalms*, 4, 135 (on Psalm 103: 9).

²⁷⁷ CO 24: 221; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 357 (on Deuteronomy 10: 14).

²⁷⁸ CO 31: 605-6; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 457 (on Psalm 65: 4).

²⁷⁹ CO 58: 185; *Thirteene Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, 284 (on Genesis 27: 29-36).

²⁸⁰ CO 25: 684; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 40b (on Deuteronomy 1: 29-33).

What likeness is there between God and humankind? Yet, as if he descended from his heavenly glory, he bound to himself the seed of Abraham, that he might also mutually bind himself. Therefore, God's election was like the joining of a mutual bond, so that he did not will to be separated from the people.²⁸¹

Nor is this condescending relationship temporary but permanent—a fact which marks this strand of divine accommodating out as different from many of the others which have been examined. God's indulgence is such “that he does not begrudge binding himself (*se obstringere non gravatur*) to his servants” even so far as to acknowledge their seed for his people.²⁸² Thus, this self-humbling act is a protracted one; maybe even an eternal one.

On top of this, the Lord renews his allegiance to his people from time to time.²⁸³ For, as circumstances may leave them uncertain as to their standing with their maker, he confirms his covenant with them in his self-binding grace so that they will have no doubts about it.

It is asked, Did not the Jews formerly enter into an everlasting covenant with God? For he appears to promise something new and uncommon. I reply, nothing new here is promised ...but it is a renewal and confirmation of the covenant, that the Jews might not think that the covenant of God was made void on account of the long-continued banishment. ... Therefore, Isaiah accommodated this mode of expression to the capacity of the people, that they might know that the covenant into which God entered with the fathers was firm, sure, and eternal.²⁸⁴

²⁸¹ CO 38: 158; the translation cited is from T.H.L. Parker, who brought this citation to my attention; see Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament*, 180 (for another ET: CTS *Jeremiah*, 2, 168). Parker addresses the covenant briefly but in a stimulating manner within his treatment of Calvin's exposition of prophecy, though his thoughts have no real bearing on our discussion of accommodation; see, Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament*, 180-7.

²⁸² CO 24: 379; *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 111 (on Deuteronomy 5: 9-10).

²⁸³ CO 24: 192; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 313 (on Exodus 19: 1-8).

²⁸⁴ CO 37: 285; CTS *Isaiah*, 4, 160-1 (on Isaiah 55: 3). God also confirms the calling he had already given to Isaiah for this same reason; see, CO 36: 125-6; CTS *Isaiah*, 1, 200 (on Isaiah 6).

In this way, then, the Lord quells his children's fears, though it involves him in voluntarily repeating his already-sure word of covenant.

Thus, in his accommodating patience, God makes it unmistakably clear that he is committed to his sons and daughters. This commitment can also be seen more generally in the Lord's willingness to repeat his promises,²⁸⁵ make oaths,²⁸⁶ and strive to support his people by means of exhortations lest their confidence should wane.²⁸⁷ What is impressive in all of this is God's unabashed willingness to swallow his pride. Additionally, the great sense of responsibility which he feels towards those with whom he has entered into relations is equally remarkable.

Finally, it is simply worth noting that Calvin does not comment upon the abrogating of this accommodated mode of engagement, so far as we are aware. One feels confident in assuming that it would continue in some form even after the parousia, given Calvin's general understanding of the divine-human relationship. But this is just an assumption. Though further inferences on the subject might be drawn from Calvin's *corpus*, such an endeavor is not crucial to this dissertation and thus shall not be taken up. It should, however, be noted that the subject of divine covenants will be broached again in the conclusion of this dissertation, where some issues arising from Calvin's medieval context and the relation of that context to his views on the covenant will be examined.

²⁸⁵ CO 23: 387; CTS *Genesis*, 2, 106 (on Genesis 28: 1).

²⁸⁶ To ensure that they will be confirmed in the reliability of his word; see, as just one example among many, CO 43: 576; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 154 (Habakkuk 3: 9).

3.3 Conclusion

3.3.1 Reviewing the Chapter

Accommodation is not discernible in all of the actions of Calvin's God. Yet, as the various spheres of divine activity are examined, it becomes apparent that it figures prominently in a number of them. Indeed, if we have satisfactorily demonstrated the presence of accommodation within the different arenas treated above, its diffusion throughout the divine economy cannot be questioned.

When the Lord teaches, he accommodates. Given his own incomprehensibility, he labors to simplify spiritual truth, through his works, his word and especially the revelation given in his Son, in order to make it intelligible. Such accommodation—a necessity even for unfallen humanity—has become all the more essential for fallen human beings. Accordingly, it permeates God's revelatory dealings with his creatures and people, affecting both the form and the content of divine teaching and moving God to employ signs and symbols to make his meaning clear.

To God the lawgiver and commander, his self-limitation entails compromise and concession. Working within the context of Israelite primitiveness, he "designedly deviated" from perfection in his drafting of case laws for Israel.²⁸⁸ For similar though more universally-applicable reasons, and because of the infinitude which characterizes his essential righteousness, he furnishes humankind with a reduced code of justice in his moral law. Both these instances bear clear testimony to the impact human sinfulness has had upon God's legislative endeavors. Nor is this impact any less apparent in God's

²⁸⁷ CO 25: 429-30; CTS *Joshua*, 26-7 (on Joshua 1: 2-3).

accommodated commands. In his bestowal of good works, his concession of a more fatherly kind comes to the fore.

The cultic domain also reveals God's self-accommodation, as he adapts the stipulations he lays down for his people's venerating of him. As in the legal realm, here also he does so with the Israelites' customs and cultural situation in mind, which means that pagan influence is also discernible in Jewish religious practices. Moreover, the Lord's acceptance of the worship of his church exposes an additional side to his condescension and adaptability.

In his role as shepherd, God accommodates himself with impressive care and devotion. He condescends to take care of many aspects of the lives of his children. He adapts providence to protect his flock and lighten their burdens. He employs angels for the sake of his elect in accommodation to human *captus*, and also threatens, tests, and chastens his sheep, lest their dullness get the best of them. Yet being tender and considerate, he always tempers his blows out of deference to the weakness of his fold.

God in Christ also accommodates. From Christ's condescending to experience the miseries of the human condition to his self-limitation in numerous daily activities, the incarnate Son of God accommodated himself in many ways during his time on earth. Calvin seems to indicate that the earthly life of the Lord of glory was essentially a continual exercise in accommodation, and one which was even undergirded by an accommodated decision on the part of the Father. Hence, the life of the Mediator provides a suitable confirmation of what has been seen in the other areas treated in this chapter.

²⁸⁸ CO 24: 624; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 39-40; slightly altered (on Leviticus 24: 18).

Finally, the Lord's covenanting betrays his accommodating demeanor. When God makes a covenant with human beings, he lowers himself and deigns to enter into an abiding relationship with them. This aspect of divine self-adaptation is noteworthy, if for no other reason, because it is an accommodating act which, unlike many others, endures not only for centuries and for the earthly life of individuals, but (presumably) for as long as God decides to remain in covenant with his people.

To Calvin, then, accommodation is multiform.²⁸⁹ Demonstrating this was the primary purpose of the lengthy taxonomy produced in this chapter. From these efforts, the breadth and character of the repertoire of God's accommodating responses to human *captus* should now be apparent.

3.3.2 Considering the argument of the thesis up to this point

As already seen in chapter two, Calvin construed human *captus* as widespread and many-sided. The findings set out above depict the accommodating reactions of God to that *captus* as similarly manifold. The breadth and pervasiveness of these two subjects seem to press even more strongly than has hitherto been imagined the

²⁸⁹ Here Calvin's vision is much more attuned to the fathers' thinking than to contemporary views on divine accommodation (see chapter one for a brief survey of some of the ways in which the fathers' employed the notion). Contemporary views are characterized by seeing accommodation as a sub-category within the *locus* of rhetoric—accommodation is well-defined, unambiguous, unified, and has strictly to do with the way in which God adapts his revelation to the mental weakness of his creatures.

Given this, one can see the truth behind Richard Muller's point concerning "dogmatic" readings of accommodation within Calvin studies. In a paper entitled, "Directions in Current Calvin Research" Muller refers to the fact that contemporary views on accommodation have, at least to some extent, been read back into Calvin's own views on the subject; see, Muller, "Directions in Current Calvin Research," *Calvin Studies IX*, 84. Here, we must add, Muller's own views on accommodation are not explained or implied clearly enough for us to discern whether he would agree with the position taken in this chapter.

significance of accommodation for God's relationship with his creatures and especially his children.

This significance cannot help but raise questions of contemporary conceptions of the reformer's accommodating God. He is not normally thought of as a God who responds but as the sovereign Initiator. This being the case, it seems appropriate that we look again at this God and ask some questions of him. One of the more obvious questions which might be asked has to do with why he accommodates. Thus an investigation of the motives, reasons, and purposes behind the Lord's accommodating practices seems a profitable undertaking. As will be seen, Calvin often speaks to these issues. But a more basic question has to do with the portrait of Calvin's accommodating God which arises from the material that is being unearthed. Accordingly, these matters will receive consideration in the next chapter as the third and final question around which the body of this thesis has been organized is taken up.

Chapter Four

The Emerging Portrait of Calvin's Accommodating God

In the two preceding chapters, creaturely *captus* and God's responses to it were treated. What now remains is to look at the accommodating God himself. This will be the object of this portion of the thesis, and will be accomplished through an examination of the observations on the divine reasons, intentions and motives for accommodating which often accompany the reformer's assertions on God's self-adaptation. Believing that these provide a window into Calvin's conception of the thinking and conduct of his accommodating deity, this chapter will aim to examine them towards the end of obtaining a better understanding of God and his accommodating ways in Calvin's thought.

In treating these matters, it will be necessary to range broadly through the complex of ideas which makes up divine accommodation and to press its boundaries occasionally. Accommodation is so interwoven into Calvin's thinking that extracting it

and those matters related to it in a clinical and precise fashion cannot be hoped for. Care will be taken, though, so as not to stretch the concept beyond its breaking point.

A summary of previously-sketched portraits of Calvin's God will be offered in the first section. This will be followed by a list of "ingredients"¹ found in the reformer's statements, which will be invaluable to the main exploratory work of the chapter.

4.1 Earlier Portraits of Calvin's Accommodating God

A survey of previous endeavors in this area will introduce the subject, beginning with the assessment of Ford Lewis Battles. The late Pittsburgh professor describes Calvin's God as father, teacher, physician, and judge.² In reality, though, his essay discusses only the first three and focuses on the general sense of kindness which is common to them. Hence, God's tenderness, care, and concern are stressed throughout the piece, such that the accommodating God appears as the condescending father.

The portrayal of God as divine rhetor is also highlighted by Battles, but its force is perhaps more strongly felt in the later works of authors such as Serene Jones, who dubs Calvin's God the "Grand Orator."³ This conclusion, also expressed in a subtler and more impressive manner by Millet,⁴ has one of its sources in the 1974 essay of Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility."⁵ There he refers, to give just one example, to the "loving

¹ This notion of ingredients has been appropriated from Wright, "Calvin's Pentateuchal Criticism," 37.

² Battles, "God Was Accommodating," 20.

³ See, for example, Jones *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety*.

⁴ Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 247-56.

⁵ Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility," 43-63. In treating accommodation, Willis cites a large segment of *Institutes* 2.11.13. He also refers to several other portions of this work in his footnotes; see, Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility," 53-58.

Father [who] strategically adjusts his dealings with his people in order to inform, delight, and move them (cf. the three classical aims of rhetoric) to do his will.”⁶

Significantly, in the same piece Willis also makes an insightful remark of a different sort. Noting that Calvin never questioned the notion of God's immutability, he then acknowledges that the reformer had to defend his teaching against those who charged that accommodation introduced the idea that God is affected by emotion or his purposes are changeable by people's actions. He continues by stating:

My point is that the equation between the divine and the immutable which Calvin inherited was mitigated by this other insight—that God persuasively accommodates his purpose to man's persuadability. Calvin was not able to expand this insight, as I think we must today, to argue from the variety of God's dealings with men that God himself changes in some sense in his relation to his changing creation.⁷

This clearly expands matters beyond the scope of rhetoric. Though not necessarily constituting a portrait, Willis' observation touches on an issue of immense importance, namely, the impact of accommodation on the reformer's conception of God. This will be a key focus of the material to be covered in this chapter. Even if Willis' comment is unfortunately brief, it sheds helpful light on an aspect of the reformer's theology which Calvin scholarship has yet to deal with and, in many ways, is just beginning to recognize. Thus, the Princetonian's foresight here sets him far above many of his fellows.

⁶ Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility," 53.

⁷ Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility," 55.

None of these authors make any meaningful use of Calvin's comments on motive and intention in asserting their views.⁸ Wright, however, in probing some of the more thought-provoking areas associated with the behavior of the accommodating God, demonstrates a greater sensitivity to these remarks.⁹ Given this, it is instructive that his portrait is also quite challenging, as can be seen by statements such as: "[t]he distinctive element in this presentation seems not the gracious condescension of God but his malleability, even his vulnerability, indeed even his captivity to the passions and lusts of his rude people."¹⁰ His self-accommodating God, like Willis', also pushes strongly against the bounds of conventionality within Calvin studies to reveal the more peculiar side of the reformer's often all-too-human deity.

Though none of these authorities sets out to study the character of Calvin's God, they have all made valuable contributions to the question. Yet, each of them puts forth a fairly small subset of divine qualities. They also, on the whole, make little use of the reformer's own observations on the subject. Thus, though each of the elements mentioned above will find a place in the assessment offered here, it is hoped that a fuller picture will result from our scrutinizing of Calvin's observations.

⁸ By meaningful we have in mind use which influences the author's portrait of God. It should be noted that one or two authors refer occasionally to Calvin's discussion of the causes of God's accommodation; see, Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 247-55; Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament*, 99. Bru speaks of "La nécessité de l'accommodation" and points to the cause of this necessity: that the finite is not able to grasp the infinite, but he does not quote Calvin nor does he treat the reformer's statements; see Bru, *La notion d'Accommodation divine*, 81-2. Battles also makes passing reference to some of the ideas which we will examine—especially the Lord's motives in accommodating himself—but his treatment does not focus in any meaningful sense upon them; see, Battles, "God Was Accommodating," 19-38.

⁹ This is particularly true in a section entitled "Implications of Divine Accommodation as Heuristic Device;" see, Wright, "Calvin's Pentateuchal Criticism," 45-7; see also 37-8.

¹⁰ Wright, "Calvin's Pentateuchal Criticism," 46.

4.2 Calvin's Observations on the reasons, intentions, and motives behind God's self-accommodation

4.2.1 Introductory considerations: a list of ingredients

Through Calvin's comments on divine attempering, which are often rich in psychological speculation, he provides his hearers and readers with insights into the thoughts and decision-making processes of the self-adapting God. These ruminations are a regular part of his treatment of the subject, appearing as early as the 1536 *Institutes* and developing in character and sophistication as he begins to comment on the books of the Bible.¹¹ They are by no means limited to the reformer's analysis of accommodation, but illumine his treatment of various subjects, and seem to be part of, or at least related to, his endeavors to "lay open the mind of the writer;"¹² though their exact relation to other aspects of his exegesis need not concern us here. A division of them into categories yields the following.

- (1) No comment
- (2) Reference to a motive
- (3) Reference to a cause
- (4) Reference to a purpose
- (5) Reference to a contingency with which God must deal
- (6) Multiple remarks

¹¹ The reformer can, of course, mention divine attempering without appending anything to his statement. Calvin asserts: "But they do not remember that God accommodates himself to human sense as often as he speaks to human beings" (CO 5: 199; *Tracts and Treatises*, 3, 447; altered). However, such unadorned declarations are rather rare, being most commonly found in his theological treatises.

¹² This translation of Calvin's letter is cited from T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1971), 54. For the Latin, see John Calvin, *Iohannis Calvini Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, edit. by T. H. L. Parker (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 1.

The first and last entries are added simply for the sake of completeness and will receive no formal treatment. Thus, four items remain. A sketch of each of them will conclude these introductory remarks.

4.2.1.a Reference to a Motive

Calvin speaks about the inner motive which moved God to attemper himself. "It was a marvelous act of loving kindness (*mirae humanitatis*) that, accommodating himself to their ignorance, he familiarly presented himself before their eyes."¹³ God "magnifies his mercy towards human beings," Calvin declares, and "moved by paternal love (*paterno amore adductus*), he condescends to embrace them in his care."¹⁴ The reformer does not always address these motives, but when he does it is consistently to the love, mercy, compassion, and familial feelings of God that he points. His assertions here rarely possess the imaginative qualities found in his more sophisticated remarks. They can, in fact, seem somewhat drab at times, though he never fails to put them to practical use.

4.2.1.b Reference to a Cause

Calvin's comments on the occasional causes of divine accommodation bear profound testimony to God's interest in the condition of his creatures and especially his people, their environment and circumstances. The causes to which he refers may be

¹³ CO 24: 145; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 236; slightly altered.

¹⁴ CO 32: 178; CTS *Psalms*, 4, 333; slightly altered.

divided into two heads: those matters found within the people to whom God is accommodating (in other words, their capacity), and those external to them.

First, human *captus*. This was already discussed in chapter two. It will be remembered that this is extensive in scope, covering the *totus homo*.

Secondly, factors outside the creature also effect an alteration in God's dealings with humankind—specifically, concerns having to do either with the nature of God and spiritual things or with the desperateness of the people's situation. Isaiah labors to urge believers to look upon their deliverance as an accomplished fact, since they might be tempted to doubt it "because they still languished amidst their miseries and were almost dead."¹⁵ Through the Babylonian king's dream and Daniel's interpreting of it, God wished to meet a doubt which surely would have crept into and overcome his people's minds:

When the Jews, captive and forlorn, saw the Chaldeans formidable throughout the whole world, and ... highly esteemed and all but adored by the rest of humankind, what could they think of it? Why, they would have no hope of return, because God had raised their enemies to such great power that their avarice and cruelty were like a deep whirlpool. The Jews might thus conclude themselves to be drowned in a very deep abyss whence they could not hope to escape.¹⁶

To be sure, human *captus* is intermingled with Calvin's mentioning of these circumstantial aspects. Nonetheless, they clearly play their part in God's thinking on accommodation.¹⁷

¹⁵ CO 37: 121-2; CTS *Isaiah*, 3, 383-4.

¹⁶ CO 40: 594-5; CTS *Daniel*, 1, 169; slightly altered. See comments prior to these as well; see also, CO 32: 608; *Sermons on the hundred and nineteenth Psalme*, 216; slightly altered.

¹⁷ In a similar vein, Calvin's references to the Lord's act of perceiving, which often accompany his discussion of causes, are quite interesting. "When God perceives that we are so slow in considering his

4.2.1.c Reference to a Purpose

The accommodating God is exceedingly purposeful, so Calvin believed. Scholarship is, it would seem, largely indebted to Willis for bringing this to light. Thus, Calvin asserts: "God deigned to descend among the Israelites by the ark of the covenant in order to make himself more familiarly known to them (*quo familiarius innotesceret*)."¹⁸ The ceremonies of the Old and New Testaments were not instituted for any need which God had for them, argues Calvin in another example. Rather God considered human weakness and designed these rites, "for the instruction (*pour l'instruction*) of the people."¹⁹ Additionally, when Christ declares "the Father is greater than I" (John 14: 28), he speaks neither of his human nature nor of his eternal divinity, but in accommodation to humankind who cannot reach to the height of God, he descends to them "that he might raise us to it (*ut nos eousque attolleret*)."²⁰ Though other purposes could be mentioned, these will suffice for the introductory aims of this section.

4.2.1.d Reference to a Contingency with which God must deal

The appended observations handled under this heading add nothing new, because they could have been included under one of the earlier categories. But the sense of

judgments," he afflicts the ungodly in order to correct his own children's dullness (CO 31: 684; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 146; slightly altered). When God gave a singular beauty to the baby Moses, it is commented, "sometimes God is accustomed, when he sees his people slow in the performance of their duty, to spur on their inactivity by allurements" (CO 24: 23; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 42; altered). And the limited desires of believers in prayer are the reason why they do not receive a greater blessings from God, for when "he sees that we are restrained within ourselves (*restrictos*), he accommodates his own generosity to the measure of our expectations" (CO 31: 606; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 458 slightly altered).

¹⁸ CO 31: 210; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 339; altered. Again such additions are quite common.

¹⁹ CO 27: 172; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 499a-b; slightly altered (on Deuteronomy 12: 3-7).

²⁰ CO 47: 336; CTS *Gospel of John*, 2, 102.

contingencies present in them warrants individual treatment. The basic idea is best broached by means of a representative citation.

Nor can it be doubted but that the mourning was improper which God permitted to them out of indulgence. But regard was had to their weakness, lest immoderate strictness drive them (*ne immodicus rigor... abriperet*) to passionate excess.²¹

This instance, which is from his commentary on Leviticus 21: 1-12, comes in the middle of a treatment of the approach God takes with his people concerning mourning. Calvin notes that although God had granted more liberty to the descendants of Aaron than to the high priest, there were restrictions in place to which they were to attend. They were only to mourn for certain family members, each of which Calvin names. All other individuals, including (interestingly) a prince, whom the law expressly mentions, were not to be mourned. Having briefly recorded these prohibitions, however, Calvin returns to God's permission to mourn and makes the comment which is cited above.

The root idea here is found in the last phrase, where Calvin implies that the Lord's reasoning in his granting of permission was influenced by matters which appear to have been out of his hands, and specifically by the possibility that his people might overreact if he attempted to issue an overly-rigorous directive, although it is clear that he would prefer a stricter injunction. Here, then, not only do we have a notable example of divine concession, but coupled with it the remarkable notion that God engages with temporal reality in such a committed way. He must take into account, as if he did not know the eventual outcome, the likelihood of his people not being able to handle certain

circumstances and the possibility that an injunction which savored of excessive severity would not be accepted by his people and might move them to cast off any concern for obedience. The uncertainty, the idea almost of guesswork and conjecture, is extraordinary. Though, on one level Calvin denies that God is hindered by such contingencies, yet on another level he deems this reality important enough to state and leave unqualified.

In addition, a second point should be noted. God does not only have to face uncertainties and assess how his children might react to his various initiatives, but he seems to be presented with the eventuality of a particular problem (namely, the likelihood that his people will mourn excessively), and this presses him with a kind of necessity. Thus, on this occasion, he seems to have little choice in the matter. His people's weakness virtually compels him to accommodate. And so he alters his plans *per concessionem*, lest his people be pressed to a degree which they were not able to cope with. Both of these points and others like them will be handled in the section that follows.

4.3 *Qualis sit Deus Accommodans?*

Making use of these elements, we will draw a composite sketch of Calvin's accommodating God which features many of the dominant traits of his character. Various attributes and idiosyncrasies which appear in the Lord's self-adapted responses

²¹ CO 24: 449; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 229; slightly altered. This instance catches the attention of Wright, but for different reasons; see, Wright, "Calvin's Pentateuchal Criticism," 42.

to his creatures and his people will be mapped out and to some extent analyzed. More general reflection upon this analysis will follow in the next section.

4.3.1 Transcendent and incomprehensible; good and loving

It is well established that Calvin's accommodating God is high and transcendent, existing on a plane unknown to mere mortals.²² On many occasions, this is the reason that he engages in his self-attempting activities. For example, in speaking of the plans he has for his people, God refers to "my whole heart and soul." This evokes from Calvin the observation that "unless he prattled, where would be found so much understanding as would reach the immense altitude of his wisdom? [wherefore] the mysteries with which he favors us are incomprehensible," such that he must accommodate himself to his creatures if he is to be understood.²³

Such is, to be sure, standard practice for the accommodating God. As has already been seen in chapter three, his endeavors in the areas of teaching doctrine, drafting legislation, and sanctioning cultic exercises are hampered by his inscrutability such that he must adapt himself in a variety of ways if he is to manage. Indeed as Susan Schreiner has noted, Calvin even makes assertions to the effect that there is *nulla proportio* between the infinite and finite realms—a conviction which is at the foundation

²² Many authors have noted this as a rich vein running through Calvin's theology. See, for instance, Eire, *War against the Idols*, 197ff. Eire emphasizes this notion of transcendence in discussing Calvin's theology of worship; see also, Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 20ff.

²³ CO 39: 45-46; CTS *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 4, 219-22 (on Jeremiah 32: 41). The full text reads "with my whole heart and my whole soul (*in toto corde meo, et in tota anima mea*)."

of his belief in God's "double justice."²⁴ Such transcendence, then, is of the utmost importance to Calvin.

Possessing such an exalted brilliance, every movement of God towards his creatures is a movement downwards; a fact which illumines other attributes of the self-limiting God. One such attribute can be observed in the following comment of Calvin on God's taking up of the task of teaching the believing community.

Is it not a great stooping down from his highness? But seeing that God does so lessen himself as to stoop to our rudeness to teach us, should we let his word fall to the ground and despise it?²⁵

Besides raising again the notion of transcendence, these remarks also allude to the goodness of God—an attribute which is equally as common to the reformer's reflections on God's accommodating actions. God "makes himself small," Calvin says, and "he does this out of his goodness,"²⁶ and "[b]ecause of our rudeness and the small measure of our understanding" believers do not comprehend many of the things of God, and so he teaches them in a simple way, "and here we see the goodness of God."²⁷

This goodness is expressed in a number of different ways. Because of his mercy, the Almighty "tolerated (*tolerasse*)" the Jews, Calvin says. This was not because they deserved it, but "because their frail and transitory condition called forth his indulgence (or kindness or favor - *veniam*) towards them."²⁸ Not only God's tolerating of his children but also his blessing of them is an expression of this goodness. God, for

²⁴ See for example, Schreiner, "Exegesis and double justice," 322-38.

²⁵ CO 26: 119; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 119b (on Deuteronomy 4: 3-6).

²⁶ SC 1: 136; *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 235 (2 Samuel 6: 1-7).

²⁷ CO 33: 63; *Sermons on Iob*, 16b (on Job 1: 6-8).

²⁸ CO 31: 735; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 255-6; altered (on Psalm 78: 39).

example, does not need to promise rewards to his bairns. He might compel them with one word to obey his will. But “notwithstanding he uses a more loving (*plus amiable*) kind of dealing towards us.”²⁹ Accordingly, commenting on the Lord’s general deportment towards his flock, Calvin asks, “[d]oes not God accommodate himself to us for the purpose of winning us, and to the end that we should have his love (*amour*) imprinted on our hearts?”³⁰

Such love is absolutely basic to God’s accommodating program, and though it would be an exaggeration to say that it is apparent in all Calvin’s statements on the matter, it is nevertheless the case that much of what will be expounded in this chapter will be a working out of this pervasive theme. Expressions of God’s accommodating love are plentiful. It may be seen, for instance, in the empathy he shows towards the plight of his people. He chooses teachers for his children from among their own number so that they will not need to run around looking for revelations and also that they might be taught in a way more suited to their needs, which Calvin calls “no common act of indulgence.”³¹ He gives them visible signs in the sacraments, which clarify the achievements of Christ for his flock, because he “sees us unable to comprehend [them];” showing his empathy and tenderness.³² He renews his covenant with his followers “about forty years after its first promulgation,” and adds an exposition of it, “because ... he was dealing with a new generation” to whom it might not have been familiar—an

²⁹ CO 26: 424; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 267b; slightly altered (on Deuteronomy 5: 1-5).

³⁰ CO 26: 474; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 292a-b; slightly altered (on Deuteronomy 6: 15-9).

³¹ CO 24: 273; *CTS Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 436 (on Deuteronomy 18: 15-6)

³² “... having respect to human rudeness,” Calvin says; CO 27: 367; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 599b (on Deuteronomy 16: 1-4).

“extraordinary proof of his indulgence,” the reformer says.³³ And he provides for the infirmity of his servants by means of angels; an act which Calvin again calls “no common proof of his paternal goodness and indulgence.”³⁴

In all of this, God's fatherly pity is deep, heartfelt, and in its own way, passionate. Indeed he labors to express this love to his children and grapples with the difficulties of communicating to them how intense his feelings are for them. In this regard, Calvin's repeated insistence on divine impassibility is not simply a bald assertion of God's *apatheia* but an expression of the superhumanness and (again) transcendence of the feelings which burn in the divine breast; for God's love and sympathy far surpass anything exhibited on earth.

God could not indeed express how ardently he loves those whom he has chosen without borrowing a human persona (*mutuando hominum personam*). For we know that passions do not pertain to him ... [so he portrays himself as a father or a husband] ... Such a character, then, God assumes, that he might better express how much and how intensely he loves his own.³⁵

This comment is not intended to suggest that Calvin's views on impassibility are different from the earlier tradition but rather that on some occasions Calvin makes it clear that there is intense love pulsating through the divine breast, and that the problem is that it is so much higher than anything comprehended by humans that it cannot be rightly comprehended by them.³⁶

³³ CO 24: 260; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 416-7 (on Deuteronomy 1: 1ff). See also CO 24: 254; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 408 (on Exodus 23: 31).

³⁴ CO 41: 104-5; CTS *Daniel*, 2, 104-5 (on Daniel 8: 13-4).

³⁵ CO 42: 55; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 2, 75; see also, CO 29: 35; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 1149a-b (on Deuteronomy 32: 28-30).

³⁶ On the issues involved here, see the essay by Richard Bauckham, “‘Only the Suffering God Can Help,’” 6-12.

Further discussion of God's attempering love may be pursued by taking up the subject of chastisements. In keeping with the Lord's gentleness, he often lessens the intensity of the corrections which he brings to his people in accordance with their frailty. Calvin notes the "gradation of punishments" in commenting on Leviticus 26: 18,³⁷ and explains that such a gradation indicates that "they are so tempered by God's kindness, that he only lightly chastises those" whose condition he has not yet proved.³⁸ In another place, Calvin remarks that "God deals gently with us, and acts with little severity in correcting our sins, because he takes into account our weakness, and wishes to support and relieve it."³⁹ God "strikes us with a human rod (*humana virga*)" when he chastens, says Calvin.⁴⁰ He "must chastise us humanely (*chastie humainement*), as a father does his children." He "chastises us with the hand of men (*chastie en main de hommes*)," for "if God chastised us according to the greatness of his majesty, would we not remain broken down and confounded a hundred thousand times?"⁴¹ Accordingly, those in the household of faith should be content with the measure of afflictions which their Lord applies, for they should know very well that he is aware of what is expedient for their feebleness.⁴² This is a frequent theme in Calvin's expository efforts, especially the Job sermons and Psalms commentary. God, Calvin says, has always moderated his afflictions so as not to "abolish the memory of Abraham's race."⁴³

³⁷ The text reads: "*Quod si usque ad haec non audieritis me, addam corripere vos septuplo ...*" (CO 25: 24).

³⁸ CO 25: 24; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 233.

³⁹ CO 37: 318; CTS *Isaiah*, 4, 216 (on Isaiah 57: 16).

⁴⁰ CO 23: 443; CTS *Genesis*, 2, 196 (on Genesis 32: 24).

⁴¹ SC 1: 195, 6; *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 334, 7 (2 Samuel 7: 12-15).

⁴² CO 33: 337; *Sermons on Job*, 124b (on Job 7: 1-6).

⁴³ CO 44: 35; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 240 (on Zephaniah 2: 4). See also, CO 31: 734; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 255; altered (on Psalm 78: 38).

But God's mildness is not so pronounced as to remove from his corrections all their sting. Though great, the father's sympathy for his children persuades him neither to withhold affliction nor to extract from it every ounce of its force. This should be obvious, but it is still worth reflecting on briefly. Calvin observes that "[God] tames his children with cords when they will not profit by his word."⁴⁴ Clearly, God's use of cords is intended to hurt. This is further indicated by the fact that Calvin feels that reminders such as the following are necessary: "although he chastises us, he does not cease to cherish a father's love and affection towards those whom he has once embraced."⁴⁵ God's empathy does not handcuff him, and his desire to temper his lashes does not mean that he withholds them altogether. God handles his own as their hardness requires, since he knows they will not approach him unless they are drawn in this manner.⁴⁶ In these ways the Lord vigorously labors to effect the good of his creatures.

4.3.2 Practical, outcome-oriented, and ambitious

This is, however, not the only way in which God's practicality expresses itself. Calvin's Lord longs to do good, and displays a keen interest in the outcome of his actions and in effecting his desired ends. This is not efficiency for efficiency's sake. He wants to do good for his creatures because he loves them and because he wishes to

⁴⁴ CO 40: 700-1; CTS *Daniel*, 1, 317 (on Daniel 5: 6).

⁴⁵ CO 37: 319; CTS *Isaiah*, 4, 217 (on Isaiah 57: 17). See also CO 31: 403; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 85 (on Psalm 39: 10-1).

⁴⁶ "Also we see how God at all times handles people according to their hardness, and how he has provided convenient remedies for them" since they will not come to him unless he draws them in this way (CO 26: 299; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 208a (on Deuteronomy 5: 13-5)).

promote his own glory. Yet, even when such considerations are taken into account, the sheer determination of the self-adapting God cannot fail to impress.

For example, the Lord deliberately alters his method of creating, not because he needs six days to finish the job, “but that he might better fix us on meditating upon his works.”⁴⁷ And in a fascinating instance already cited in the last chapter concerning his governing of providence, God varies the length and temperature of summer and winter days and causes numerous other changes on the earth, not for abstract or esoteric reasons, but specifically so that he might “rouse” his people “that we may not grow torpid in our own grossness.”⁴⁸ Examples such as these might very well be used by Willis to back up his claim concerning God’s desire to persuade (and we would have no objections to this), but they evince with equal potency the Lord’s regard for and pursuit of outcomes. God changes his way of working towards the specific end of producing a result which he desires.

Besides his works of creation and providence, God accommodates his revelatory endeavors “in order to be understood,”⁴⁹ the expression of his infinite righteousness in the Ten Commandments “to condemn us,”⁵⁰ and his plan of salvation because “he does not want to have the eternal salvation of believers brought into opposition to his glory.”⁵¹ Moreover, rather than pardon without Christ’s death, God submits to human lethargy by sending his Son to be dreadfully executed “in order that we may be the more

⁴⁷ CO 48: 270; CTS *Acts*, 1, 484; slightly altered (on Acts 12: 10).

⁴⁸ CO 40: 577; CTS *Daniel*, 1, 145; slightly altered (on Daniel 2: 21).

⁴⁹ CO 7: 169; Calvin, *Anabaptists and Libertines*, 214.

⁵⁰ He needed a way, Calvin says, to condemn people which was “fitted (*propre*) to their nature” (CO 33: 460; *Sermons on Job*, 172a; (on Job 9: 29-35)).

⁵¹ CO 25: 98; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 360-1 (on Exodus 32: 31).

horrified by our sins and that we may learn to detest them.”⁵² Hence, in creation, providence, revelation, legislation, and redemption—the most elemental themes in redemptive history—the Lord’s self-adaptation figures significantly, displaying his practicality and tendency to look for and work towards results.⁵³

A similar habit may be observed at insignificant junctures as well. Though of the opinion that uncovering one’s feet in worship is of no value *per se*, God commands Israel to take off their shoes “so that they may better excite and prepare themselves for veneration.”⁵⁴ And the same is true with the Lord’s instruction to Israel to wear the commandments on bands on their arms.⁵⁵ In so doing, Calvin explains, he “had no regard for the bands themselves.” Perfunctory implementation of the regulation itself was not his objective. Rather he wished “to rouse their senses ... [and] to suggest and renew their care for religion.”⁵⁶ Neither the momentous nor the trivial evade his notice.

From this general analysis the divine purposefulness appears. But it can also be discovered in some of Calvin’s more particular reflections, such as those on God’s power and authority. When, for instance, God went before Israel in a cloud by day and fire by night, Calvin acknowledges that he was “able to protect and direct them in some other way” from the sun and the difficulties of the night.⁵⁷ And yet, with such ability and with an infinite variety of options at his disposal, God chose what he did, “in order

⁵² CO 35: 625; *Sermons on Isaiah's Prophecy*, 72; slightly altered.

⁵³ It is interesting to note that Calvin’s God does not, it would seem (at least, it is not commented on very often at all), act out of or on the basis of principles. Rather, it is outcomes that drive the self-accommodating God.

⁵⁴ CO 25: 464; CTS *Joshua*, 89; slightly altered (on Joshua 5: 15).

⁵⁵ CO 24: 229-30; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 368 (on Deuteronomy 11: 18).

⁵⁶ CO 24: 230; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 368.

⁵⁷ CO 24: 145; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 236; slightly altered (on Exodus 13: 21-22).

that his power might be more manifest, ... to remove all room for doubt."⁵⁸ The purpose which drove God's decision *de potentia ordinata* was the desire for a particular outcome, a fact which is highlighted by Calvin's reflections upon the *potentia Dei absoluta*.⁵⁹

This is observable elsewhere. In discussing God's sending of rain on the earth so that it brings forth food (Deuteronomy 28: 12), Calvin observes that if God were pleased to do so, he could cause the earth to bring forth fruit "without rain and without dew."⁶⁰ Earlier in his exposition, Calvin had reminded his hearers that once upon a time God did this very thing, referring to Genesis 2: 6.⁶¹ Why, then, does God choose to use rain now? It is, says Calvin, because he "wants to make us perceive [his goodness] in a more visible manner," since his creatures are "so slow-witted and gross."⁶² And in his commentary on the parallel passage (Leviticus 26: 3ff), Calvin notes: God "might with one word have promised great abundance of food."⁶³ For that matter, he might have chosen to give bread to his people in the former way, raining down manna from heaven.⁶⁴ But he chose the means which currently prevails "that his grace may be more illustrious ... [and] that the signs of his paternal solicitude may be constantly (*assidue*) before us."⁶⁵

⁵⁸ CO 24: 145; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 236. Similar are Calvin's remarks on Deuteronomy 5: 29; see CO 26: 408-9; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 260a; slightly altered.

⁵⁹ These matters of the *potentia absoluta/ordinata* distinction and their relation to Calvin's thought will to some extent be taken up in the next chapter, but only briefly.

⁶⁰ CO 28: 377; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 958a; altered.

⁶¹ CO 28: 376; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 957b.

⁶² CO 28: 376; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 957b; slightly altered.

⁶³ CO 25: 14; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 217; slightly altered.

⁶⁴ CO 25: 14; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 217.

⁶⁵ CO 25: 14; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 217.

Further, though “God might in His own right simply require what He pleased” from his people, Calvin says at the beginning of his treatment of Old Testament threats and promises that the Lord chose the more effective route of enticing them by promises to obey him.

Since, therefore, we are naturally attracted by the hope of reward, we are slow and lazy, until some fruit appears. Consequently God voluntarily promises, in order to arouse them from their sloth, that if people obey his law, he will repay them.⁶⁶

Thus, the reasoning of God is again shown to be purposeful in its outlook and bent upon productiveness.

In addition to these considerations, God's habit of doing more than a situation calls for also demonstrates his results-oriented mentality.⁶⁷ For an example of this one need only look at the well-known comment on the Spirit's accommodating of his expressions of the gospel (*Institutes* 2.16.2),⁶⁸ but it is expressed with equal clarity

⁶⁶ CO 25: 6; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 203; slightly altered. It should be acknowledged that Calvin puts this offer of reward down to the kindness of God. This is, of course, often the case, as an examination of the reformer's comments will attest. But such a motive does not detract from the fact that the Lord's outlook and reasoning was decidedly focused on producing the outcome which he desired.

⁶⁷ This is often provoked by his children's stubborn hardness, as can be seen, for example, in Ezekiel's vision. The feet of the four creatures are made to shine like polished brass because “if the usual fleshy color had appeared in these animals this perhaps would have been neglected,” but by doing this, Ezekiel is compelled to apply his mind to things more attentively (CO 40: 35; CTS *Ezekiel*, 1, 71 (on Ezekiel 1: 7)).

⁶⁸ “The Spirit usually speaks in this way in the Scriptures: ‘God was men's enemy until they were reconciled to grace by the death of Christ’ ... Expressions of this sort have been accommodated to our capacity that we may better understand how miserable and ruinous our condition is apart from Christ. For if it had not been clearly stated that the wrath and vengeance of God and eternal death rested upon us, we would scarcely have recognized [our misery] ... For example, suppose someone is told: ‘If God hated you ... and cast you off ... destruction would have awaited you. But because he kept you in grace voluntarily ... he thus delivered you from peril.’ ... [this person would know something of his indebtedness to God's mercy]. On the other hand, suppose he learns ... that he was estranged from God ... is an heir of wrath, subject to the curse of eternal death ... and that at this point Christ interceded as his advocate ... Will the man not then be even more moved by all these things ...?” (CO 2: 368-9; *Inst.* 2.16.2). See also CO 24: 293-4; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 469 (on Exodus 13: 3-10). Similar instances can also be found in the prophets; see, CO 36: 464; CTS *Isaiah*, 2, 272-3 (on Isaiah 28: 2-4).

elsewhere, as can be seen in Calvin's comments on an episode recorded in Matthew 28: 1-6. The women at the tomb receive two visits, one from an angel and one from Christ. First, the angel comes and instructs the women to tell the disciples to meet him in Galilee. His countenance being like lightning, he gave clear testimony that he was not a mortal man but a messenger from the Almighty. But the women are so weak. Though it should have been enough that the angel had come, "for he bore marks that he was sent by God," yet their frailty is evident. Just like many who are "taught in such a way that [their] rudeness and weakness will be plainly seen," so the women needed further confirmation. Therefore, Christ comes as well to tell them what he would have them do. "We see," Calvin says on these grounds, "how the Son of God draws us by degrees to himself until we are fully confirmed, as is needful for us."⁶⁹

In another instance involving an angel, when the progress of the heavenly messenger sent in response to Daniel's prayer is impeded by the Prince of the kingdom of Persia, God sends Michael to assist the first angel (Daniel 10: 12-3). Surely one angel was sufficient, Calvin notes. God, however, is anxious to make known to his church, and particularly to these troubled believers, his care for them, and so for this reason he sends a second angel, "in order that his love towards these afflicted and innocent ones may be more manifest."⁷⁰

⁶⁹ CO 46: 950; *Sermons on Saving Work*, 192.

⁷⁰ CO 41: 207; CTS *Daniel*, 2, 254; slightly altered. This is perhaps not unlike some of Calvin's comments on the sacraments. For instance he explains that they are added to seal the promise of God in accommodation to human frailty "to make [the promise] as it were more evident to us" (OS 1: 118; *Inst* 1536, 118).

And in a third occurrence from the case laws, a woman who has given birth is required to bring a sacrifice for a sin offering on behalf of herself and her child.⁷¹ One would have thought, Calvin points out, that circumcision (in the case of a male child) would have sufficed to remove the stain of human corruption. But here again, the Lord applies supplementary measures. For God was not content with one symbol for the expurgation of sin, but “added another subsidiary sign, and did this especially because he knew” the profundity and depth of human sinfulness.⁷² His object in this was “that he might exercise his people in continual meditation upon [their depravity].”⁷³

Hence in matters of the utmost significance to redemption and in trivialities, in both the regular exercise of his power and his tendency to go the extra mile (so to speak), God behaves in ways which testify plainly, so Calvin thinks, to his practicality, ambition, and intense interest in achieving his objectives. The regularity, thoughtfulness, creativity, and sense of extravagance or super-abundance apparent in God's performance of many of his accommodating endeavors all demonstrate his earnest desire to accomplish his aims as well as revealing his practical efficiency.

⁷¹ Although in Leviticus 12: 1-8 Moses seems only to mention the mother, Calvin asserts that Luke 2: 23 teaches that the sacrifice was for both mother and child; see CO 24: 312-3; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 500.

⁷² Calvin's full sentiment is quite long: "... he knew how profound human hypocrisy is, with what complacency people flatter themselves in their vices, how difficult it is to humble their pride, and, when they are forced to acknowledge their wretchedness, how easily forgetfulness creeps over them" (CO 24: 313; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 500; slightly altered (on Leviticus 12: 1-8)).

4.3.3 Preoccupied and obsessed, opportunistic and unprincipled, desperate and despairing

But all this is relatively tame in comparison with the more startling manifestations of divine efficiency. Consider, for example, some additional comments on angels. It is God's goal in employing them "to comfort our weakness,"⁷⁴ and towards this end he informs his children that there is a vast host of superhuman beings guarding them at all times.⁷⁵ Yet in so doing God overlooks the fact that believers act "wrongly (*perperam*)"⁷⁶ when they fail to be sufficiently comforted by the simple promise of God's protection. Though such unbelief is sinful, he is willing to turn a blind eye to it in order to console his people. Similar forbearance can be found in a second instance in which God is compelled to swear an oath to his church. He does this "for the greater and more sure confirmation of us all,"⁷⁷ yet as it is a sign of disrespect to require an oath from a fellow human, surely when believers require one from the Lord it is "terrible villainy (*trop vilains*)" and "a great sign of distrust."⁷⁸ But once again God, who has pity on his children, accommodates himself to them, overlooking their impertinence in order "to assure us."⁷⁹

Though the scandalous divine behavior to which we wish to point is not established by the citing of two examples, these introduce the subject and provide us with something on which to build. But to continue, more particular issues must be taken

⁷³ CO 24: 313; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 500; slightly altered.

⁷⁴ CO 2: 125; *Inst.* 1.14.11.

⁷⁵ CO 2: 125; *Inst.* 1.14.11.

⁷⁶ CO 2: 125; *Inst.* 1.14.11.

⁷⁷ CO 58: 97; *Thirteene Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, 135 (on Genesis 26: 1-5).

⁷⁸ CO 58: 97; *Thirteene Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, 136.

⁷⁹ CO 58: 97; *Thirteene Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, 136. Calvin's comments on Exodus 6: 7-8 resemble these; see, CO 24: 80; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 131.

up. Inappropriate language seems a good subject on which to become more specific.⁸⁰ The Spirit uses the unseemly image of Christ's flesh as meat and his blood as drink, and does so "that we might have a completely certain pledge of our salvation."⁸¹ It is, Calvin says, because believers are "gross (*grossiers*)" that he employs correspondingly gross language.⁸² The same rationale is given for the prophet Ezekiel, whom Calvin seems to feel he must defend from the charge of barbarism because of the character of his speech.⁸³ His crude discourses, some of which will be examined more carefully in a moment, were indicative of his surroundings; because the exiles had declined in language and piety, the prophet was compelled to accustom himself to their manner of speech.⁸⁴ Such coarseness, though, is not relegated solely to this late period, for it is found in Moses as well. The law, which records God's naming of the shewbread as "my bread" (Numbers 28: 2), illustrates this. God made use of such inappropriate language "in order that [the people] should more earnestly beware of every transgression."⁸⁵ Nevertheless, Calvin found it to be a "hard (*aspera*) saying"—referring to the fact that it implied that God ate bread. But, he argues, it was an expression which was required by

⁸⁰ Somewhat similar is God's use of earthly elements in his dealings with his people. As the sacraments were added to seal God's promise and "make it as it were more evident to us," so Calvin also notes that God leads us "even by these carnal elements (*elementis etiam istis carnalibus*)" and "in the flesh itself" causes us to contemplate spiritual things (OS 1: 118; *Inst* 1536, 118; slightly altered); see also, CO 31: 248; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 410; slightly altered.

⁸¹ CO 46: 920; *Sermons on Saving Work*, 156 (on Matthew 27: 45-54).

⁸² CO 46: 920; *Sermons on Saving Work*, 156 (on Matthew 27: 45-54).

⁸³ Calvin declares that Ezekiel is "not a barbarous man," and this seems to flow from the fact that his speech would tend to indicate that he is (CO 40: 71; CTS *Ezekiel*, 1, 122 (on Ezekiel 2: 6)).

⁸⁴ CO 40: 83; CTS *Ezekiel*, 1, 139 (on Ezekiel 3: 11). See also CO 40: 133; CTS *Ezekiel*, 1, 212 (on Ezekiel 5: 15); CO 40: 153; CTS *Ezekiel*, 1, 241 (on Ezekiel 7: 1); CO 40: 243-4; CTS *Ezekiel*, 1, 373 (on Ezekiel 11: 19-20); CO 40: 256-7; CTS *Ezekiel*, 1, 392 (on Ezekiel 12: 4-6); CO 40: 340; CTS *Ezekiel*, 2, 101-2 (on Ezekiel 16: 7).

⁸⁵ CO 24: 493; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 300.

the rudeness of the people.⁸⁶ Thus, the situation seems to determine God's manner of speaking.

This crude efficiency is also poignantly displayed in the way in which God describes himself. On numerous occasions the Lord applies to himself images and descriptions which, from Calvin's deconstructing of them, show that they are deemed quite unsuitable by the reformer. Yet he consistently points to the effect these descriptions were calculated to have and to the hardness of the people to whom God spoke in order to explain why he appropriated them. God's complaint "you have taken away my gold and silver ... and my desirable goods" (Joel 3: 7)⁸⁷ provides us with one such example. Calvin explains that we are not to conceive of God as a child who takes delight in shiny trinkets. Rather, the Lord speaks after a human manner, clothing himself in "an alien guise (*alienam personam*),"⁸⁸ so that his people might know that he approves of the worship which he has ordained by his command.⁸⁹ In the same way, God compares himself to a drunk man (in Psalm 78: 65), transforming himself in this "very harsh (*asperior*)" saying to show that this sudden awakening in judgment after a period of delay would be more alarming than if he executed his wrath immediately.⁹⁰ God also says he deceives the false prophets (Ezekiel 14: 9), by which "very harsh" and "improper" figure he transfers to himself "what properly does not belong to him."⁹¹ And he does this so that the Israelites should stop turning their backs on God and claiming

⁸⁶ CO 24: 493; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 300.

⁸⁷ "... *desiderabilia mea bona*..." (CO 42: 585).

⁸⁸ CO 42: 587; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 2, 122-3.

⁸⁹ CO 42: 587; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 2, 122-3.

⁹⁰ Again Calvin says, God assumes "an alien guise" (CO 31: 742; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 274; altered (on Psalm 78: 65-6)).

⁹¹ CO 40: 310; CTS *Ezekiel*, 2, 59.

that if they remain in doubt amidst the various opinions it should not be imputed to them.⁹²

So, a child, a drunkard, and a deceiver. But what is particularly troubling to Calvin, curiously, are the images of God as husband and lover, such as one finds in Zephaniah 3: 17 and Ezekiel 16: 8.⁹³ Respecting the former, he writes, “if it is asked whether these expressions are suitable to the nature of God, we must say bluntly that nothing is more improper (*remotum*).”⁹⁴ Calvin says it is “by no means proper (*minime ... consentaneum*)” that God is described as “a husband who burns with love for his wife,” this being at odds with his glory. But it is necessary “to convince us of God’s ineffable love for us.”⁹⁵ Nonetheless, Calvin complains regarding an earlier portion of the text (“He will rejoice over you with joy” (Zeph 3: 17a)),

What could be more alien to God’s glory than to exult like a human being who is carried away by joy arising from love? It seems that the very nature of God repudiates these modes of expression.⁹⁶

Though his exegesis of the passage from Ezekiel is more subdued, it contains the same concerns. The depiction of God as a man struck with the beauty of a girl and offering

⁹² CO 40: 308; CTS *Ezekiel*, 2, 57.

⁹³ Zephaniah 3: 17, cited from the *NRSVB* is: “The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.” Ezekiel 16: 8 reads: “I passed by you again and looked on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness: I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord God, and you became mine.” Strangely, Calvin seems much less worried when God declares “Therefore my bowels are troubled for him” (Jeremiah 31: 20). On this text, he notes that God ascribes human feelings to himself, explains the meaning of the image employed, and avers that such an image is not applied properly to God, “but as he could not otherwise express the greatness of his love towards us, he thus speaks crassly in order to accommodate himself to our rudeness” (CO 38: 677; CTS *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 4, 109; slightly altered).

⁹⁴ CO 44: 73; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 305.

⁹⁵ CO 44: 73; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 305; slightly altered.

⁹⁶ CO 44: 72; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 304.

her marriage is described as God speaking “grossly (*crasse*).”⁹⁷ Loving “as young men do” is associated with “the people’s obtuseness (*stupor*).”⁹⁸ Thus, we are told that the people “could not be usefully taught unless the prophet accommodated himself to their crassness (*crassitiem*).”⁹⁹

In all these examples, phrases and images are found which the reformer, adhering to traditional views on divine immutability, impassibility and the like, finds unsavory. They are, in fact, crass, improper, harsh, and gross, and they strike out against and seem incompatible with God’s own nature. Accordingly, they should be judged objectionable, even offensive, but for the fact that they are employed by the Lord himself. Calvin, it must be said, rarely approaches this issue head on, but generally accounts for the Almighty’s conduct by blaming the obtuseness of the people, which made such means necessary if the desired effect was to be achieved. Thus he does not censure the use of such expressions, but simply expounds the ways of God in employing them. With this treatment he seems content. But such an interpretation leaves in God’s deportment a rather unattractive quality, according to which the reformer seems to justify the means the Lord uses by pointing to his aims and the difficulty of his circumstances.

This unattractiveness is, though, often more the product of Calvin’s exegesis than of the biblical text. Nor is this simply due to his views on matters such as God’s impassibility. For Calvin, due at least in part to the intensity of his psychologizing

⁹⁷ CO 40: 341; CTS *Ezekiel*, 2, 103.

⁹⁸ CO 40: 341; CTS *Ezekiel*, 2, 103.

⁹⁹ CO 40: 341; CTS *Ezekiel*, 2, 103.

interests and also to his polemic bent, is often drawn into interpretive problems to which the text may barely allude.

First he says, "God rejected his altar," which is obviously said improperly (*impropre*), but the prophet could not otherwise fully show the Jews what they deserved.¹⁰⁰

In this example from his lecture on Lamentations 2: 7, it is difficult for the reader to avoid the conclusion that God chooses his words more, or at the very least as much, for the effect he wishes them to have than for a concern to speak the truth.¹⁰¹ Nor does the continuation of Calvin's argument do anything to correct or alter this reading.

For had he only spoken of the city, the lands, the palaces, the vineyards, and, in short, all their possessions, it would have been a much lighter matter. But when he says that God had counted as nothing all their sacred things—the altar, the temple, the ark of the covenant, and festive days—when therefore he says that God had not only disregarded but had also cast away from him these things which were especially effective for conciliating his favor, from this the people must have perceived, unless they were excessively stupid, how grievously they had provoked God's wrath against themselves.¹⁰²

Here Calvin surely leaves God open to the charge that he chose his words as a result of a careful consideration of the purpose and end which he had for them, a fact which makes the reformer's reference to impropriety look like a euphemism for untruthfulness. The

¹⁰⁰ CO 39: 542; CTS *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 5, 355; altered (on Lamentations 2: 7).

¹⁰¹ This issue was briefly raised in chapter two. Bouwsma is well known for his position on this question of whether Calvin sought truth or effect with greater zeal in his writing: "Here we recognize once again the significance of Calvin's identification of himself with the humanists. ... He understood the Reformation as a great effort, mediated by language, to transfuse the power of the Spirit into human beings: not *truth*, which belongs to God and is beyond the capacity of human beings, but the ability to act. [This was] a supremely rhetorical task. ... His model was God's own communication by way of scripture, ..." (William Bouwsma, "Calvinism as Renaissance Artifact" in *John Calvin & the Church*, 38). Of course, these comments and ones like them have raised questions and caused others to respond to the contrary. A full consideration of these matters is outside the realm of this dissertation to deal with; see Francis Higman, "I Came not to Send Peace, but a Sword," in *CSRV*, 123-37.

text on which the reformer is commenting is not an easy one. “The Lord has rejected his altar and abandoned his sanctuary” (Lamentations 2: 7) certainly raises difficult questions. But it is the way Calvin handles it and his tendency to analyze the reasoning of the Almighty that gets him into trouble. He incessantly comments on God’s objectives and on his great concern for the capacity of believers, and seems very interested in the movements of the Lord in relation to humankind and the ways in which he makes concessions for them. Yet often these matters lay well behind the text. In this way, then, the reformer seems at times to create his own stumbling blocks.

But as surprising as God’s use of inappropriate language is, his employing of heavenly rewards is equally strange. For though the picture of the Eternal Father offering his children blessings and gifts for their obedience may simply be thought to highlight his kindness—and, of course, it does—yet in Calvin’s eyes it also depicts a God laboring vigorously to try to win over a people who seem determined to thwart his every attempt to lead them. Hence the slightly odd character of Calvin’s accommodating God also appears within this sphere of activity.

The Almighty could of course exact from his flock whatever he wished by simple fiat, since “the simple authority of God ought to be sufficient” for his people.¹⁰³ But this is not what he chooses. Rather, God “gives up a part of his right” over his church.¹⁰⁴ As if in their debt, he recompenses them for their labors. And in addition he lessens his demands, receiving and rewarding works which are sub-standard and

¹⁰² CO 39: 542; CTS *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 5, 355; slightly altered.

¹⁰³ Calvin’s full statement declares that although the simple authority of God ought to be sufficient, yet God “deigns to humble himself (*se ... submittere*)” on account of their infirmity (CO 39: 225; CTS *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 4, 488; altered (on Jeremiah 42: 7-10).

¹⁰⁴ CO 26: 103; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 111b; slightly altered (on Deuteronomy 4: 1-2).

tarnished by sin.¹⁰⁵ Thus what ought to be the Lord's sovereign reign over his servants actually bears closer resemblance to a father receiving the service which comes from his son, "though it is worthless."¹⁰⁶

But God is by no means satisfied with any of this. Why, then, does he settle for it? Because, Calvin answers, he wishes to spur his children on to do better. God wants them to honor his authority, to be zealous in serving him cheerfully and to excel in holiness, but he knows they are lazy and self-indulgent. So he offers them rewards to try to coax them to serve him. Though sometimes his purposes are general—"to win us,"¹⁰⁷ or "to keep them in the way of duty"¹⁰⁸—most often they are carefully crafted "to provoke us to keep his commandments,"¹⁰⁹ "so much the more to provoke and stir us up with cheerfulness and courage to serve him,"¹¹⁰ "to the end that we should be more willing to serve him,"¹¹¹ "that they may be more disposed to obedience,"¹¹² "that we should be more touched, and should serve him more earnestly,"¹¹³ and even to animate

¹⁰⁵ CO 34: 338; *Sermons on Job*, 414b (on Job 23: 1-7); CO 23: 726; *Sermons on Melchisedech and Abraham*, 173-4 (on Genesis 15: 6-7). Calvin compares human works to wine which is criticized in various ways by people ("it is too sharp, it is musty" and so forth) and always has some fault attached to it (CO 28: 185-6; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 858b; slightly altered (on Deuteronomy 24: 10-13)). In addition to the examples of God's gracious acceptance of the flawed works of his saints which were listed in chapter three, the women at the tomb (CO 46: 946-8; *Sermons on Saving Work*, 188-9 (on Matthew 28: 1-10)), may also be pointed to.

¹⁰⁶ CO 33: 497; *Sermons on Job*, 187b (on Job 10: 16-7). On the worthlessness of works generally see also, CO 23: 318-19; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 572 (on Genesis 22: 15-16). Of course, the issue is dealt with in the *Institutes* as well. There Calvin refers to that generosity of God which "bestows unearned rewards upon works that merit no such thing" (CO 2: 581; *Inst.* 3.15.3)—this passage from the *Institutes* was brought to my attention through the reading of George Hunsinger's unpublished paper, "A Tale of Two Simultaneities," 7.

¹⁰⁷ CO 26: 536; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 323a (on Deuteronomy 7: 11-15).

¹⁰⁸ CO 24: 378; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 110 (on Exodus 20: 5).

¹⁰⁹ CO 27: 98; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 464b; slightly altered (on Deuteronomy 11: 8-15).

¹¹⁰ CO 58: 98-9; *Thirteene Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, 137-8 (on Genesis 26: 1-5).

¹¹¹ CO 26: 234-5; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 176a-b; slightly altered (on Deuteronomy 4: 39-43).

¹¹² CO 24: 214; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 345 (on Deuteronomy 5: 32).

¹¹³ CO 26: 424; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 267b; slightly altered (on Deuteronomy 6: 1-4).

to obedience those “who would otherwise have neglected their duties” if some favor were not offered.¹¹⁴ His labors in this area are ubiquitous.¹¹⁵

While this in itself may seem rather objectionable, a less-palatable aspect of God's tactics is still to be considered. For, as the recalcitrance of God's people is virtually unbounded, God's accommodation must follow suit. Accordingly, the Lord is often willing to appease the purely carnal appetites of his people in the hope that he can lead them up from there to the contemplation of spiritual verities. Moreover, although he loves his children and does not want to “hire their services like those of slaves, so that they should be mercenaries in heart,”¹¹⁶ he is often given little option. Desperate times, and desperate people, call for desperate measures!

When, for example, Israel is famished and obedient to a stomach which “has no ears, nor ... reason and judgment,” God has regard to “these blind instincts,”¹¹⁷ and promises them,

And it shall come to pass in that day, I will hear, says the Lord, I will hear the heavens, and they shall hear the earth; and the earth shall hear the corn, and the wine, and the oil; and they shall hear Jezreel (Hosea 2: 21-2)

Here God alludes to and tolerates the idea that when people are in extreme need they will “invoke (*invocant*) bread, wine, and oil.”¹¹⁸ This is why he says the bread, wine, and oil will hear Jezreel. But these can do nothing to help apart from the nourishing of

¹¹⁴ CO 24: 478; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 275 (on Leviticus 7: 6-36).

¹¹⁵ See chapter three for a full exposition of this subject.

¹¹⁶ CO 24: 478; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 275 (on Leviticus 7: 6-36).

¹¹⁷ CO 42: 253; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 1, 118.

¹¹⁸ CO 42: 253; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 1, 118; slightly altered.

the earth and the rain from heaven and, ultimately, the blessing from God. Thus, Calvin remarks:

Therefore, we now see how apt is this gradation employed by the prophet, where God, on account of human rudeness and weakness, leads them at last to himself. For they turn their thoughts to bread, wine, and oil; from these they seek food, yet in this they are very stupid (*nimum stupididi*). Be that as it may, God indulges their simplicity and ignorance (*indulget ... ruditati et inscitiae*) and proceeds gradually from wine and corn and oil to the earth, and then from the earth to heaven, and afterwards he shows that heaven itself cannot pour down rain except by his will.¹¹⁹

So one can see what God is forced to do to raise his people from their carnality. The same can be found in the reformer's comments on Joel 2: 23, in which he argues against those who think it absurd that God would set in the first and highest place temporal blessings like rain, "which belong to the support and nourishment of the body."¹²⁰ The prophets often lead God's children by rudimentary principles to higher truths, Calvin asserts. Thus there is nothing surprising about the fact that Joel first affords the Jews a taste of God's blessings belonging to the body. "He begins with temporal benefits in order that little by little and by certain steps he may lead a rude and weak people" to a higher level.¹²¹

But God's behavior in the book of Haggai provides the clearest insight into the matter. Here the Lord, having spoken to his church through a succession of prophets,¹²² still found them cold and recalcitrant. Accordingly he disciplined them, bringing a

¹¹⁹ CO 42: 254; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 1, 119; altered.

¹²⁰ CO 42: 560; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 2, 83.

¹²¹ CO 42: 560; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 2, 83.

¹²² These were Ezekiel, Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

famine upon them to express his anger.¹²³ Yet, so far from being stirred, the people were now dull (*crassum ingenium*),¹²⁴ and “so insensible that their want and famine could not touch them.”¹²⁵ So, when Haggai preaches, he speaks “in a crass manner to earthly people (*hominibus terrenis*).”¹²⁶ He does not even try to turn their thoughts to heaven or proclaim mysteries, “but only speaks of food and daily support.”¹²⁷ Following this approach, he mentions the famine which God sent, calls them to take it to heart, reminds them that it was caused not by something like excessive cold or heat but by hail (thus making the divine element more difficult to deny),¹²⁸ and promises them a fruitful harvest if they take up that task which is their duty. But all this raises an objection; namely, that such an approach would almost certainly produce only a “servile and mercenary” obedience with which God, we know, is not pleased. Calvin does not deny that such obedience is unsatisfactory, but gives the following answer:

I answer that God often stimulates people by such beginnings when he sees them to be extremely tardy and slothful, and afterwards he leads them by other means to serve him truly and from the heart. When therefore anyone obeys God only that he may satisfy his appetite, it is ... [like someone who works for a wage without regard for the one who hired him] ... It is certain that such service is counted as nothing before God. For he wishes to be worshiped freely (*ingenue*) by us. ... But as generally people, because of their rudeness, are not able to be led at first to such liberality so as to devote themselves willingly to God, it is necessary to begin by using other means, as the prophet does here, who promises earthly and daily sustenance to the Jews—for he saw that they could not immediately, at the first step, ascend upwards to heaven ... [but it was his purpose ultimately to raise their minds higher]. Let us then know that this was only a beginning, that they might learn to fear God, and to expect whatever they

¹²³ CO 44: 117; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 379.

¹²⁴ CO 44: 118; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 381.

¹²⁵ CO 44: 117; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 380.

¹²⁶ CO 44: 116; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 377.

¹²⁷ CO 44: 116; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 377.

¹²⁸ CO 44: 117; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 379.

desired from his blessing, and also that they might shake off their stupor by which they had been completely paralyzed before that time.¹²⁹

When necessity requires it, God is willing to hire those who are mercenaries in heart—though in the hope of raising them to better things.

This is obviously quite a way from the picture of a God whose sovereign rule over his people allows him to command them without any promise of reward. Here he would seem to have little real authority over his subjects. So far is he from simply blessing the obedience of his children with gifts that he is now reduced to promising these gifts to his people in order to cajole them into the performance of what is effectively a mock-obedience, which would otherwise be wholly unacceptable, in the hope that better things will follow. A more unsatisfactory situation can hardly be imagined. But Calvin's God shows himself to be pragmatic enough to live with these circumstances.

Finally, in addition to inappropriate language and divine rewards, God uses chastening and afflictions to effect his purposes.¹³⁰ This was, it will be remembered, briefly mentioned earlier but will now be examined more thoroughly. "God," says Calvin, "allures us at first to himself, he employs kind and gentle invitations; but when he sees us delaying, or even going back, he begins to treat us more roughly and more severely."¹³¹ This rough treatment is clearly a last resort. Its harshness makes it an

¹²⁹ CO 44: 119-20; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 383; altered.

¹³⁰ Under this heading mention will also be made of God's practice of trying and testing his creatures, which is clearly related to, and not always distinguished from, chastisements.

¹³¹ CO 44: 47; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 263 (on Zephaniah 3: 1-2). So, in Calvin's exposition of the second commandment, he declares: "[God] prefers to attract people (*adducere malit homines*) to duty by gentle invitations, than by terrifying threatenings to extort from them more than they are willing to do" (CO 24: 380; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 113 (on Deuteronomy 5: 9)).

option which the Lord delays until other methods have failed. "God is not accustomed to deal so severely with people except when he has tried all other remedies."¹³² But even given this, it is a means which the Lord regularly employs in his dealings with his stiff-necked brood.

The divine intentions behind it have already been implied in the above citations, but they are identified more explicitly by Calvin as God's purpose "to force us, so to speak, to return to him,"¹³³ "to lead us to repentance,"¹³⁴ and "to draw us back to himself,"¹³⁵ or (speaking of general afflictions) "to try [his servant's] obedience,"¹³⁶ "to purge them" and "make them know" themselves,¹³⁷ and "to stir them up ... to the consideration of the celestial life."¹³⁸ It is not the administration of justice that God seeks, which awaits the afterlife, but the betterment of those in his household.¹³⁹

Yet because of an elemental decision on God's part, according to which he chooses to employ means and to relate to his creatures in this way (rather than simply calling on his absolute power to accomplish his will),¹⁴⁰ he finds these intentions difficult to achieve. God can find the going exceedingly arduous and can even be put under a kind of necessity by his people's recalcitrance. So when God threatens,

¹³² CO 42: 202; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 1, 41; slightly altered (on Hosea 1: 2). So Calvin also says that God does not lift up his hand to strike his people except with the best intentions, "knowing what is in us and having well considered whether there is any means to reclaim us or not." (CO 26: 679; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 394a; slightly altered (on Deuteronomy 9: 13-4)).

¹³³ SC 1: 310; *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 532 (on 2 Samuel 12: 1-6). See also CO 26: 114; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 117a.

¹³⁴ CO 40: 649; CTS *Daniel*, 1, 245 (on Daniel 4: 1-3).

¹³⁵ SC 1: 200; *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 344 (on 2 Samuel 7: 12-17).

¹³⁶ CO 35: 218-9; *Sermons on Iob*, 639a (on Job 35: 1-7).

¹³⁷ CO 33: 69-70; *Sermons on Iob*, 20a; slightly altered (on Job 1: 9-12).

¹³⁸ CO 23: 362; CTS *Genesis* 2, 65; slightly altered (on Genesis 26: 14).

¹³⁹ This is even his purpose, or one of them, in chastening the wicked. Calvin says one of God's purposes in this is "to make us walk in fear" (CO 33: 559; *Sermons on Iob*, 210b (on Job 12: 1-6)).

“Therefore will I return and take away my corn in its time, and my new wine in its stated time” (Hosea 2: 9),¹⁴¹ Calvin observes: “[h]ere again the prophet shows that God was constrained by extreme necessity to take vengeance on an ungodly and irreconcilable people.”¹⁴² And in a sermon on the promise, “God will chastise with the stripes of men and with the blows of the sons of men” (2 Samuel 7: 14),¹⁴³ he notes:

And what is more, just as a father does not strike his son except with regret, God also shows that if he were not, so to speak, forced by our actions, he would not always continue dealing with us in this way. Of course, we cannot properly speak of forcing God, but what we mean is (as I said) that when he chastises us, he would certainly wish to spare us if it were useful for us, but he has our salvation in mind.¹⁴⁴

Thus, as will be seen in material to be considered in the next chapter, God's own often puzzling weakness, or rather self-limitation, commits him to the employment of means and implies that he can be pressed by exigencies which are effectively out of his control.

But the reality of these necessities leads to a more puzzling anomaly. In the circumstances which prevail in the world, God must obscure, conceal, and even violate his own nature in order to try to rescue his lost sheep. This problem, which can be seen in God's general governing of providence as well,¹⁴⁵ was adumbrated in the earlier discussion of God's donning of “alien” masks. Calvin's previously-cited complaint

¹⁴⁰ The plainest reference which we have come across to this notion is found in Calvin's sermon on Job 5: 17-18 and will be addressed in the next chapter.

¹⁴¹ As cited by Calvin in CO 42: 235; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 1, 92.

¹⁴² CO 42: 235; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 1, 92.

¹⁴³ Text cited from SC 1: 200; *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 343 (on 2 Samuel 7: 12-17).

¹⁴⁴ SC 1: 200; *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 343.

¹⁴⁵ CO 33: 593-94; *Sermons on Job*, 223a-b (on Job 13: 17-25).

concerning Zephaniah 3: 17 points plainly to it.¹⁴⁶ Yet in considering divine chastening, the reformer's treatment of the issue becomes more explicit and thus more provocative.

By declaring "I have hewed them by the prophets ... and my judgments are as the light which goes forth" (Hosea 6: 5), God shows that "he was constrained by urgent necessity to deal sharply and roughly with the people."¹⁴⁷ However, this is not the norm, Calvin adds. As God is the best father, nothing is more pleasing to him than to treat his people kindly. But when we are perverse we "do not allow (*non patimur*) him to follow the inclination of his nature."¹⁴⁸

In the reformer's sermon on the words "Behold, the one whom God corrects is blessed" (Job 5: 17),¹⁴⁹ which would have been delivered around the same time (the mid-1550s)¹⁵⁰ as his Hosea lectures, he follows the same pattern. God's nature (*nature*) is to show himself gracious and tender towards his creatures.¹⁵¹ However, if the Lord were to handle his people according to his nature, they would perish, because they are so froward and rebellious. Therefore, God is required to "change his intention" and to deal with them differently from the way in which he would like to.¹⁵² He is compelled to

¹⁴⁶ On this text, it will be remembered, Calvin complained: "What could be more alien to God's glory than to exult like a human being who is carried away by joy arising from love? It seems that the very nature of God repudiates these modes of expression" (CO 44: 72; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 304).

¹⁴⁷ CO 42: 327; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 1, 227. The passage from Hosea is quoted as it appears in Calvin's lecture.

¹⁴⁸ CO 42: 327; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 1, 227.

¹⁴⁹ "*Voici, l'homme que Dieu corrige est bien-heureux*" (CO 33: 257).

¹⁵⁰ The Hosea lectures were begun in 1555 or 1556, the Job sermons on February 26, 1554; see de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin*, 108-17.

¹⁵¹ CO 33: 265; *Sermons on Job*, 96b.

¹⁵² "*Dieu change quasi de propos, c'est à dire qu'il se montre envers nous autre qu'il ne voudroit estre*" (CO 33: 265; *Sermons on Job*, 96b; slightly altered).

treat them roughly and effectively to disguise himself (*se desguise*), if he wishes them not to fall away.¹⁵³

Similarly, in his exposition of Job 22: 23-30 Calvin asks, "what is the cause that we are thus afflicted," one person with poverty, another with disease, and so forth? Is it because God the father "takes pleasure in dealing roughly with us?"¹⁵⁴ Calvin's answer ("surely not") is followed by the interesting observation that his children are not ready (*capables*) for him to treat them according to his natural inclination (*son naturel*).¹⁵⁵ If his children had all that they wanted in this life, they would become drunk with pleasure and kick against God. "In short," Calvin insists, "we constrain God (*contraignons Dieu*) to deal so rigorously with us."¹⁵⁶

Likewise, preaching on Job 36: 18-19 Calvin once more acknowledges that "it is God's nature to be gentle, longsuffering, and loving."¹⁵⁷ Surely then, when God disciplines his children he transforms himself (*se transfigure*) and, as it were, "does not follow his own nature."¹⁵⁸ Yet since his church is stubborn, this is necessary if God "would gather us gently home to himself."¹⁵⁹ In all these examples one discovers a hiding of the divine face which rivals those discussed by Brian Gerrish, Susan Schreiner and others. For here the Eternal God not only conceals but contradicts (says Calvin) his nature.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵³ CO 33: 265; *Sermons on Job*, 96b; slightly altered.

¹⁵⁴ CO 34: 323; *Sermons on Job*, 409a; slightly altered.

¹⁵⁵ CO 34: 323; *Sermons on Job*, 409a.

¹⁵⁶ CO 34: 323; *Sermons on Job*, 409a; slightly altered.

¹⁵⁷ CO 35: 286; *Sermons on Job*, 664a.

¹⁵⁸ CO 35: 286; *Sermons on Job*, 664a; slightly altered.

¹⁵⁹ CO 35: 286-7; *Sermons on Job*, 664b.

¹⁶⁰ See, Brian Gerrish, "'To the Unknown God,' Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," in *The Old Protestantism*, 131-49; Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom*, 91-155; Schreiner, of course, deals specifically

The ramifications of this are felt quite keenly by Calvin, and accordingly, he is pressed to acknowledge that “God dissimulates for a time (*Dieu dissimule pour un temps*), and things seem to be hidden from his sight” when he stands by unmoved by the plight of his people, fails to hear their sighs, and seems to forget his tender kindness, while allowing the wicked to run riot without lifting a finger to stop them.¹⁶¹ A startling conclusion, he does not propose it with the same confidence which characterized Origen's assertions.¹⁶² Indeed, there is at least one occasion on which Calvin seems to draw back from it.¹⁶³ At other times, though, the reformer does not attempt to deny or remove from God's ways this appearance of deception, but simply reminds his readers or hearers that this is how God must treat his people if they are to be brought safely home; that their stubbornness, in fact, constrains him to act in this manner. Yet such a claim surely struggles to support the weight it is being asked to carry.¹⁶⁴

Stepping back, we can see that Calvin's interpreting of the Lord's use of means—inappropriate language, the promise of rewards, and the chastening rod—results

with the Job sermons and covers them in outstanding fashion. Hermann Selderhuis also deals with God's hiddenness in his recent paper, “Calvin's Theology of the Psalms” in *Calvin Studies IX*, 1-15. See also, C.J. Kinlaw, “Determinism and the Hiddenness of God in Calvin's Theology” in *Religious Studies* 24 (1988), 497-510.

¹⁶¹ CO 34: 374; *Sermons on Job*, 428a (on Job 24: 1-9). See also a little earlier in the same sermon where Calvin puts words into the mouths of believers, “how is it possible that God should be so patient [towards the wicked] and dissemble so much (*il dissimule tant*) ...?” (CO 34: 369; *Sermons on Job*, 426a). Also, on a different occasion, Calvin declares simply that God “seems to dissemble (*qu'il semblera ... qu'il dissimule*)” (CO 33: 404; *Sermons on Job*, 150a (on Job 8: 13-22)).

¹⁶² See the discussion of early church exegesis and usage of accommodation in chapter one.

¹⁶³ This comes, significantly, late in Calvin's exposition of Job, in a sermon on Job 34: 4-10. There, Calvin declares that the rebuke Job receives from Elihu warns believers to bridle themselves when they behold the things which happen on earth lest they be tempted to say, “why does God dissemble thus?” He goes on to warn of the temptations which can move God's children to blaspheme against the Lord (CO 35: 139; *Sermons on Job*, 609b (on Job 34: 4-10)).

¹⁶⁴ For example, there was likely to be more than a little confusion over the fact that what was allowed to God was denied to Calvin's hearers and readers; for dissembling is something which is expressly forbidden to God's children: “To be short, we see in this passage that it is not lawful for the faithful in

in a surprising set of conclusions. Here the accommodating God, because he longs to accomplish his aims, is forced to take up drastic, compromising and occasionally bizarre measures on account of which he appears not only practical but also pragmatic enough to tolerate what one would have thought was intolerable in the hope that the results to which he aspired would follow. At times, the God depicted here seems reckless, on other occasions preoccupied and almost frantic. And though Calvin's expositions are frequently interspersed with warnings—"we must reverence the secrets of God that are unknown to us, acknowledging him to be righteous, though we find his deeds to be strange"¹⁶⁵—these do little to lessen the sense of confusion which arises from such a depiction of the Eternal God.

What is astonishing, though, given the lengths to which God is willing to go to accomplish his aims, is that very often he fails to do so. His aspirations go unfulfilled and his people remain disobedient, unrepentant, and irreclaimable. Though God "allures us at first," and "treats us more roughly" when he sees the continued stubbornness of his children, yet it may happen that he "teaches and reproveth in vain."¹⁶⁶ It was, in fact, this that moved him to send his people into exile. "We now see," says Calvin, "how God dealt with Israel when he saw what his disposition required." For Israel "could not be constrained to obedience in his own land, but it was necessary to move him elsewhere."¹⁶⁷ Impressive for its honesty is Calvin's examination of such issues. His probing of this note of divine failure reveals a God whose experience of disappointment,

any way to dissemble (*qu'il n'est point licite aux fideles de dissimuler en façon que ce soit*) ..." (CO 34: *Sermons on Job*, 460b; slightly altered (on Job 27: 5-8)).

¹⁶⁵ CO 34: 369; *Sermons on Job*, 426a (on Job 24: 1-9).

¹⁶⁶ CO 44: 47; *CTS Minor Prophets*, 4, 263 (on Zephaniah 3: 1-2); see also CO 42: 407; *CTS Minor Prophets*, 1, 347 (on Hosea 9: 17).

frustration, and resignation is as deep as it is confounding. God “complains that he is trifled with when he has chastised his children in vain.”¹⁶⁸ And “God here complains that he had in vain punished neighboring nations, and made them examples in order to recall the Jews to himself.”¹⁶⁹ And “God declares that he had tried in every way to find out whether” there was any meekness in his people, and “that he had ill bestowed all his blessings; for his people were blind to such kind favors.”¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, when God laments, “What shall I do to you, Ephraim? What shall I do to you, Judah?” (Hosea 6: 4), Calvin explains, “God ... intimates that he had tried all remedies, and found them useless.” Calvin then puts these words into God’s mouth:

“What more then,” he says, “shall I do to you? You are wholly incurable, you are inexcusable, and altogether past hope. For no means have been omitted by me, by which I could promote your salvation, but I have lost all my labors. As I have effected nothing by punishments and chastisements, as my favor also has not been esteemed by you, what now remains, but that I must utterly cast you away?”¹⁷¹

Here is the self-adapting God defeated and exasperated. He has exerted himself tirelessly but done so in vain, and now finds himself unable to do anything but protest over the Jews’ intractability.

¹⁶⁷ CO 42: 426; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 1, 376 (on Hosea 10: 11).

¹⁶⁸ CO 40: 362; CTS *Ezekiel*, 2, 131 (on Ezekiel 16: 27).

¹⁶⁹ CO 44: 55; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 275 (on Zephaniah 3: 6, 7).

¹⁷⁰ CO 42: 437; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 1, 394 (on Hosea 11: 4).

¹⁷¹ CO 42: 326; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 1, 225; slightly altered.

4.3.4 Anxious, distressed, controlling but malleable

Thus the accommodating God often labors in vain, and this causes expressions of anxiety such as the ones cited above. But this is not the only way in which the Almighty vents his feelings of concern. Accordingly, having come to the end of a long section dominated by the issues of purpose and intention, and having beheld a God who is impressive almost entirely because of his determination, we shall now take up a different set of concerns in the material that follows.

When God legislates for the various feasts, he seems almost to bend over backwards making allowances for his people. The necessity of going up to Jerusalem five times a year is not imposed upon them, but God, wishing to make a concession for their infirmity, requires only three visits.¹⁷² Furthermore, because travel was less convenient for the women—who would have been almost always either pregnant or nursing anyway¹⁷³—only the fathers and males above twenty are required to make the journey, being permitted to present themselves in the names of their wives and children. But this second capitulation could put the Jews in peril of their lives, for they could very well find themselves in danger of enemy attack during those times when all the males are gathered together in one place. Accordingly, God anticipates this and promises that no one shall desire their land at these times. Commenting on this, Calvin notes that the promise was given “lest the Jews should object” over the threat of invasion and not obey the Lord’s instructions.¹⁷⁴ Though this assertion is simple enough, it implies that God acts on the basis of a possible outcome which he foresees and about which he is

¹⁷² CO 24: 600-1; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 471 (on Deuteronomy 16: 16).

¹⁷³ CO 24: 600-1; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 471.

concerned. Other instances of such concern are commonplace in Calvin's exegesis. They include God's repeating his promises to his servants "lest at any time their confidence should be shaken through fleshly infirmity,"¹⁷⁵ and an occasion on which God, following his giving of rest to the Israelites, instructs them to divide amongst themselves the Mediterranean coastline (which was still in the hands of rival nations), "lest the intermission which was given for the purpose of restoring them to new vigor might provide an occasion for sloth."¹⁷⁶ While the notion of God displaying such cares is in itself fascinating, what is significant here is that these apprehensions have quite a marked effect upon his policies and procedures and seem, at times, to amount to a kind of fretting or excessive worrying on his part. Indeed, they possess if not a controlling then a striking influence over many of the decisions he makes.

At times, God's concern seems to make him more generous and compliant. God provides an explanation of the Decalogue, though it should have been sufficient by itself to instruct the people, "lest its brevity should render it obscure to an ignorant and slow-hearted people."¹⁷⁷ When Israel mix superstitious prayers with their use of vows, these are tolerated by God, "lest in his hatred of them, he should altogether abolish what was useful and laudable."¹⁷⁸ Moreover, their vows were confirmed by God, not because they were completely pleasing to him, but "lest the people should accustom themselves to impious contempt of him" if they kept their vow and yet found that there was no

¹⁷⁴ CO 24: 600-1; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 471.

¹⁷⁵ CO 23: 387; CTS *Genesis*, 2, 106 (on Genesis 28: 1). In a specific example of this, God confirms Noah in the truth of divine assurances, "lest he should faint" (CO 23: 128; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 264 (on Genesis 7: 1). And in the same way, he institutes the Passover to signify his grace to Israel, "lest it should ever depart from their memory" (CO 24: 286; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 456 (on Exodus 12: 1-2)).

¹⁷⁶ CO 25: 515; CTS *Joshua*, 182; slightly altered (on Joshua 13: 1-14).

¹⁷⁷ CO 24: 260; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 416 (on Deuteronomy 1: 1).

difference between themselves and those who broke their promise.¹⁷⁹ Also God permits mourning amongst his people rather than legislating against it (as he would clearly like to do), “lest immoderate strictness drive them to passionate excess.”¹⁸⁰ He promises prophets to his people “lest Israel should object that they were more hardly dealt with than the rest of the nations.”¹⁸¹ And he takes a cautious approach when chastening the righteous, not always allowing the wicked to triumph over them, “lest the just, being overcome by temptation, should abandon themselves to the things which they desire.”¹⁸²

Probably more often, this uneasiness moves God to be more cautious, more micro-managing, and less indulgent and lighthearted (so to speak). Normally this is due to his characteristically uncomplimentary assessment of human nature, which makes its presence felt throughout his engagements with humankind and seems to have convinced Calvin's Lord that his people could not be trusted to perform even the simplest of tasks. When Israel crosses the Jordan, God attempts himself to direct almost every step of their progress by his own voice, “lest any perplexity should occur to retard them.”¹⁸³ He restricts the high priest from entering the inner sanctuary except once a year, “lest a more frequent entrance of it should produce indifference.”¹⁸⁴ God instructs Israel to write the commands on their city gates, on the stones which they set up near the Jordan, on their door-posts and the borders of their garments, “lest by the people's carelessness

¹⁷⁸ CO 24: 569; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 423; slightly altered (on Leviticus 27: 1-29).

¹⁷⁹ CO 24: 568; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 421.

¹⁸⁰ CO 24: 449; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 229; slightly altered (Leviticus 21: 1-12). So, God reprimands Joshua, says Calvin, not for lying on the ground and lamenting but “for excessive sorrow” (CO 25: 477; CTS *Joshua*, 110 (on Joshua 7: 10)).

¹⁸¹ CO 24: 271; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 433 (on Deuteronomy 18: 15-8).

¹⁸² CO 32: 315; CTS *Psalms*, 5, 92; altered.

¹⁸³ CO 25: 455; CTS *Joshua*, 73; altered (on Joshua 4: 16).

¹⁸⁴ CO 24: 501; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 314 (on Leviticus 16: 2).

the knowledge of the law should be obscured or in any way obliterated.”¹⁸⁵ He apportions to the priests their due from the sacrifices, not only for their sake but “lest the priests should basely and greedily take more than their due.”¹⁸⁶ He also forbids any use whatsoever to be made by Israel of the silver and gold from which the idols of other nations had been formed, not because it was polluted in itself or because the idol worshippers had contaminated the good things of God, but because the people were prone to superstition, and thus, such snares “might easily have separated them from the pure worship of God” unless they were completely pulverized.¹⁸⁷ He prescribes the measure of each particular element, when instructing his children regarding their offerings, “lest the people should introduce many worthless and superfluous religious practices.”¹⁸⁸ The same is true with respect to the shewbread, “lest diversity in so serious a matter might gradually give birth to many corruptions.”¹⁸⁹ The people must not dare to invent anything arbitrarily. For the same reason, he commands one form of offering to be observed both by Jews and by the stranger who may be living with them, “lest if any distinction should be made, corrupt mixtures should immediately creep

¹⁸⁵ CO 24: 229-30; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 368-70 (on Deuteronomy 11: 18 and Deuteronomy 27: 1-4, 8).

¹⁸⁶ CO 24: 487; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 289 (on Deuteronomy 18: 3). God, Calvin adds, “prescribes certain limits to which they were to confine themselves,” lest they should give in to their covetousness (CO 24: 487; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 290). See also, CO 24: 458; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 243 (on Leviticus 22: 10ff).

¹⁸⁷ CO 24: 553-4; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 399; slightly altered (on Deuteronomy 7: 25-26). The same care to curtail human sinfulness can be seen in God’s instruction to make an altar of earth upon which sacrifices were to be offered (Exodus 20: 24-5), or alternatively an altar of unfashioned stones which permitted (Deuteronomy 27: 5-7). On this Calvin comments that God anticipates the fact that “if anything in the shape of an altar had remained” for long, “immediately religious notions would have been associated with it.” For this reason, “this evil is anticipated when he forbids altars to be built which might exist for any length of time” (CO 24: 397; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 139).

¹⁸⁸ CO 24: 538; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 376-7; slightly altered (on Numbers 15: 1-16).

¹⁸⁹ CO 24: 488; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 292 (on Leviticus 24: 5-9).

in.”¹⁹⁰ He even uses fine flour, frankincense, and the like to instruct his children, even though he himself is not attracted by sweet tastes or pleasant smells, “lest they should corrupt God’s service by their own foolish inventions.”¹⁹¹ But, more extreme than any of these instances is God’s condemning to death of the person who drinks the blood of an animal—even though there is obviously no proportion between the two in terms of intrinsic worth—because he determines such instruction to be necessary for a rude people such as the Jews, “lest they should speedily lapse into barbarism.”¹⁹² These are the lengths to which God can be moved by his concerns. To be sure, not all his decisions are as extreme as the last one.¹⁹³ Nevertheless, the Lord’s tendency to worry about possible outcomes coupled with his conviction regarding the absolute wickedness of human nature clearly moved him to be extremely cautious respecting what he could allow his people to do, say, and think.

Thus Calvin’s beleaguered God responds in different ways to the stimuli present in the historical circumstances in which he involves himself, though as indicated, caution tends to predominate. Apart from this overriding concern, his reactions exhibit little rhyme or reason; on one occasion he is indulgent, on another severe. Yet the prevalence of such caution means that the Lord’s choices often betray a mixture of

¹⁹⁰ CO 24: 539; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 377; slightly altered (on Numbers 15: 14-16).

¹⁹¹ CO 24: 509; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 328 (on Leviticus 2: 1-16).

¹⁹² CO 24: 619; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 31; altered (on Leviticus 17: 10). Similar reasoning is also found in CO 24: 544; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 385 (on Exodus 23: 19); also, CO 25: 487; CTS *Joshua*, 130 (on Joshua 8: 29).

¹⁹³ Having said that, we do find God commanding the indiscriminant exterminating of all nations living in the promised land, for “if any of the old inhabitants had survived, they would have soon endeavored to revive their corruptions” and been a stumbling block to Israel (CO 24: 552-53; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 397). Here Calvin has clear support from Scripture itself (Deuteronomy 7: 16-26).

worry, gloom, and fear, as he anticipates the various dangers his children are likely to face.

To elaborate on this last point, the character of God's anxieties may be illustrated from his choice to use frankincense and fine flour as a particularly illuminating example. For him to opt to use such substances in the instructing of believers with which he himself is not in any way pleased, simply so that he can keep the Jews from implementing their own vain notions, seems astonishing and displays a level of cautiousness—almost, of paranoia—on the part of God which is quite remarkable.

We know that God is not attracted either by sweetness of taste nor by pleasant scents; but it was useful to teach a rude people by these symbols, lest they should corrupt God's service by their own foolish inventions.¹⁹⁴

Here Calvin's deity is nothing if not suspicious. In the above quotation Calvin, perhaps out of a concern to safeguard the divine transcendence, leaves his readers with a God who has absolutely no confidence in his chosen people; a God who is robotically dispassionate about the beauties of his own creation; a God whose hatred of sin and human invention, rather than revealing the glory of his holiness, tends to make him look more like the ultimate killjoy. Nor does this instance stand on its own, as has already been seen. In many of the examples surveyed above, the Lord appears meticulous, excessively deliberate, fastidious, obsessive, rigid, and controlling, a veritable "control freak," in fact. His concern over his people's depravity results in behavior which often seems more mistrusting and chary than loving, and discloses a strange mixture of affection and anxiety, concern and preoccupation, care and perturbation. Here the

reformer's God—normally so profoundly caring—acts not so much from a generous, fatherly wisdom but from an earnest desire simply to avoid various problematic outcomes. This being so, it is not the least bit surprising that when Jehovah triumphantly led Israel safely out of Egypt, he took the precaution of placing a barrier between his people and the land of their former bondage, “[l]est any desire of return should steal over their hearts.”¹⁹⁵ Even when things were, presumably, at their best between God and his children and they had every reason to love him, his mind could not be devoid of solicitude.

But the earlier points set out above, dealing with the arbitrariness of God's responses, should also briefly be addressed. It would seem that from the foregoing analysis a responsive, adaptable, and malleable deity has been unearthed, whose reasoning virtually defies analysis. One minute he strives to curtail his children's implementing of empty inventions in worship and the next he concedes to them many base and questionable privileges. This is strange to say the least, but a more surprising result should also be noted.

Behind all of this, of course, God appears as one committed to his relationship with Israel and to working hard to maintain it; as one who has dedicated himself to laboring to keep his children from the excesses of sin. Yet equally apparent is the fact that Israel is bent upon ruining that relationship and reveling in dissipation. Although not surprising, this has the curious effect of putting the Jews in the driver's seat and

¹⁹⁴ CO 24: 509; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 328 (on Leviticus 2: 1-16).

¹⁹⁵ CO 24: 143; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 233 (on Exodus 13: 17-20). It is to be noted, that on this occasion, Calvin's sentiment simply echoes that of Scripture. For Exodus 13: 17 reads: "... for God said, lest by chance the people change their minds when they see war, and they return to Egypt" (CO 24: 142).

forcing Calvin's Lord into the position of responder. Like a wife in a doomed marriage, God must constantly strive to answer the numerous challenges posed by his ne'er-do-well husband, knowing that if he does not, no one will. The relationship owes its continued existence to him alone. This being the case, God is forced continually to turn, twist, and change to suit the varying needs of the moment, trying all the while not only to maintain a friendship with his church but also to lead them in paths of righteousness. His behavior may appear sporadic and embarrassing, but it is *de potentia ordinata* necessary if God is going to maintain his fragile relationship with his children. Hence, here we look upon not only the docility and malleability of God, but also his vulnerability and, in some sense, defenselessness.

Though not completely altering the register of the previous discussion concerning God's goal-oriented practicality, these new considerations certainly cast their own peculiar shadow over them. Thus the God who earlier looked like one driven to excel, bold and assertive, now begins to take on the characteristics of one possessed by fear of rejection, or alternatively, like one who simply delights in denying to his people any vestige of that enjoyment which could be theirs if he would just leave them alone.

4.3.5 Tolerant, indifferent, supine, coerced and captive

But there is more to be said about Calvin's God. In what follows a collection of motifs will be handled which is associated with the subject of sin and congregates around the ideas of toleration, resignation, and enslavement. The themes present a peculiar picture of the thrice-holy deity. Throughout the material to be covered here

Calvin's God seems so passive. Although his desire for holiness and detestation of sin cannot be doubted, he appears, in marked distinction to what we found earlier, to be far from zealous to rid his flock of inbred sinfulness and to strive for results. Here it is almost as if he has learned to live with the innumerable imperfections of his people. And more striking still, on other occasions he seems patently unable to do anything about them. How can this be? Although one is immediately inclined to point to God's forbearing love as the reason, and naturally such an explanation is sometimes asserted, yet it is not produced by the reformer as readily as one might have expected. This is particularly true when Calvin is discussing the more scandalous of God's affairs. Here and in other places as well the answer is shrouded in mystery and hidden from mortal eyes.

A suitably solemn subject will be the starting point for the following investigation, what Calvin called the most holy of conversations, prayer.¹⁹⁶ That God indulges the innocuous weaknesses which cling to his children's petitions,¹⁹⁷ and "permits (*permittit*)" the use of arguments in prayer although they are superfluous¹⁹⁸ are just two of the many examples which testify to how pervasive within this *locus* is accommodation. Yet its true character and import only become clear when one realizes that God allows his creatures to engage in remarkably, at times brutally, honest discourse with him. As seen in the previous chapter, God "complies with (*concedit*) our

¹⁹⁶ "... prayer, than which nothing is more holy, ..." (CO 31: 448; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 172; slightly altered (on Psalm 44: 23)).

¹⁹⁷ CO 36: 625; CTS *Isaiah*, 3, 119 (on Isaiah 37: 14). Here Hezekiah spreads letters out before God when threatened by the Assyrians, which God allows out of accommodation to the king's frailty.

¹⁹⁸ "It is indeed superfluous to bring arguments before God, for the purpose of persuading him to grant us what we ask; but still he permits us to make use of them, and to speak to him in prayer, as familiarly as a

praying for him to make haste,"¹⁹⁹ and "patiently bears with (*sustinet*) our foolishness" in this.²⁰⁰ He "tolerates (*tolerat*) in the prayers of his saints" times when "they pray for him to rise up or wake up."²⁰¹ With respect to such utterances, Calvin says, God "concedes to us this license (*licentiam*)."²⁰²

The same can be seen in the cries of specific saints. When Abram questions the veracity of the Lord's promise (Genesis 15: 8), the reformer writes that sometimes the Lord concedes to his children this privilege, for "he does not act so strictly with them as not to allow himself to be questioned."²⁰³ When Habakkuk protests, "How long will you show me iniquity and make me see trouble?" (Habakkuk 1: 3),²⁰⁴ Calvin declares "there was nothing wrong in this before God, [or] at least no sin is imputed to him."²⁰⁵ And when Joshua "quarrels (*litigat*) with God" for having led the people out of the desert, his excessive vehemence "was excused (*excusata fuit*)" by the Almighty.²⁰⁶ God even tolerates the prayers of Job, who on one occasion vents his anger by asking: "is it good

son speaks to when earthly Father. It should always be observed, that the use of prayer is, that God may be the witness of all our affections" (CO 31: 116; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 150 (on Psalm 10: 13)).

¹⁹⁹ CO 31: 773; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 338; altered (on Psalm 83: 1).

²⁰⁰ CO 32: 62; CTS *Psalms*, 4, 98 (on Psalm 102: 2).

²⁰¹ CO 31: 447-8; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 171; altered (on Psalm 44: 23). Calvin is not consistent in this interpretation; or, at least, he does not always mention the Lord's patience and tolerance when exegeting these passages. On occasion, he assigns to the Psalmist's prayer for the Almighty to arise the following rendering: "the expression to arise does not apply to God but to the external appearance of the matter and to our senses. For we do not perceive God to be the deliverer of his people except when he appears before our eyes, as it were sitting upon the judgment seat" (CO 31: 106; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 131; slightly altered (on Psalm 9: 19). Likewise, more generally, Calvin often speaks of the prayers of the saints as being crafted according to "the sense of the flesh (*carnis suae sensu*)" (CO 31: 432; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 141 (on Psalm 42: 9)).

²⁰² CO 32: 62; CTS *Psalms*, 4, 98.

²⁰³ CO 23: 215; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 411; slightly altered.

²⁰⁴ CO 43: 496; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 18; slightly altered.

²⁰⁵ He goes on to explain that "God permits (*permittat*) us to deal so familiarly with him." (CO 43: 496; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 18; slightly altered).

²⁰⁶ CO 25: 474; CTS *Joshua*, 107-8; slightly altered (on Joshua 7: 6).

for you to do me wrong and to cast away the work of your hands ...?" (Job 10: 3).²⁰⁷ Job, whose patience was not "as perfect as was required,"²⁰⁸ utters passions with which he was "carried away," and which Calvin found deeply disturbing, as Schreiner rightly observes.²⁰⁹ Job confesses that he was filled with such bitterness that even if it did not benefit him, he could not help but continue his complaining and loosening of the reins of his frustration; indeed, he speaks as a man full of passion and "out of his mind (*bout de son sens*)."²¹⁰ Yet in all this, God "abases himself (*qu'il s'abaisse*)" and allows the Uzite to pour out his feelings.²¹¹ Although Job, Calvin assures us, restrains himself so as not directly to accuse God²¹² (an assertion which runs counter to the general tenor of the reformer's exegesis), yet he still expresses himself with great intensity in interrogating the Almighty, a fact which brings the divine sufferance into clear focus.

God does not approve of these prayers. He allows them, but only *per indulgentiam*—a fact which Calvin says is true of every prayer.²¹³ Nor is his objection trivial, as if it were merely nominal sin, a simple matter of a misplaced word or slight impropriety. Rather these prayers treat God's majesty "with very little reverence."²¹⁴ In fact, concerning Joshua's litigious query, the reformer asserts that "Joshua exceeds moderation," and "proceeds to much greater intemperance (*maiolem ... intemperiem*) when, in opposition to the divine promise and decree, he utters the reckless wish

²⁰⁷ CO 33: 467; *Sermons on Iob*, 175; slightly altered.

²⁰⁸ CO 33: 478; *Sermons on Iob*, 179b.

²⁰⁹ Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom*, 95-105, 108, *et passim*.

²¹⁰ CO 33: 467-8; *Sermons on Iob*, 175a; slightly altered.

²¹¹ CO 33: 475; *Sermons on Iob*, 178a.

²¹² CO 33: 468; *Sermons on Iob*, 175a.

²¹³ "And in this way all prayers would be vitiated if God did not pardon them in his immense indulgence" (CO 24: 474; CTS *Joshua*, 107; slightly altered).

²¹⁴ CO 32: 62; CTS *Psalms*, 4, 98.

(*turbulentum votum*), 'would that we had never come out of the desert!'"²¹⁵ But all this was excused. These, then, are violent and repulsive utterances, and far from the fear and reverence which are due to the Almighty.²¹⁶ Accordingly, God's indulgence here does not merely countenance the odd misdemeanor or hiccup, but overlooks rank truculence.

Yet God also answers these pleas. Though it is a mercy when a pious prayer is answered, yet "God many times grants to people their ill-advised (*inconsiderement*) requests."²¹⁷ The words of the *Institutes* are even stronger: "the prayers which God grants are not always pleasing to him (*non semper placere Deo*)."²¹⁸ Accordingly, when Lot complains to the angels that he could not flee to the mountains as they had instructed and asks if they would allow him to find safety in a nearby town, though some in Calvin's day had argued that this request pleased God, Calvin opposes this view, declaring that there is nothing new in the Lord granting through forbearance what nonetheless he "does not approve (*non probatur*)."²¹⁹ So, he describes the Lord as bearing with "the evil wishes of his own people (*pravus suorum votis*)."²²⁰ And when God forbids a master to oppress his servant, and declares that he will hear the oppressed servant who cries out against his unjust master (Deuteronomy 24: 14-5), Calvin asks if this is not a violation of Christ's injunction to pray for your enemies. He answers simply

²¹⁵ CO 25: 474; CTS *Joshua*, 107-8; slightly altered.

²¹⁶ Calvin explains the matter succinctly when he says: "[i]f it is objected that prayer, than which nothing is more holy, is defiled when some perverse imagination of the flesh (*perversa carnis imaginatio*) is mingled with it, I confess that this is true. But when we use this license which God permits us, let us know that by his indulgence he wipes away the fault (*vitium*), that our prayers may not be defiled" (CO 31: 448; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 172; slightly altered (on Psalm 44: 23)).

²¹⁷ CO 23: 683; *Sermons on the Historie of Melchisedech*, 88; slightly altered (on Genesis 15: 4-6).

²¹⁸ CO 2: 640; *Inst.* 3.20.15; slightly altered. In fact, Calvin goes on to argue in this section that God hears and answers the prayers of unbelievers at times.

²¹⁹ CO 23: 276; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 511 (on Genesis 19: 21).

²²⁰ CO 23: 277; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 511.

that "God does not always approve of the prayers which he nevertheless answers."²²¹ To support his point, he reminds his readers that the imprecatory prayer of Jotham, Gideon's son, against the Shechemites (Judges 9: 20) was answered although "it was plainly the offspring of immoderate anger."²²² Thus God's lenience and longsuffering do not only countenance the hearing but also the granting of offensive and displeasing pleas.

Equally impressive is the Lord's acquiescent attitude often displayed in his answering of his people's prayers, according to which God submits himself to his creatures as if he were taking on the role of the inferior. When the angel is delayed in coming to Daniel, God explains the situation and through his messenger "excuses himself to his own prophet."²²³ Ezekiel, wishing to know whether God would destroy even the remnant of Israel, vehemently entreats the Lord to answer him and receives an explanation in which Calvin finds an impressive indulgence. God, the reformer declares, deigns out of his goodness "to give an account of himself as if he wished to satisfy them."²²⁴ In both instances the Lord seems almost to turn matters on their head, taking the position of a subordinate who must report back to his superior. But perhaps more remarkable are those occasions when God is described as capitulating to the terms

²²¹ CO 24: 672; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 115.

²²² CO 24: 672; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 115.

²²³ "We must notice, secondly, God's kindness (*humanitas Dei*) because he deigns through his angel, so to speak, to excuse himself to his own prophet. He offers a reason for the delay of the angel's return, and the cause of this hindrance was, as I have already stated, his regard for the safety of his elect people. The wonderful clemency of the Almighty is here proved by his offering an excuse so graciously to his Prophet, because he did not shew himself easily entreated on the very day when prayer was offered to him" (CO 41: 205; CTS *Daniel*, 2, 251; altered (on Daniel 10: 13)).

²²⁴ CO 40: 204; CTS *Ezekiel*, 1, 315; slightly altered (on Ezekiel 9: 9). See also Calvin's comments on Ezekiel 16: 34-7, where the Lord gives to his people some explanation of the chastisements he is about to send to them; a fact which leads Calvin to observe: "This passage teaches us that although the reason for

laid down by his children. Psalm 145: 19, for example, declares, "he will perform the desires of those who fear him." Musing over this text, Calvin queries concerning the standing of humanity that the Almighty should show compliance or obedience (*morigerum*)²²⁵ to their will, and wonders at the fact that God "voluntarily lowers himself to these terms that he may yield to our desires."²²⁶ Similarly evocative is Calvin's comment on Numbers 2: 1-34, that although the Lord's authority was completely sufficient (in this case, to prevent quarrels among the people), he "rather conformed himself to their wishes than drove them by compulsion."²²⁷ On such occasions, the divine deportment is nothing less than astonishing in the completeness of its amenability.

In all of this, we find an uncharacteristically docile God.²²⁸ He tolerates his children's misdeeds; permits their strident words; blesses their ill-advised prayers; subordinates himself to them; conforms himself to their wishes; and even when they make brash requests, which contradict his own teachings, grants them without a word being spoken. Nor are forgiveness, the atonement and the like set forth as an explanatory basis for understanding these actions. Though it may be in the back of Calvin's mind, he almost never sees fit to inform his readers of this. Nor, it should also be noted, is God portrayed here as one striving towards the end of achieving some

God's judgments does not always appear, yet they are never too severe; and when he condescends to afford us a reason, he grants us a gratuitous indulgence" (CO 40: 370; CTS *Ezekiel*, 2, 142).

²²⁵ CO 32: 419; ET: CTS *Psalms*, 5, 282.

²²⁶ CO 32: 419; CTS *Psalms*, 5, 282; slightly altered.

²²⁷ CO 25: 150; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 449. See similar comments in CO 25: 221; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 4, 111 (on Numbers 16: 21).

²²⁸ Lest someone object that the reformer's comments on isolated historical episodes do not make a strong case for this conclusion, it should be noted that many of his assertions, the majority in fact, express

salubrious aim, for a discussion of aims and purposes is consistently missing from Calvin's remarks on these matters. Indeed one would have to wonder what sorts of goals could be achieved by this sort of leniency. Rather, it would appear, God is simply willing to do these things. This is sometimes interpreted as an expression of love—but one which to judge from his corrective comments, Calvin is slightly uneasy with.²²⁹ But on other occasions, and in fact often, God's conduct is as strange as it is loving, and comes close to suggesting a hint of indifference on God's part towards his people's sins. When Calvin makes observations like the one cited earlier concerning Abram's request—that God “does not act so strictly with them as not to allow himself to be questioned,”²³⁰—perhaps there is justification in ascribing a kind of apathy to God, for such a statement seems to imply it. Hence even on those occasions when love is mentioned by the reformer, it is a love which seems to express itself through laxity and nonchalance and to render God remarkably yielding.

But docility turns to indifference, resignation and captivity when the prayer closet is vacated and other subjects are taken up. While these traits may be discovered in varying degrees in a number of instances, such as God's capitulation to the people's mourning²³¹ or in the budding of Aaron's rod,²³² a stimulating example comes in God's instituting of the Sabbath, where he “releases us” from the more rigorous demands which he could have placed upon his people.²³³ It is, the reformer explains, “as if he had

general truths about the ways of God with his people. Calvin's Lord is depicted as commonly—almost habitually—compliant and tolerant.

²²⁹ See, for example, his comments on Psalm 145; CO 32: 419; CTS *Psalms*, 5, 282.

²³⁰ CO 23: 215; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 411; slightly altered.

²³¹ CO 24: 449; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 229; slightly altered (on Leviticus 21: 1-12).

²³² CO 25: 229; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 4, 123-4 (on Numbers 17: 1-13).

²³³ CO 26: 298; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 207b; slightly altered (on Deuteronomy 5: 13-5).

said, 'since you cannot be instant in seeking me with all of your affection and attention, at any rate give up to me some little undistracted time,'" adding that in the phrase "all your work" God "signifies that they have plenty of time, excluding the Sabbath day, for all their business."²³⁴ Here Calvin's God comes close to appearing sour, callous, his actions tainted with cynicism. Though early in his remarks Calvin had called this an expression of love by which the Lord wished to entice Israel to obedience "since he only claims a seventh part for himself," the remainder of his comments effectively nullify such an interpretation.²³⁵ Indeed the sentiments which prevail are closer to pessimism than affection. Calvin's God, it would seem, cannot imagine the idea that his people might actually delight in worshipping him—that they might *ever* find worship enjoyable—but rather takes it for granted that they wish to break free of such an onerous obligation. Thus his accommodation is one which is given with more than a hint of resentment. One cannot help but wonder if the reformer's own experience of almost thirty years in the pastorate is not expressed in the reasoning which he ascribes to the Almighty. Whether it is or not, his God, like Calvin himself, seems to have been deeply wounded at the hands of his people.

Moving from Sabbath legislation to other aspects of Old Testament law, we discover not only further pessimism but also an increasing sense of enslavement. Such an idea is, of course, no longer a novel one. Having been treated by Wright some ten

²³⁴ CO 24: 579; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 438; slightly altered (on Exodus 20: 8-11 and Deuteronomy 5: 12-5). One must question whether the reformer does not contradict himself elsewhere in his remarks on the nature of the law. For example, Calvin writes on Matthew 22: 37-8—God's requirement that he be loved with all the heart, soul and strength: "It now appears from this summary that in the commandments of the law, God does not look at what human beings can do, but at what they ought to do. For in this infirmity of the flesh it is not possible that perfect love for God can obtain dominion" (CO 45: 611-2; CTS *Gospels*, 3, 59; slightly altered).

years ago, this and related concepts are now recognized by at least portions of the scholarly world. They may have taken on an air of familiarity which renders them less shocking. Yet these are without doubt some of the most scandalous, volatile matters to be found in the Calvinian *corpus*. The ideas briefly presented below are ones which seem extraordinarily odd, even inconsistent with the very notion of deity. For here God is one who is so confounded by his people's intractability that, being unable to effect his desired aims, he opts for an alternative and less-ambitious set of goals.

This may be seen in a number of places. When dealing with the liberties which victors take in war (Deuteronomy 21: 10-3), the Lord is forced to set aside any hopes he has that his people might remain chaste, endeavoring instead "to restrain their lusts" by granting them the lamentable right to marry pagan women. "It was better, indeed, that they should completely abstain from such marriages," but this was simply too much to ask.²³⁶

The same sense of abandonment can be seen in the allowance made for the taking of vengeance against the murder of a close relative (Numbers 35: 19ff). This was "tolerated, and not approved of," Calvin says, being granted by God because "the fury of those whose kindred had been slain could hardly be restrained."²³⁷ So God, limited as if he were human, is said to be hindered by "the people's hardness of heart" on account of which this concession was made.²³⁸

²³⁵ CO 24: 579; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 438.

²³⁶ CO 24: 353; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 71.

²³⁷ CO 24: 638-40; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 64-5.

²³⁸ CO 24: 638-40; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 65.

The desperateness of God's circumstances is also expressed in Calvin's remarks on the divine instructions to a father who wishes to sell his daughter into slavery (Exodus 21: 7-11). In fact, here the reformer's language is even stronger. "From this passage," he writes, "as well as other similar ones, it plainly appears how many vices were of necessity tolerated in this people."²³⁹ His further comments on the passage indicate that it was utter barbarism (*prorsus barbarum*), but "it could not be corrected as might have been hoped."²⁴⁰ Thus, although God shows through these regulations that "chastity is pleasing to him," it was the people's hardness of heart and not the Lord's will that controlled how much and in what ways he could make this truth known.²⁴¹

In these places, we discover helplessness on a different scale than has been seen previously. This is not the first time these notions have been broached in this chapter, but when the magnitude of sinfulness is calculated it becomes apparent that the necessity being discussed here cannot be compared with any earlier models. God accommodates, but he does so because he has no choice in the matter. Surely if he did, he would not allow such heinous crimes and propensities to go unremedied.

This is, in fact, one of the key ideas Calvin wished to communicate here, or so it seems to this author. God is actually still in control throughout all of this, as has been observed by Wright.²⁴² But it is instructive that the reformer himself does not bother to make this point when commenting on such occasions. Rather, it is captivity and a sense of enslavement which seem to have impressed Calvin and which he wished to

²³⁹ CO 24: 650; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 80-1.

²⁴⁰ CO 24: 650; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 80-1.

²⁴¹ CO 24: 650; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 80-1.

²⁴² See, Wright, "Pentateuchal Criticism," 49.

communicate to his readers. Whether polemics is behind this reading of the text is not clear, but it seems likely.²⁴³ Yet in laboring to safeguard God's holiness, Calvin runs aground on an equally-problematic shore.

Although we might stop short of calling Calvin's God a victim here, he certainly comes close to being cast in such a role. How radical is his entrapment? What extremes of offensiveness will the accommodating God accept? The answers to such queries are not clear. What is clear, though, is that in accommodation God consistently struggles, experiences resistance, and accepts second-best in his dealings with his people. The accommodating God pictured here is not the God of all-invincible power who effortlessly brings his perfect will to pass. This God exists in Calvin's thought too. But the accommodating God often betrays markedly different qualities. He is more like the one who looks at a situation, thinks of what he would like to have happen, and then takes into account the various limitations which hinder the realisation of that goal, and, putting his first desire behind him, does what seems most feasible given the circumstances. Often this is far from his desired outcome. Often this involves him (at least to some degree) in acquiescing with sin. Often he hates it. Often he strives against it and loses and resigns himself to a situation that seems entirely unsatisfactory but lives with it anyway. This is what this face of the accommodating God is like; a God who prizes realism, opportunism, and shrewdness; a God who endures hardship and exercises patience; a God who seems more often than not to fail at his first try but continues to labor and toil.

²⁴³ This question will be taken up in the next chapter.

4.4 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to look at the accommodating God himself. Here there is space enough only to summarize very briefly the results of this inquiry and point out some of the issues which will receive further treatment in the next chapter. A peculiar God confronts us in the analysis offered above, one who not only displays the familiar qualities of love, sovereignty and transcendence normally associated with him, but also wears other less-common faces. Such results, of course, require additional analysis. As this will be one of the purposes of the next chapter, further discussion shall be deferred until then. In addition to this, in the conclusion a summary of the whole dissertation shall be attempted, and a number of related issues will be probed or at least proposed as appropriate topics for further study.

Chapter Five

Concluding Reflections

This dissertation has sought to analyze divine accommodation in Calvin. It has found the theme to be so pervasive that it appreciably penetrates Calvin's thinking about God. This inevitably raises questions, several of which will be treated in this conclusion once a summary of the earlier portions of the thesis has been completed. These investigative undertakings mark an attempt both to explain the more surprising results set out in the last chapter and also to begin to integrate the findings of this work into the broader field of Calvin studies.

5.1 Summary and Definition

A number of issues have received treatment in the foregoing chapters

An introduction to the idea of divine accommodation as it was taken up by the early church opened the work. Following this, the contemporary study of the subject in

Calvin was critically assessed, and the course for the thesis plotted. Three main questions with which the substance of the dissertation would be occupied were identified:

1. What is human capacity?
2. What is the character of the accommodating responses of God to that capacity?
3. What do Calvin's explanatory statements, which often accompany his remarks on accommodation, teach us about his accommodating God?

The first of these topics was then taken up. The scope of the *captus* to which God adjusts himself was broken down and inspected. From this it was shown that the Lord accommodates himself to a variety of human conditions and essentially with the whole person in mind—although some aspects of human capacity receive more attention than others. An attempt was made at the end of the chapter to reassess the three-fold division of human capacity into human finitude, sinfulness, and Jewish barbarity which has arisen in scholarly discussion.

God's accommodated responses to human capacity were then treated by mapping them out according to the different spheres—pedagogical, legislative, cultic, pastoral, incarnational, and covenantal—within which they appear. From this, the breadth and character of these responses could be seen. These findings, especially the sense of diversity discovered in Calvin's construal of God's self-adapting procedures, are considered particularly important in that they help to fill gaps present in current conceptions of accommodation in Calvin's thought.

Finally, Calvin's observations on the intentions, motives, and purposes behind God's accommodating responses were scrutinized in an effort to begin to paint a portrait

of this God. A deity was unearthed in this chapter whose habit of adapting himself to his frail, unyielding and truculent people exposed an often-puzzling and at times disturbing set of traits. Here God, though displaying his supreme power and other more-traditionally-discussed attributes, often appeared less than majestic and even exhibited indifference, vulnerability, inflexibility and other surprising qualities. These results also exposed with particular clarity the penetration of accommodation into the reformer's thinking on God which was mentioned earlier.

These chapters have shown that accommodation appears in Calvin's *corpus* with surprising frequency. In an age that seems to have rediscovered the Old Testament,¹ it was regularly called upon by Calvin in his exegetical endeavors on those ancient writings. Additionally, the reformer repeatedly had recourse to accommodation in the apologetic arena, a fact which recalls qualities found in the earliest Christian usage of the idea.

But these chapters revealed more than this. They showed accommodation to be a slightly cumbersome notion in Calvin, but one of profound importance to him.² Granted, the significance of accommodation is belied (at least to some extent) by the *ad hoc* character of most of Calvin's references to it and by his failure to treat the matter in a separate *locus* in his *Institutes*. Yet despite these facts, the qualities attributed to the reformer's usage show accommodation to have been of abiding importance to him: the diversity, sophistication, and sheer frequency—the fact that Calvin's God so consistently considers the disposition of those with whom he is dealing and alters his behavior in

¹ Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 5-6.

² This latter assertion has been made by others; see chapter one for an adjudication of contemporary views.

response to it—make this conclusion inescapable. Therefore Calvin's God, it is rightly said, is an accommodating God. Accommodation was not merely an apologetic tactic for Calvin, but it was part of God's ways, an aspect of his manner of dealing with his creatures and his people. The fact that Calvin does not spell out a developed theology of accommodation may puzzle us but cannot stand in the way of this conclusion.

5.1.1 Defining Accommodation in Calvin

One might have expected a definition at the beginning of this thesis. But as it was the contention of this author that accommodation in Calvin possessed several qualities which set it apart from standard definitions, it was deemed more appropriate first to draw out these qualities from the reformer's *corpus* and then to try to define the concept. Yet before such an attempt is made, or rather by way of introduction to it, there is one point which ought to be considered briefly.

The possibility of defining accommodation may be legitimately queried. Consider, for instance, its complexity. As a concept, it has three components: God, humankind (individual or group), and the divine response. These appear in an assortment of circumstances in the reformer's writings, sometimes thoroughly grounded in a historical time and place and sometimes appearing under fairly abstract conditions. Within each component, moreover, there is great variety, many different acts, many different settings, numerous human participants and many different postures from the divine accommodator. Hence, not homogeneity but marked diversity characterizes the motif, which makes it difficult to define.

One might be tempted to try thoroughly to strip away these differences. But if this is done in a cavalier manner, it is likely to result in a definition which bears little resemblance to most of the individual accommodation instances. If, however, one moves in the other direction, he or she runs the risk of being overwhelmed by the diversity. Yet the problem is not insurmountable; indeed the variety itself can be incorporated into the final product. This being so, the following basic definition of accommodation is set out. Accommodation in Calvin is a diverse collection of divine responses, which appear within different arenas of the divine-human relationship, whereby God reacts to his creatures and especially his own people, often with specific aims in mind, in a manner informed by and adapted with respect to their limited capacity. At its very root, then, it is a reaction, a reply, a response to humankind. This in itself is an immensely significant notion.

Thus it can be seen that accommodation is not linked to an individual or isolated *locus*, such as revelation, nor, it follows, is it rhetorical in nature. This is not to say that Calvin's comments never display a rhetorical orientation. Sometimes they do. Nevertheless, it should now be apparent that accommodation is not a subject which can be accurately understood solely or even chiefly by means of an appeal to rhetorical categories. It is simply too complex and penetrates too deeply into the reformer's concept of God for issues of rhetoric to be significantly helpful. The accommodating God appears in Calvin's thought as one who adapts himself, moving, shifting, bending, twisting, stretching, and straining, as we have seen. His accommodating ways are clearly *ways*—habits, mores, patterns of behavior. Accommodation is a basic element in the Genevan's understanding of God and his intercourse with his people. Therefore,

being so interwoven into the reformer's thinking on God, it cannot possibly be adequately interpreted by means of an idea which has to do with the crafting and delivery of a speech or writing of a document. To suggest such a thing is to miss its depth and penetration.

5.2 Questioning Calvin and His Accommodating God

With this précis behind us, the various lines of inquiry mentioned in the introduction to this chapter can now be taken up. Though not inextricably related to one another, all these queries have a common axis around which they orbit. They all ask questions of Calvin's accommodating God as he has been portrayed in this thesis, primarily in chapter four. The first seeks to determine whether there is an organizing construct which may be used to assimilate the phenomenon that is Calvin's accommodating God. The second queries whether Calvin's understanding of God is a coherent one or not. And the final section asks what is perhaps the most obvious and in many ways the most difficult question, namely, how this enigmatic God is to be accounted for in Calvin's writings.

5.2.1 Towards taming the Behemoth that is Calvin's Accommodating God

How does one conceptualize something as gargantuan as Calvin's accommodating God? Can he be trapped, his nose pierced (to use Joban language)?³ In

³ Job 40: 24.

the past *cognitio* has been proposed as a way to accomplish this.⁴ In this section, two of the more important motifs which Calvin associates with the accommodating God will be suggested as an alternative means of carrying us close to this goal. This is, however, only a provisional assessment of the question which awaits further research. It is suggestive but not prescriptive; exploratory rather than conclusive.

At times Calvin addresses the idea that God possesses a freedom which allows him to choose between various options in his engagements with his people. In addition, there are occasions when the reformer finds God to be restricted, inhibited by the sinfulness of his followers from accomplishing what he would really like to achieve. In both situations, the end result is that God accommodates himself. In fact, these broad themes seem to be woven into the warp and woof of Calvin's thinking on accommodation. In what follows their presence in Calvin's *corpus* will be demonstrated. Their impressive breadth will serve as an argument for their usefulness in the task of assimilation.

5.2.1.a When God acts freely

The notion that the accommodating God has a number of options at his disposal is apparent in many of Calvin's references to accommodation and in his writings generally, as his sermons on Job testify. So in his exposition of Job 5: 17-18, he discusses people's numerous "diseases" (as he terms human vice) "which God cannot

⁴ While we certainly do not intend to disparage the category of knowledge within Calvin's thought, the analysis offered below marks a deliberate departure from knowledge-oriented analyses, such as Dowey's, which have dominated the study of accommodation up to this point but no longer seem capable of accomplishing the task. Accommodation has simply expanded beyond the capacity of such a rubric.

heal except by means of the afflictions which he sends to us.”⁵ “True it is,” the reformer observes, “if he wished to use an absolute power (*puissance absolue*), he could well do otherwise.”⁶ Yet, following this interesting remark, having opened the door to speculations, Calvin quickly shuts it by stipulating: “but we are not speaking now of the power of God (*la puissance de Dieu*), we treat only of the way in which he wishes to treat us (*seulement du moyen qu’il veut tenir envers nous*).”⁷

Such a flight of conjectural fancy exposes an opening in Calvin’s thinking which may be profitably exploited. We note that he distinguishes between what God can do and what he does in a manner reminiscent of medieval theology’s *potentia absoluta/potentia ordinata* distinction, and also identifies God’s manner of acting as one which the Sovereign Lord has chosen. In fact, he highlights the element of divine choice, as can be seen in his wording—*il veut*.

Similar sentiments can be found elsewhere. Such an outlook is certainly implied in Calvin’s remarks on Deuteronomy 5: 29, where God longs for his people to have hearts that fear him. Why does he speak in this way? He need only will a thing and it is accomplished; “all things are in his hands.”⁸ But he speaks “after a human manner,” so that all would realize the difficulty of walking with God and would be roused to

Thus, a new one must be sought. It is this conviction which has moved the author to look for some other controlling structure for assimilating accommodation in Calvin.

⁵ CO 33: 269; *Sermons on Job*, 98a; slightly altered (on Job 5: 17-8).

⁶ CO 33: 269; *Sermons on Job*, 98a; slightly altered.

⁷ CO 33: 269; *Sermons on Job*, 98a; slightly altered.

⁸ CO 26: 409; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 260a; slightly altered. Interestingly, the unquestioned emphasis of the reformer, when addressing accommodation which relates to teaching and the revealing of the knowledge of God, is not on the freedom of the Lord and the fact that he could have done this or that, but rather on the necessity which compelled him to speak in a particular way because of the ineffability of the knowledge of God and his own people’s blindness. But that being the case, this instance seems to introduce the issue of freedom; see also, CO 24: 208; *CTS Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 337.

diligence.⁹ So again, God chooses one approach, but seems to have at least one other at his disposal.

This can be more easily seen when Israel treks meanderingly through the wilderness at God's behest (Exodus 13: 17)—a plan designed to shore up their sagging confidence and keep them from desiring to return to Egypt. Calvin observes:

I admit that God was able to counteract all these evils in some other way, but since he is often accustomed to dealing with his people in a human way (*humanitus saepe cum suis agere solet*), he chose to adopt the method which was most suited to their infirmity.¹⁰

Further, when God opts for a long and time-consuming method when instructing his servant Moses (Exodus 25: 1-22), towards the end that his people might be more disposed to diligently obey the law, Calvin notes:

Although God might have so instructed his servant in a moment that nothing should have been wanting, still he chose to form for himself a perfect teacher gradually, and as if he had his ease; and this concession was made to the infirmity of the people.¹¹

When the Lord sends rain to water the earth and bring forth food (Deuteronomy 28: 12), Calvin observes both that God could have caused the earth to be fruitful without using rain and dew, and that at one time he did this very thing, as Genesis 2: 6 explains.¹² This example, as well as the next, were cited in the last chapter to highlight God's purposefulness, but they also vividly demonstrate his freedom. For, again he

⁹ CO 26: 409; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 260a; slightly altered.

¹⁰ CO 24: 143; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 233.

¹¹ CO 24: 401; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 2, 147 (on Exodus 25: 1-2).

¹² CO 28: 376-7; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 957a-b.

appears as one who has options at his disposal. He is at liberty to make choices; to employ means or to forego the use of them. And out of this freedom, God elects to accommodate himself, pouring down rain on the land in order to serve the needs of human frailty.¹³

When the Lord went before the children of Israel in a cloud by day and fire by night (Exodus 13: 21), Calvin notes that it was an act whereby God, “accommodating himself to their ignorance, presented himself familiarly before their eyes.”¹⁴ He comments further,

He was clearly able to protect them in some other way from the heat of the sun and direct them in the darkness of the night, but, in order that his power might be more manifest, he chose to add also his visible presence, to remove all room for doubt.¹⁵

Further, Calvin’s comments on Daniel 1: 17 provide perhaps the most impressive example. When God prepares Daniel for service, Calvin can state:

Certainly, God was able (*Potuit*) to prepare [Daniel] in a single moment; also he was able (*potuit etiam*) to strike terror and reverence into the minds of all, and induce them to embrace his teaching; but he wished (*sed voluit*) to raise his servant by degrees, and to bring him forth at the fitting time,¹⁶

¹³ CO 28: 376; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 957b; slightly altered.

¹⁴ CO 24: 145; *CTS Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 236; slightly altered.

¹⁵ CO 24: 145; *CTS Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 236; slightly altered. See also, CO 40: 700-1; *CTS Daniel*, 1, 317-8; and CO 42: 468-69; *CTS Minor Prophets*, 1, 440 (on Hosea 12: 10).

¹⁶ CO 40: 554; *CTS Daniel*, 1, 113; altered (on Daniel 1: 17).

The same freedom is also expressed, albeit briefly, in Calvin's handling of Genesis 8 where God "might have dried the earth by his secret power, [but he] made use of the wind."¹⁷

What is clear from all these passages is that Calvin's emphasis is placed upon the divine will and the idea that the accommodating God operates with various options at his disposal. God adopts particular methods of interacting with his children, but a range of alternatives are open to him. He is not coerced, nor is any necessity, in the absolute sense,¹⁸ attached to his actions. Rather, he seems free to select what he wishes, and from this liberty he selects options which are attuned to the capacity of his people. To be sure, accommodation may not be explicit in all of these examples. But this, so far from taking anything away from the point, seems rather to demonstrate that Calvin's emphasis on liberty applies to the divine will generally, as well as to the accommodating will.¹⁹

Calvin's assertions on "average" or accommodated justice provide us with a different vantage point from which these same characteristics, that is the idea that God acts with relative freedom, may be examined. When explaining the law he makes it clear that, among other things, it proclaims the behavior of God. Not only is it an adapted expression of the righteousness which the saints must abide by, but it is also a declaration, decree, or contract concerning the treatment which they can expect from God. This can be seen in the reformer's sermon on Job 27: 1-4, where he states that

¹⁷ CO 23: 136; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 277 (on Genesis 8: 2).

¹⁸ On *necessitas absoluta*, see, Oberman, *The Harvest*, 472. For Calvin's engagement with such medieval distinctions, see Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 53-4.

¹⁹ This is so because comments on the character of God's general choosing and acting are almost certainly going to state truths which apply to his accommodating choosing and acting as well. Therefore, matters would undoubtedly be less clear for us if God's accommodating acting alone were discussed in the above citations while other aspects of God's will were left untouched.

God's "ordinary righteousness," which is published in the law, "is his vouchsafing to help us in our need, and his showing that he has a care for our welfare."²⁰ God, Calvin continues, blesses those who walk in fear before him and rewards their tarnished works, and in this way, these and all the benefits which believers receive from the Lord ratify, as it were, the ordinary *justitia Dei* enshrined in the law.²¹ Conversely, "when God punishes whoremongers, thieves, and drunkards; even this also is his ordinary righteousness."²² So when those things which are illicitly obtained by the wicked are seen to waste away and scoffers are overthrown and punished, it is a strong proof which moves humankind to acknowledge that God is a judge. "Thus," Calvin says, "you see God's ordinary justice, that is, the justice which we perceive to be executed according to what is contained in the law."²³ However, the Genevan continues, God often acts in ways which hardly seem to agree with his promulgation concerning his behavior found in the law. The godly endure horrendous trials, depraved and foul people prosper, and the whole world seems to be turned upside down. Instead of a just government there is chaos. Because this is so, "it behoves us," Calvin explains, "to know that he has a higher kind of justice or righteousness than our senses can reach to, and we can never attain to it."²⁴ This fact does not give believers the right to grumble against the divine

²⁰ CO 34: 447-8; *Sermons on Iob*, 455b; slightly altered.

²¹ CO 34: 448; *Sermons on Iob*, 455b.

²² CO 34: 448; *Sermons on Iob*, 456a; slightly altered.

²³ CO 34: 448; *Sermons on Iob*, 456a; slightly altered.

²⁴ CO 34: 448; *Sermons on Iob*, 456a; slightly altered. Interestingly, parallels can be found here between Calvin and nominalism; so Courtenay explains that according to them, "*God always acts wisely*, not because his actions accord with some previously established norm but rather because he possesses an inward sense of justice, consistent with his nature, which will always be unknowable by man ... and, when revealed to man, ... absolutely dependable" (Courtenay, "Covenant and Causality in Pierre d'Ailly" in *Covenant and Causality in Medieval Thought; Studies in Philosophy, Theology and Economic Practice* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984), IX, 117; italics his). On this matter, see also, Oberman, "'Iustitia Christi' and 'Iustitia Dei': Luther and the Scholastic Doctrine of Justification," 106, n. 7.

conduct. Rather, this secret justice must be honored, though it is far above human comprehension. It is to be known simply so that it may be acquiesced in.

What may again be inferred quite easily from Calvin's discussion in this place is that, in Calvin's mind, God's behavior hinges on his choices, which are free. Here, in fact, this freedom appears more absolute. God elects to act in this way or that; in accordance either with his ordinary righteousness or with his secret righteousness. This is not to say that his mercy and justice are not consulted in this. But apparently, consultation with them still leaves him the liberty of choice. Hence his actions do not all exhibit, nor are they subject to, a strict necessity, but are ultimately the result of the divine will, and as such exhibit his freedom.

Finally this same truth can also be seen in relation to a specific element of God's ordinary righteousness, namely his rewarding of believers' works, where Calvin insists upon the fact that the Lord's decision to recompense his children is entirely his own. As was seen in chapter four, his people's obedience is something to which the Lord grants his blessing only "because it pleases him to do so."²⁵ Not the value of the work, but God's own initiative is the sole reason for his behavior.²⁶ Indeed Calvin can be more vociferous than this in his proclamations. So in another place, after explaining that God rewards human works, Calvin qualifies the matter by asking: "But is he bound to do so? No. ... [is he subject to us?] ... No. He does it of his own free goodness."²⁷ And this position is also stated more fully in an additional comment. First, Calvin discusses the accommodated character of God's decision to reward good works.

²⁵ CO 33: 496; *Sermons on Job*, 186b; slightly altered.

²⁶ See, Oberman, " 'Iustitia Christi' and 'Iustitia Dei' ," 106.

For, although God might in His own right simply require what He pleased, yet such is his kindness to humankind, that he chose to entice them by promises to obey him freely. Since, therefore, we are naturally attracted by the hope of reward, we are slow and lazy, until some fruit appears. Consequently God voluntarily promises, in order to arouse them from their sloth, that if men obey his law, he will repay them. Nor is this an ordinary act of liberality that he prefers to agree with us for the payment of a recompense, rather than simply to command by his sovereignty. For we must bear in mind the declaration of Christ, that when we have fulfilled the whole law, we still deserve nothing; since God claims for himself our entire services (Luke 17:10).²⁸

And, following this, he addresses the free character of the Lord's will in this act.

Therefore, however much we may strive even beyond our strength and devote ourselves entirely to keeping the law, nevertheless God lies under no obligation to us, except in so far as he himself has voluntarily agreed and made himself our willing debtor. And this has been pointed out even by common theologians, that the reward of good works does not depend upon their dignity or merit but only upon covenant (*sed ex pacto*).²⁹

From these considerations it can be seen that Calvin's thinking stresses the freedom of divine actions, and that ultimately God's accommodated dealings flow out of this liberty. In this last citation, the reformer's approving reference to the medieval idea of the *pactum Dei*³⁰ is notable but ought to come as no surprise, since the various theological approaches with which it is associated highlight the activity and supreme liberty of the divine will, and since it is now generally agreed that the reformer embraced many of the positions asserted in these approaches (particularly in their Scotist

²⁷ CO 33: 337; *Sermons on Job*, 414b; slightly altered.

²⁸ CO 25: 6; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 203; slightly altered.

²⁹ CO 25: 6; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 203; slightly altered.

³⁰ See, Oberman, "The 'Extra' Dimension," 121. A helpful history of the development of the notion of the *pactum* and the *potentia ordinata* and *absoluta* is given by William Courtenay; see, "The Dialectic of Divine Omnipotence," *Covenant and Causality in Medieval Thought* IV, 1-37.

form).³¹ Thus, it only serves to substantiate the suggestion made earlier that the reformer's emphasis on divine freedom may have its base in this late medieval emphasis or is, at least, related to it in some way.

5.2.1.b When God acts as if under constraint

But there are other times when Calvin perceives matters in a different way. God seems to be limited in his dealings with his creatures. It "plainly appears," Calvin says on Exodus 21: 7-11,

how many vices were of necessity tolerated (*toleranda fuerint*) in this people. It was altogether an act of barbarism that fathers should sell their children for the relief of their poverty, still it could not (*non potuit tamen illud*) be corrected as might have been hoped (*corrigi ut optandum erat*). ... God ... shows that chastity is pleasing to Him, as far as the people's hardness of heart could take it (*quatenus ... ferebat durities populi*).³²

On this occasion, God wrestles with external impediments and (it would seem) with his own inability as well. He accommodates himself, but this time rather begrudgingly.

Though discussed in chapter four, this issue is worthy of some review. Such limitation is present in several different ways. It is seen from one angle in the constraint apparent in God's revelatory activity. As "God in his greatness can by no means be fully comprehended by our minds,"³³ he finds himself presented with obstacles which impede his endeavors to make himself known. Much more striking, though, are

³¹ See, for example, Oberman, "*Initia Calvini*," 144-27.

³² CO 24: 650; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 80-1.

³³ CO 49: 23; CTS *Romans*, 69 (on Romans 1: 19). This is one of the passages which moves Dowey to state that God's infinite mysteries "are beyond the powers of the mind of man to grasp" (Dowey, *Knowledge of God*, 3).

instances in which God strives and struggles, such as the occasion where he labors to “restrain [Israel’s] excessive violence,” but is only able to keep them from “kill[ing] either women or children,” while conceding to them the right to slaughter every male when warring against a city which refuses terms of peace.³⁴

But even in relatively insignificant ways this constraint can be seen, as the budding of Aaron’s rod, an instance mentioned only in passing in the previous chapter, suitably demonstrates. Though Israel “ought to have acknowledged the authority of the priesthood,” their obstinacy persisted, and forced God into producing yet another miracle in order to reclaim his children. Calvin explicitly declares that the remedy “was necessary (*necessarium remedium adhibuit*)” since “God never appoints anything in vain.”³⁵ Continuing, he asserts quite strikingly that the Lord not only had regard for the people’s infirmity, “but even struggled with their depravity and perverseness.”³⁶ And in a later remark he adds, “God saw that in the extreme perversity of the people there would be no end to their murmurs and rebellions unless a final ratification were added.”³⁷ Thus, God struggles and wrestles; he experiences limitation and restrictions, and knows frustration and at times *de facto* enslavement.

In summary, these themes appear on a wide enough scale that one can begin to see how they might well serve as conceptual suction cups (to use Barth’s imagery) by which God’s accommodating regime might be assimilated.³⁸ Whether they can, in fact, serve in that capacity for the whole of accommodation cannot be sufficiently determined

³⁴ CO 24: 631; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 3, 53 (on Deuteronomy 20: 12-15).

³⁵ CO 25: 229; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 4, 123-4 (on Numbers 17: 1-13).

³⁶ CO 25: 229; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 4, 123-4.

³⁷ CO 25: 229; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 4, 124.

from the analysis recorded above. That is likely to be a more involved question, which cannot be fully answered here. Nor was it our purpose at this time to do so. Rather, the goal of this section was simply to probe an alternative to *cognitio* for conceptualizing the self-adapting economy of God. But, the question of whether these themes are fully capable of taming the behemoth that is Calvin's accommodating God will have to await further study.

5.2.2 Calvin's portrait of God and the question of coherence

The findings of chapter four move the question of whether the portrait of God which appears in Calvin's writings is a stable one. Such an inquest has already been proposed by others: "there may be a deeper challenge here," asserts Wright, "for Calvin scholars—to strive after a rounded, integrated grasp of Calvin's understanding of God, his theology."³⁹ Philip Holtrop records similar thoughts on the question.⁴⁰

Nor ought anyone to be surprised at this. For quite simply, in Calvin's God we find it all; or nearly all. Calvin's God can sovereignly predestine his chosen to salvation and be enslaved by their intractability, possess infinite moral purity and begrudgingly sanction barbarous wickedness by the words of his own mouth, be ineffably

³⁸ See Parker, *Old Testament*, i (this image is from a letter of Barth's which is cited in the introductory portion of Parker's study).

³⁹ The quote is from Wright; see, "Calvin's Accommodating God," 19. Of course, Willis' penetrating observation ought not to be overlooked either: "My point is that the equation between the divine and the immutable which Calvin inherited was mitigated by this other insight—that God persuasively accommodates his purpose to man's persuadability. Calvin was not able to expand this insight, as I think we must today, to argue from the variety of God's dealings with men that God himself changes in some sense in his relation to his changing creation" (Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility," 55).

⁴⁰ Philip Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy on Predestination, from 1551 to 1555: the Statements of Jerome Bolsec, and the Responses of John Calvin, Theodore Beza, and Other Reformed Theologians* (Lampeter, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 822-32.

transcendent and yet also unsettlingly opportunistic. Calvin himself would not be surprised that such a question was being asked. He was not unaware of at least some of the tensions present in his own thought. He marvels, for example, at the way in which God “loved us even when he hated us.”⁴¹ He is forced to defend his interpretation of God’s will from the accusation of duality.⁴² Further, as has already been seen in earlier portions of this thesis, he makes use of ideas such as God violating his own nature and speaking *improprie*, thus implicitly acknowledging the presence of friction or conflict. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the sermons on Job, in which even the reformer himself seems to become uncomfortable with his own distinction between infinite and accommodated righteousness.⁴³ Thus, far from being an invention of twentieth-century scholarship, these difficulties receive perhaps their most eloquent testimony from Calvin’s own self-critical eye.

The question, then, is a legitimate one: is this a portrait of God which holds together, which coheres and makes sense? Although the reformer on occasions tries to make sense out of his own analysis of God and seeks to answer objections, a torrent of questions still arises, at least in the mind of this student of Calvin. How can one not have serious misgivings when one attempts to piece together the various impulses which drive this self-adapting God? Can such disparate elements as those which appear in this divine profile be held together in any comprehensible way? Therefore, while the question raised is large enough to engage Calvin studies for some time to come, the

⁴¹ CO 2: 370; *Inst.* 2.16.4. See also, CO 53: 9-10; *Sermons on Timothie and Titus*, 6a-b (1 Timothy 1: 1-2)

⁴² CO 2: 170-71; *Inst.* 1.18.3; see also, CO 39: 588-89; CTS *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 5, 427-28 (on Lamentations 3: 37-38).

⁴³ See for example, Schreiner, “Exegesis and Double Justice,” 322-38.

provisional assessment of this author is that his portrait of God cannot be convincingly unified.

5.2.3 Accounting for the more problematic aspects of Calvin's Accommodating God

As is well known, Calvin never expatiates at length in any one place on his principles of biblical interpretation the way, for example, Augustine does in *De doctrina Christiana*. Calvin scholars have thus been left to search his voluminous exegetical and homiletical *corpus* for hermeneutical principles. This is a daunting task. Fortunately, the scope of our assignment is not so all-encompassing, being circumscribed by the question at hand. Its magnitude is further curtailed by the fact that it is really only Calvin's Old Testament expositions that must be considered here, since by far the bulk of the Genevan's references to accommodation are found in them. Yet even with this welcome lightening of the load, the proposed undertaking involves a sufficiently broad and demanding range of material. Thus what follows are a number of considerations, of differing weight and from different angles, which might help to explain what Calvin ascribes to God when discussing divine accommodation.

1. First, Calvin exhibits a tendency to twist the text of Scripture, which is partially responsible for the picture of God which appears in his *corpus*.⁴⁴

In part this arises from the highly-polemical environment within which the reformer labored. To give one example, his commentary on John 20: 1-10 is distorted

⁴⁴ We owe this insight to Professor David Wright.

by his unwillingness to give credence to the idea of shrines and relics in light of Rome by producing a complimentary interpretation of Mary, John and Peter and their journey to the tomb and encounter with the grave clothes—an experience which culminates with the testimonial from John’s own pen: “he saw and believed” (John 20: 9). Calvin paints a dire picture of the situation, describing the faith of the disciples and the women as almost completely snuffed out, and ascribing nothing of consequence to John’s confession.⁴⁵ His interpretation is not implausible but seems excessively harsh; nor does it treat much of the biblical text.

An additional example relates more closely to accommodation⁴⁶ and betrays Calvin’s ability to noticeably alter, or shift the emphasis of, his own position on a given question when it suits him. So throughout his *corpus* the law is the flawless, unsurpassed expression of “perfect righteousness,”⁴⁷ but, as has already been noted, in his sermons on Job it is “an average (*moyenne*) righteousness wherewith God contents himself when the case concerns the judging of angels and people.”⁴⁸ Though the two statements are not necessarily contradictory, Calvin’s exegetical perspectivalism gives the reader pause. He seems to change his tune in the Job expositions because it helps him explain God’s treatment of the Uzite if the law is a less-than-perfect righteousness. Thus, the alteration springs from questionable or at least slightly suspicious motives and

⁴⁵ CO 47: 428-29; CTS *John’s Gospel*, 2, 250-51 (specifically covering John 20: 3-8).

⁴⁶ Whether such manhandling is just part and parcel of what it means to employ accommodation is also a possibility, but also would require more work to prove. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 34-5.

⁴⁷ When the Psalmist refers to “the judgments of your righteousness” (Psalm 119: 7), Calvin declares in his commentary on the text: “The phrase ‘the judgements of your righteousness,’ is the same with the commandments, in which perfect righteousness is comprehended; and thus the prophet commends God’s law on account of the thorough perfection of the doctrine contained in it” (CO 32: 217; CTS *Psalms*, 4, 406).

suggests a distasteful willingness on the part of Calvin to press his own ideas on the Bible when in a pinch.

2. Conversely, Calvin can be such a boldly honest listener to the text of the Scripture. This is a more commonplace and less controversial point, to be sure. The reason it is mentioned here is because the Bible itself is so uncompromisingly broad. Yet there are times when Calvin, because he often listens to it and follows its lead, will make an assertion which so many others would shy away from making. So, Calvin is willing to state that God answers prayers which he objects to, as was noted in chapter three. He is also prepared to state that God answers the prayers of unbelievers.⁴⁹ In these ways, he paints a less familiar portrait of the self-adapting Almighty.

3. Several scholars have noted the humanist's intense interest in psychology, both social and individual.⁵⁰ Indeed as has already been observed in the previous chapter, Calvin shows himself to be quite adept at the business of probing the mind and inner thought-world of the God whom he finds in the narratives of the Old Testament. Self-assured and at times betraying an astounding penchant for speculation, Calvin is willing to ascribe motives and purposes to God which occasionally succeed in raising more questions than they answer.

⁴⁸ CO 33: 725; *Sermons on Job*, 273a (on Job 15: 11-6).

⁴⁹ CO 2: 640-41; *Inst.* 3.20.15.

⁵⁰ As mentioned in chapter two, this number includes: Stroup, "Narrative in Calvin's Hermeneutic," 158-71; Wright, "Calvin's Pentateuchal Criticism," 46; May, "Calvin's Commentary on the Psalms," 195-204.

4. Earlier scholarship has also pointed to the importance which Calvin attached to experience. Most helpfully for our purposes, Wilhelm Balke discusses “Experientia as an hermeneutical key into understanding of Scripture” in a brief but stimulating essay in which he argues that Calvin’s belief that the Bible is “a dogma rooted in life” means that he sees experience as important to the interpretation of it.⁵¹ As if putting words into the reformer’s mouth, Balke summarizes Calvin’s thought by declaring: “It is a mark of appropriate handling of scripture, therefore, when so much of the life of his own church appears in the commentary of Chrysostom.”⁵²

Balke’s is an impressive assertion, and also one which a perusal of the reformer’s *corpus* seems to validate. Though not common in his commentaries, Calvin’s reflections on “the life of his own church” are by no means missing from his sermonic output, as William Naphy has recently shown.⁵³ Indeed descriptions similar to those applied to Israel by Calvin in his Old Testament expositions were applied from the pulpit to the Genevans who sat under the reformer’s ministry, as he reflected on and often despaired over the life of his church and city. Calling even those in authority “brute beasts” and other similarly insulting names, Calvin not infrequently punctuated his expositions with surprisingly acerbic admonitions, denounced in the sharpest terms the impiety of his host city, and chided those who took pride in their standing as a

⁵¹ Wilhelm Balke, “The Word of God and Experientia according to Calvin” in *CED* (Kampen: Kok, 1978), 19-31; see esp. 22-23.

⁵² Balke, “The Word of God and Experientia,” 22.

⁵³ Calvin’s remarks on various details—sometimes personal, but more often social commentary on Genevan morals, or on his enemies, or on the state of the reformation in Geneva, and so forth—are not common, but they are also not entirely absent. For one such example, on the state of the reformation in Geneva, see CO 35: 216-218; *Sermons on Job*, 638a-b (on a sermon on Job 34: 33-37). Others are mentioned in T.H.L. Parker’s discussion; see *Calvin’s Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John

reformed city. At times these had only a tenuous relation to the text of his sermon, but on other occasions they flowed from it, as can be seen for example from his homily on “Let wise men speak and let men of understanding hear” (Job 34: 34).⁵⁴

Thus, his handling of Scripture seems to have reflected his own experiences. Indeed there was a kind of parallel between the two. Like the biblical leaders of God’s people, Calvin also found himself at odds with a recalcitrant people. Like the apostles and prophets⁵⁵ whom he expounded, Calvin often pled in vain with the wicked and those who wanted God out of their thinking. Like these servants of God, Calvin and the Venerable Company of Pastors often endured riots, the fury of the godless and opposition from those in authority.⁵⁶ Such can be found even in the commentaries, as this observation on the tumult caused by Paul and Silas in Thessalonica (Acts 17: 8) indicates:

Likewise, we see that it is no new matter (*non esse novum*) for magistrates to be carried away with the rage of the people as with a tempest, especially when the injury touches those who are strangers and unknown ...⁵⁷

Here the parallel is clearly suggested. The abuse Calvin endured was, at least in this comment, what the apostles before him had endured. To read of their struggles was to read of his own.

Knox Press, 1992), 114-28. A much more volatile picture is painted by Naphy, *Calvin and the consolidation*, 154ff.

⁵⁴ See CO 35: 216-218; *Sermons on Job*, 638a-b (from a sermon on Job 34: 33-37). For an example of remarks which bear relatively little connection to the text, see CO 25: 122-23; *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 121b (on Deuteronomy 4: 3-6).

⁵⁵ Max Engammare attempts to demonstrate that Calvin viewed himself as a prophet, “A Prophet without Honor” *Calvin Studies IX*, 88-107.

⁵⁶ Naphy discusses the fact that Calvin’s sermons often caused complaints and riots; see, *Calvin and the consolidation*, 154-66.

This parallel seems to have informed his reading of the sacred scriptures, allowing him to use their experiences to aid in his interpretation. So in remarks on another uprising, this time from Acts 16: 16-22, Calvin moves so seamlessly from commenting on the historical event recorded in Acts 16 to pontificating on qualities common to humankind that one cannot help but wonder if he is not relying on his familiarity with human nature as learned through the pain of confrontation. “Foolishness and inconstancy are surely common vices among all people, and almost continual. ... the wonderful force of Satan ... [appears] ... in that those who are in other matters modest and quiet, suddenly break out (*repente effervent*) for a matter of no importance and become companions of the most vile people. ... Surely the malice of humankind ought to be deplored whereby it has come to pass that nearly all the judgment seats of this world, which should have been sanctuaries of justice, have been polluted with wicked and sacrilegious fighting against the gospel.”⁵⁸ Of course, his reliance upon experience here is quite subtle. He is not like those who tell stories and recount various episodes from their lives to get their point across. That notwithstanding, it seems quite likely that Calvin is reflecting on his own familiarity with judges and common people when he makes these comments. The text reminds him of his own life and his life informs his reading of the text.

This parallel also seems to have informed his reading of God’s accommodating of himself. This conclusion garners support from the fact that he is so willing to psychologize about God’s accommodating, an activity which is surely based in many

⁵⁷ CO 48: 398-9; CTS *Acts*, 2, 138. The text reads: “And they stirred up the multitude and the magistrates of the city ...”.

ways on one's own experiences. So, for example, God "accommodates himself to us insofar as we are so sluggish," Calvin declares in a sermon on Jeremiah 16: 8-12.⁵⁹ On this occasion accommodation takes the form of God's forbidding Jeremiah to eat and drink at the banquet house. The text merely states the command of God to Jeremiah and his eventual purpose to cause the voice of joy and mirth to cease from the land. But in this, Calvin discerns accommodation. How?

His thinking is based very much on the reality of human sinfulness. God, Calvin points out, could have simply spoken once. But what would that have accomplished? Human hardness is such that this would achieve nothing. Thus, God must "take pains" to overcome the unwillingness of his people to hear his word. Hence, he issues the command to his prophet in accommodation to this unwillingness. It is in this way that the accommodation appears.

Clearly God, who "reproaches our obstinacy when he makes the prophet abstain from what was otherwise legal, to show his teaching is valid,"⁶⁰ knows the human heart well. Indeed, his whole thinking in this episode seems to be based on his awareness of it; thinking which is summarized in the most sober of terms: "It would be enough that the prophet merely spoke, were it not for the fact that we are so hard ... we are so hard ... we do not hear the Word of God ... we are so sluggish"⁶¹ There is nothing indecisive about his position on human depravity.

⁵⁸ CO 48: 384-85; CTS *Acts*, 2, 114 (on Acts 16: 22).

⁵⁹ SC 6: 64-65; *Sermons on Jeremiah*, 104-5.

⁶⁰ SC 6: 64-65; *Sermons on Jeremiah*, 104.

⁶¹ SC 6: 64-65; *Sermons on Jeremiah*, 104.

But this thinking, we note, is largely based on a maxim which is worthy of particular attention. Calvin's idea that God could have spoken only once is not found in the passage. Though it could be from Scripture, this author cannot think of any place in the Bible where such a truth is stated. Whence, then, did he learn it? Even if one were to find it in Holy Writ, one feels justified in suggesting experience as an equally likely source. For even if he initially learned the axiom from some other source—either written or oral—it would almost certainly have been set aside or forgotten by him had it not been reinforced by concrete experiences, such as the kind which became familiar to him in Geneva. Furthermore, an additional argument for experience as the source comes from the fact that his further exposition in this sermon and in other places seems to rely so heavily on his own familiarity with the intractability of his listeners, that is, the Genevans.⁶²

And yet in Calvin's exposition this maxim becomes the thinking of God. This process of reasoning is set out as an explanation why God issued the command to his prophet, as already noted.⁶³ Thus, Calvin's experience would seem clearly to be an aid to the reformer by which he is better able to interpret not only the Scriptures generally but also God's accommodating ways specifically.

⁶² In several places in these sermons on Jeremiah Calvin puts words in the mouths of people who are making excuses for not listening to God. For instance, "Why does he cry out after us? What have we done?" or "Alas! If I err, I now regret it," or "I did such-and-such with good intentions." (SC 6: 68-71; *Sermons on Jeremiah*, 109, 113). One can very easily imagine that he heard these very words uttered to him by the Genevans to whom he preached.

⁶³ Nor, it should be added, is this the only place where Calvin's God thinks in this way; see, CO 2: 368-9; *Inst.* 2.16.2.

5. This fifth point focuses more broadly on the question of how the portrait of the accommodating God constructed in chapter four relates, albeit uneasily, to the fuller, more traditional portrait of Calvin's God. Calvin's intense concern for the transcendence (transcendence, infinitude, eternality, otherness) of God noticeably impacts his work as an interpreter of the Old Testament to such a degree that, just as Wright declares of Augustine that he "normally works with a two-level understanding of Scripture,"⁶⁴ so it might also be said of Calvin that he works with a two-level understanding of God. This is exemplified in the following comment on "God repented of the evil that he had said that he would do to them" (Jonah 3: 10):

Hence we see that God is described to us in two ways (*dupliciter*); namely, in his word, and in his secret counsel. With respect to his secret counsel, I have already said that God is always like himself and is not subject to any of our affections. But with respect to the teaching of his word, which is accommodated to our senses, God is now angry with us, and then, as though he were pacified, he offers pardon and is propitious towards us. This is the repentance of God.⁶⁵

This conviction works itself out in his exegesis in such a way that what one begins to find in Calvin, albeit with varying degrees of clarity, is a "God within the story" (who is, at times, surprisingly human) and a "God outside of the story" and largely outside of history (who is utterly transcendent). The appearance of either is dependent upon the way in which the text engages God's infinitude. The interaction of these two divine manifestations, if you will, causes some problems for Calvin as each manifestation grows increasingly different from its counterpart.

⁶⁴ Wright, "Augustine: His Exegesis and Hermeneutics," in *Hebrew Bible*, 726.

6. This propensity to emphasize the transcendence of God is joined by a second tendency; namely, a willingness to see in God's behavior a certain laxity regarding ethical issues. Calvin tenaciously protects God's essential qualities (those which would normally be considered under the question *Quid sit Deus?*), but such care is conspicuously weak or even absent from his consideration of the divine morality. This latter fact is superbly testified to in the reformer's commentary on Joshua.

In an incident recorded in Joshua 5: 2-9, Joshua is instructed to circumcise the children of Israel who, having been born during the journey through the wilderness, had not been circumcised. Though Calvin's comments range widely, the remarks which are of interest have to do with the fact that during the intervening period the Lord's people had celebrated the Passover while uncircumcised. This was, Calvin confesses, "absurd" according to God's usual standards. He compares it to one taking the Lord's supper who has not been admitted into the Church by baptism. However, undaunted—almost nonchalant—the reformer simply declares, "God was free to change the ordinary rule (*ordinaria ratione*) for a time." "Thus," he asserts, "the people were excommunicated in one matter, and yet, in the meanwhile, furnished with fit aids to prevent them from falling into despair."⁶⁶ He does not seem disturbed by this development, nor does he endeavor to provide any defense of God's righteousness in the face of such a strange form of conduct. Having made the observation, he simply moves on to the next issue. One could never, it is safe to say, find Calvin exhibiting such a lackadaisical attitude towards a potential offense against divine impassibility or immutability.

⁶⁵ CO 43: 261; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 3, 116.

⁶⁶ CO 25: 459; ET: CTS *Joshua*, 79.

These two tendencies (numbers 5. and 6.) work together with the result that Calvin will allow his intense concern for the Lord's essential attributes to coerce his treatment of God's morality, such that if, in Calvin's perception, a choice must be made between protecting one or the other, he will consistently opt to safeguard the former, even at the expense of the latter. This, as has been seen in chapter four, can bear bad and sometimes shocking, fruit. But there may also be more to this moral line of argument, as our final point will attempt to demonstrate.

7. The picture of Calvin as cold, ruthless and tyrannical is a legendary one. Here he is perceived as the ruler of the police-state of Geneva, a man of iron-will and merciless logic who crushed anyone that dared to stand in his way. It is unquestionably an exaggerated portrait. Yet despisers of the man have not lacked for material in this regard.

Naturally, all the reformers had their human side as well as their detractors. Though the image of Luther as a foul-mouthed, beer-loving ex-monk is comical, it does not win him any points for saintliness.⁶⁷ Nor is he immune to more serious criticism, as the recent treatment of Richard Marius demonstrates.⁶⁸ Additionally, Martin Bucer has been described as “a situation theologian,” who “showed an extraordinary degree of flexibility” at times.⁶⁹ Peter Matheson offered these remarks with some qualification,

⁶⁷ Heiko Oberman mentions some of Luther's more vulgar tendencies in *The Reformation; Roots and Ramifications*, trans. Andrew Colin Gow (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 69 and also *id.*, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (London: Yale University Press, 1989), *passim*.

⁶⁸ Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: the Christian between God and Death* (London: Belknap, 1999), xi-xv.

⁶⁹ Peter Matheson, “Martin Bucer and the Old Church” in *Martin Bucer; Reforming church and community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 6, 12. Matheson does not seem to be a demonizer of Bucer, and he makes his remarks tenderly.

and did not seem to have the worst of Bucer's shortcomings in mind. Indeed one cannot help but think of the more damaging fact of Bucer's justifying of the bigamy of Philip of Hesse.⁷⁰ Thus these men were at once extremely impressive and predictably human.

The same must also be said of Calvin. G. R. Elton, after acknowledging the exaggerated "legend" which surrounds the reformer, was still moved to refer to Calvin as a man who was so utterly sure of himself, his views and his calling that he "could not help but equate opposition to himself with denial of God's omnipotence."⁷¹ Owen Chadwick also declared of Calvin: "He knew what he wanted and could be ruthless in getting it."⁷² Nor are these outdated opinions, as Naphy's impressive study demonstrates.⁷³

Some of Calvin's faults are highlighted in the well-known cases involving Servetus and Bolsec. Although respecting the former he has recently been defended,⁷⁴ there were those in his own day who were shocked by his handling of the affair, such as Castellio. Nor was it only foes who opposed the reformer at this juncture. As amenable an associate as Bullinger accused him of a lack of moderation in his judgments towards Bolsec.⁷⁵ Similar responses have greeted Calvin in modern times. Accordingly, even an author who is generally very sympathetic to Calvin is forced to acknowledge that the reformer "showed himself vindictive and cruel to his opponents—and there are other cases besides that of Servetus in which he appears before us in this light."⁷⁶ Philip

⁷⁰ I was reminded of this point by Professor David Wright.

⁷¹ G. R. Elton, *Reformation Europe 1517-1559* (London and Glasgow: Fontana, 1963), 213.

⁷² Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation* (Middlesex, Penguin Books Ltd., 1964), 88.

⁷³ Naphy, *Calvin and the consolidation*, 231, *et passim*.

⁷⁴ See McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin*, 114-20.

⁷⁵ Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy*, 276-79.

⁷⁶ Allan Menzies, *A Study of Calvin and Other Papers* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1918), 190.

Holtrop, in his mammoth study of the Bolsec controversy, takes a similar line when he declares:

The Bolsec controversy reveals that he was tense, intense, hurried, and harried in consolidating his power base in Geneva. He was capable of conniving, contriving, distorting, and even wanting to see his enemies put to death.⁷⁷

Thus we begin to see the hard edges of the reformer's personality or the "ugly Calvin" as Oberman calls him.⁷⁸

This ugliness may be further illustrated by considering Calvin's treatment of a fellow pastor with whom he was forced to work, Henri De la Mare. Present upon Calvin's return to the city in 1541, De la Mare did not leave until 1546. During this period, he was subjected to neglect at the hands of Calvin which was systematic, pitiless and spiteful. Calvin's disregard for the man issued no doubt from a number of causes, but especially from his disapproval of the part which De la Mare played in Calvin's expulsion from Geneva in 1538 and from his simple desire to remove De la Mare so as to make room for a more qualified, hand-picked, French replacement.⁷⁹ As Naphy writes:

Calvin embarked on a fairly consistent programme of pushing aside the earlier, less qualified, less pliant ministers and replacing them with educated, socially prominent, hand-picked foreigners who could be expected to give Calvin their wholehearted support.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy*, 3.

⁷⁸ Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy*, xvii.

⁷⁹ In Calvin's estimation, De la Mare was a coward, who refused to share exile with him, was suspected of immorality and was involved in several other dubious incidents including one involving dancing, was implicated (so Calvin believed) in a concerted attempt to undermine his position in the city, who (Calvin felt) hated him and worked to stir up others against him, and who had theological problems (Naphy in *Calvin and the consolidation*, 60, 66).

⁸⁰ Naphy, *Calvin and the consolidation*, 223; see also, 51-68.

It seems then that De la Mare was not the only one to suffer at the hands of the reformer.

The picture painted here is an incomplete one. Yet it is still clear enough to raise the question of whether some of the distastefulness which is found in Calvin's portrait of the accommodating God could be the product of the moral flaws which clung to the reformer's mind and character. One learns by experience, the importance of which for Calvin has already been highlighted. Could it be that the reformer's interpreting of God's dealings with the wayward Israelites was influenced by his own dealings with the wayward Genevans? In this regard, the observation of Naphy is enticing:

Far too often the temptation has been to focus on Calvin and to treat Geneva as an addendum to his life. ... The research for [*Calvin and the consolidation of the Genevan Reformation*] has driven home the depth of Calvin's involvement in the local political situation in Geneva.⁸¹

Genevan politics, Naphy is saying, was the air Calvin breathed. Furthermore we must consider that the majority of Calvin's Old Testament expositions, in which the most offensive aspects of this portrait of God are to be found, were produced during the last decade of his life. His first Old Testament commentary, on Isaiah, did not appear until 1551. Genesis followed in 1554. Thus all his Old Testament expositions were the product of a mind which had been steeped in the intense heat of the political cauldron. Can it be sheer coincidence that Calvin's God also appears as one whose relations with his children had to be managed as if they were his enemies? A definite answer will not be proffered here, yet the suggestion seems a feasible one.

⁸¹ Naphy, *Calvin and the consolidation*, 230.

5.3 Final Comments

Calvin is by common consent a controversial figure. The marketability of his God has never been high, even (perhaps, especially) in his own day. One suspects that he will be no more appealing to the twenty-first century. Whether this is a good thing or bad, a proof of Calvin's fidelity to biblical revelation or a sign of his departure from it, is not for us to say. It is not the purpose of this dissertation to make such judgments. But the one who wishes to do so, or who wishes to defend Calvin or to condemn him, should do so only after being fully apprised of the evidence.

This evidence reveals a multi-faceted God. It does, on the more traditional side of the issue, reveal that Calvin's *Deus accommodans* is full of divine love for the creatures to whom he is accommodating himself. Due to the provocative nature of some of the material which has been covered, this may have been overlooked at times. Yet, we would surely be remiss if we were to neglect in the final pages of this work to recall this most significant truth. For John Calvin, God is love and the accommodating God is love. It would be very difficult to over-emphasize this crucial truth when giving an account of the character of Calvin's views on his Sovereign.

But this evidence also discloses a wider array of qualities. Calvin's accommodating God, as has been seen, is many things—ambitious, disparaging, scandalous, supine. He is unconventional, perhaps even eccentric or unpredictable. This can be seen in many of his actions and responses. He is the God who appoints the use of frankincense in worship simply so that he can deny to his people the chance to

choose something different. He is the God who seems, effectively, to be opposed to all mourning, and must grant as a concession the right to mourn even for a member of one's own family. He is the God who leads his people triumphantly out of Egypt with mighty miracles, but worries all the while that they might decide they want to return. In these and other ways, Calvin's self-adapting God appears unfamiliar, unattractive—perhaps even outrageous. He does not fit the standard account of the reformer's theology which one finds, say, in Niesel.⁸²

Whether marketable or not, however, Calvin's God will almost surely go on being studied. Therefore, this conclusion will end with a comment on one of the applications this dissertation might have for Calvin studies generally. What quickly becomes apparent from the findings set out above is that a serious question is raised by them regarding the reading of Calvin's *corpus* and the recent discussions of the relationship between the *Institutes* and scriptural exposition (the commentaries, lectures and sermons).⁸³ How, for example, is one to approach that relationship when one realizes that the expository writings possess a markedly broader range of material on divine accommodating than is found in the *Institutes*? Does this not strongly suggest that the same body of writings may possess a broader, rougher, more amorphous and potentially more problematic portrayal of Calvin's God? But if this is so, can the relationship be conceived of in as smooth and seamless a way as Calvin himself wished us to imagine? While the answers to and ramifications of these questions may take some

⁸² Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 22-79, 159-169, *et passim*.

⁸³ Elsie Anne McKee, "Exegesis, Theology, and Development in Calvin's *Institutio*: A Methodological Suggestion," *Probing the Reformed Tradition: Historical Studies in Honor of Edward A. Dowey, Jr.*, Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 154-72, and Richard Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, *passim*.

time to unravel, they are all indicative of the fact that we have yet to come to terms with the God who “is often accustomed to dealing with his people as a human being would (*humanitus saepe cum suis agere solet*).”⁸⁴

⁸⁴ CO 24: 143; CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony*, 1, 233.

APPENDIX

“The God of Love and Weakness; Calvin’s Understanding of God’s Accommodating Relationship with his People” in *Westminster Theological Journal* 62 (2000), 177-95

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Ford Lewis Battles’ influential article, “God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity”¹ has largely governed our conception of Calvin’s thoughts on accommodation since its appearance in 1977, with numerous authors citing it as the standard work. Though apparently unaware of doing so, Battles follows the main lines drawn earlier by Edward Dowey,² E. David Willis and one or two others.³ Making

¹ Ford Lewis Battles, “God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity,” *Interpretation* 31 (1977) 19-38.

² Though accommodation is mentioned in the modern period as early as 1849 by Thomas Myers (John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas Myers (1849-50; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), vol. 2, 448-51. (Henceforth, CTS). Edward Dowey’s fourteen-page treatment, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 3-17, is the first extended discussion (See, Edward Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology*). Whether he should be credited with the discovery of accommodation in Calvin is a trickier puzzle to solve. Both Ford Lewis Battles and Richard Stauffer in 1977 and 1978 respectively seem to claim this honor for themselves. To be sure, Battles does not explicitly claim the discovery, but his footnote at the beginning of the paper certainly leans in this direction; see Battles, “God Was Accommodating,” 19 n. 1. Further, note Stauffer’s words, “Cf. l’excellent article de Ford Lewis Battles ... qui, en même temps que nous, décourvre l’importance de la notion d’accommodation dans la théologie de Calvin” (Richard A. Stauffer, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans le Prédication de Calvin*, Basler und Berner Studien zur historischen und systematischen Theologie, 33 (Berne: Peter Lang, 1978), 36 n. 31). The truth is, the tribute could go to several authors. See Paul Lobstein, “La Connaissance religieuse d’après Calvin. Étude d’Histoire et de Dogmatique,” *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 42 (1909) 53-110; Rev. A. Mitchell Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin; A Modern Interpretation* (Glasgow: Maclehose, Jackson and Co., 1920), 48, n. 2; and Arnold Williams, *The Common Expositor; An Account of the Commentaries on Genesis, 1527-1633* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948), 176-177.

much of its supposed rhetorical roots, Battles argues that God's accommodation functions in the realm of speech; that God, like a good teacher or orator—indeed, more recent authors have spoken of Calvin's God as the "Grand Orator"⁴—adjusts and simplifies the knowledge of himself and divine realities to the weak capacities of those whom he is instructing.⁵ Hence, all knowledge of God revealed to us is accommodated knowledge.

³ H. Jackson Forstman, *Word and Spirit; Calvin's Doctrine of Biblical Authority* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), 13f, 16, 55, 60, 107, 114-115; E. David Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility in Calvin's Theology," in *The Context of Contemporary Theology. Essays in Honor of Paul Lehmann* (Atlanta: 1974), 43-63; and Clinton Ashley, "John Calvin's Utilization of the Principle of Accommodation and its continuing Significance for an Understanding of biblical Language" (unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, 1972). A work that appeared near the same time as Battles' piece is Garret Wilterdink, "The Fatherhood of God in Calvin's Thought," in *Reformed Review* 30 (1976-1977), 9-22.

⁴ See, for example, Serene Jones *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995).

⁵ Following Battles' article, accommodation began to spread within Calvin studies. On Calvin's intellectual background, see Suzanne Selinger, *Calvin Against Himself; An Inquiry in Intellectual History* (Hampden, CT: Archon Book, 1984), 66, 69, 83-84, 115, 179, 213; William Bouwsma, *John Calvin; A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 105, 124, 125; idem, "Calvin as *Theologia Rhetorica*," in Wilhelm Wuellner, ed., *Calvinism as Theologia Rhetorica* (Berkeley: Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1986), 10-11; idem, "Calvin and the Renaissance Crisis of Knowing," *Calvin Theological Journal* 36 (1982) 207; idem, "Calvinism as Renaissance Artifact," in Timothy George, ed., *John Calvin & the Church: A Prism of Reform* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 38; Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 130-132, 263 (Appendix I); Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric*, 28, 32-34, 61, 77, 108, 133-134, 187-188, 202. On Calvin's exegesis and view of Scripture, see Donald McKim and Jack Rogers, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 89-116; Richard Muller, "The Foundation of Calvin's Theology: Scripture as Revealing God's Word," *Duke Divinity School Review* 44 (1979) 17-18, 22; idem, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics; volume 1: Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 125; idem, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics. Volume 2, Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 192-193, 319-320; Dirk Jellema, "God's 'Baby Talk': Calvin and the 'Errors of the Bible,'" *Reformed Journal* 30 (1980) 25-47; Brian Gerrish, *The Old Protestant and the New; Essays on the Reformed Heritage* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), 6, 175-176, 178, 364, n. 95; David Steinmetz, "John Calvin on Isaiah 6: A Problem in the History of Exegesis," *Interpretation* 36 (1982) 164; T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 98-102; Jane Dempsey Douglass, "Calvin's Use of Metaphorical Language of God: God as Enemy and God as Mother," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 8 (1987) 19-32, esp. 19-22; A. Baxter, "John Calvin's Use and Hermeneutics of the Old Testament," (unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Sheffield, 1987); Richard Gamble, "Calvin as Theologian and Exegete: Is There Anything New?," *Calvin Theological Journal* 23 (1988) 182-183, 185; Susan Schreiner, "Exegesis and Double Justice in Calvin's Sermons on Job," *Church History* 58 (1989) 332; Roland Frye, "Calvin's Theological Use of Figurative Language" in George, ed., *John Calvin & the Church*, 172-194; David Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of*

The lone critique of Battles' views and of the general trend of study in this area has come from David F. Wright in a series of essays published between 1986 and 1998.⁶ By drawing attention to a previously unknown aspect of accommodation in Calvin (namely, God's attempering of his laws to the barbarity of his Old Testament people) and by striving to re-evaluate the phenomenon in the reformer, Wright not only offers a formidable challenge to contemporary understandings of accommodation⁷ but also

the Old Testament, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 11, 40, 43, 51 n.110, 80 n. 106, 112-114. On Calvin's theology, see Richard Muller, *Christ and the Decree* (Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1986), 17-38; Philip Butin, *Revelation, Redemption and Response: Calvin's Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 12-21; and Paul Helm, "God in Dialogue" in A. N. S. Lane, ed., *Interpreting the Bible; Historical and Theological Studies in Honour of David F. Wright*, (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1997), 223-240; esp. 231-238.

Near the end of the 1980's scholars began to devote more particular attention to the study of accommodation in Calvin. Apart from the essays by David F. Wright cited below, see, A. Baxter, "What Did Calvin Teach about Accommodation?" *Evangel* 6:1 (Spring, 1988) 20-22; Michael Keefer, "Accommodation and Synecdoche: Calvin's God in *King Lear*," *Shakespeare Studies* 20 (1988) 147-68; Jacobus de Jong, *Accommodatio Dei. A Theme in K. Schilder's Theology of Revelation* (Kampen: Kok, 1990), 35-43; Martin Klauber and Glenn Sunshine, "Jean-Alphonse Turretini on Biblical Accommodation: Calvinist or Socinian?" *Calvin Theological Journal* 25 (1990) 9-12; Martin Klauber, "Francis Turretin on Biblical Accommodation: Loyal Calvinist or Reformed Scholastic?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 55 (1993) 73-86; Stephen Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 187-192; and Randall Zachman, "Calvin as Analogical Theologian" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51 (1998) 162-187. Though Millet's recent tome covers more than accommodation, he makes an important contribution to that subject, Olivier Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole. Étude de rhétorique réformée*, Bibliothèque littéraire de la Renaissance, série 3, Tome 28 (Geneva: Slatkine, 1992), 247-255.

⁶ David F. Wright, "Calvin's Pentateuchal Criticism: Equity, Hardness of Heart, and Divine Accommodation in the Mosaic Harmony Commentary" *Calvin Theological Journal* 21 (1986) 33-50; idem, "Accommodation and Barbarity in John Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries," in A. Graeme Auld, ed., *Understanding Poets and Prophets. Essays in Honour of George Wishart Anderson*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series, 152 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Series, 1993), 413-427; idem, "Calvin's 'Accommodation' Revisited," in Peter De Klerk, ed., *Calvin as Exegete: Papers and Responses Presented at the Ninth Colloquium on Calvin and Calvin Studies* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Studies Society, 1995), 171-90, and idem, "Calvin's Accommodating God" in Wilhelm Neuser and Brian Armstrong, eds., *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex*, (Kirksville: Sixteenth Century Journal, 1997), 3-19. Some criticism of contemporary views of accommodation is also offered in, *id.*, "Was John Calvin a 'Rhetorical Theologian'?" in John Leith and Robert Johnson, eds., *Calvin Studies IX; Papers Presented at the ninth Colloquium on Calvin Studies*, (Davidson, NC: Calvin Studies Society, 1998), 46-69, esp. 59-63.

⁷ Richard Muller, "Directions in Current Calvin Research" in *Calvin Studies IX; Papers Presented at the ninth Colloquium on Calvin Studies*, 84 notes the problem, uncovered by Wright's efforts, of "dogmatic" readings in the earlier works of folk such as Dowey and Battles.

demonstrates that we have a long way to go before we understand the place it holds in Calvin's theology.⁸

Wright's reflections are the impetus for the study that follows. It is the contention here that accommodation pervades Calvin's thinking to a degree that has yet to be realized within the scholarly community. More particularly, we have become convinced that accommodation is not restricted to God's revealing of himself, but rather encompasses a broad range of divine activities and characterizes many aspects of the relationship God has with his people. God not only speaks but behaves in an accommodated manner towards his church. Thus, a glimpse of Calvin's views on the subject may be obtained from a statement such as the one we find in his commentary on Isaiah 40:11 "he carries them close to his heart":

These words describe God's wonderful condescension, for not only is he led by a general feeling of love for his whole flock, but, in proportion to the weakness of any one sheep, he shows his carefulness in watching, his gentleness in handling, and his patience in leading it. Here he leaves out nothing that belongs to the office of a good shepherd. For the shepherd ought to observe each of his sheep, in order that he may treat it according to its capacity; and especially they ought to be supported, if they are exceedingly weak. In a word, God will be mild, kind, gentle, and compassionate, so that he will not drive the weak harder than they are able to bear.⁹

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that Calvin's conception of accommodation includes a behavioral aspect according to which God "treats each of his

⁸ "We are still, I would claim, at the stage of uncovering the shape of the animal;" Wright, "Calvin's 'Accommodation' Revisited," 172.

⁹ "*His verbis exprimitur singularis Dei indulgentia, quia non modo in totum gregem communi amoris affectu ducitur, sed prout quaeque ovis imbecilla fuerit, ... enim ... pastori inspiciendae ... ut illis pro cuiusque captu consulat...*" (John Calvin, "*Ioannis Calvinii Commentarii in Isaiam Prophetam*" in *Ioannis Calvinii Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, 59 tomi, ed., Wilhelm Baum, Eduard Cunitz and Eduard Reuss,

sheep according to its capacity.” This aim will be accomplished by examining various aspects of that relationship. It is not possible in a short essay such as this one to canvass the subject exhaustively. Because this study must be selective it should be regarded as a beginning step, but certainly an important one toward understanding this accommodated relationship.

To this end, I have chosen to explore several themes associated with God’s daily interactions with his children—believer’s oaths, vows, and prayers, his or her performance of good works and endurance of chastening, and the Lord’s guidance and providential oversight of his people. In these areas, according to Calvin, God tempers his dealings with his children according to their capacity. I will take up each of these themes in turn, but by way of introduction will briefly outline Calvin’s thoughts on the character of the believer’s life and prayers. By mapping Calvin’s sense of how the Lord expected his people to conduct themselves, it will be easier to see the accommodation present in God’s treatment of them.

The Believer’s Life and Prayers

One of the best approaches for addressing the Lord’s expectations briefly is to survey Calvin’s discussion of the believer’s life as it is found in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.6-10 and prayer in *Institutes* 3.20. Respecting the first of these, Calvin begins by writing:

Corpus Reformatorum 29-87, (Brunswick: C. A. Schwetsche, 1863-1900), 37 (1888) 15 (hereafter CO)). CTS *Isaiah*, 3, 216; slightly altered.

The object of regeneration, as we have said, is to manifest in the life of believers a harmony and agreement between God's righteousness and their obedience, and thus to confirm the adoption that they have received as sons.¹⁰

This harmony has numerous elements to it. A zeal for obedience and good works is certainly a key component. For this reason, the invaluable instruction provided by the Law is mentioned by Calvin in the next sentence and the example of Christ follows quickly thereafter. Love of neighbor is also basic to this life as is an earnest desire to be led by God in every area and to renounce human wisdom and desires.

Indeed, this last element, self-denial, is clearly of supreme importance to Calvin. One need only look at his chapter titles to see this.¹¹ Though he does not neglect the Lord's tender affection for his flock and the reciprocal love God's people ought to demonstrate, yet he seems to have his eyes resolutely focused upon the harsh reality of our desperate sinfulness. Accordingly, he highlights the crucial importance of the heart,¹² proper motives,¹³ holiness,¹⁴ and the denial of the believer's own reason and

¹⁰ CO 2: 501. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), book 3, chapter 6, section 1 (hereafter *Inst.*).

¹¹ The title of *Inst.* 3.7 is "The Sum of the Christian Life: the Denial of Ourselves (*ubi de abnegatione nostri*)" (CO 2: 505) and the title of the next chapter is "Bearing the Cross, a Part of Self-denial (*quae pars est abnegationis*)." (CO 2: 515) For more on self-denial and a number of the themes we will mention see, John Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 38-45, 74-82.

¹² See CO 2: 504-5 (*Inst.* 3.6.4-5), CO 2: 505-32 (*Inst.* 3.7-10) (in chapters 7 - 10 there are many references to the heart; these references are too numerous to be mentioned individually). By referring to the heart I do not mean exclusively the heart (*cor*) in distinction from the mind (*mens*), but the soul (*anima*)—intellect (*intellectus*) and will (*voluntas*), or the whole person (*totus homo*), in distinction from that lifeless embracing of Christianity that ever remains on the top of the brain as Calvin was accustomed to say. This seems to be what the reformer had in mind, in an early portion of his treatment of the Christian life, when he called the gospel "a doctrine not of the tongue but of life (*Non ... linguae est doctrina, sed vitae*)" (CO 2: 504; *Inst.* 3.6.4). Thus, Calvin emphasized the indispensable place held by the inward affections and the necessity for Christian truth to be embraced by both intellect and will. For Calvin's view of the human soul and the importance of the *totus homo*, see Richard Muller, "Fides and Cognition in Relation to the Problem of Intellect and Will in the Theology of John Calvin" *Calvin Theological Journal* 25 (1990) 207-224; esp. 212-6.

will.¹⁵ Furthermore, Calvin seems particularly fond of the notions of contentment, frugality, propriety and moderation¹⁶ for describing the carriage of the believer in all the providential circumstances she or he encounters during this fleeting life,¹⁷ and correspondingly of the utter necessity of meditation on the future life.¹⁸

Several of these emphases also find expression in Calvin's discussion of prayer. In particular, his stress on holiness (in the form of reverence) and sobriety is of central importance here. Believers are to approach prayer in a way "that befits those who enter conversation with God,"¹⁹ Calvin says in his first rule on the subject. On this basis, he castigates any who would dare to entreat the almighty as if prayer were a "discourse ... between us and an ordinary man."²⁰ Appended to this is a warning that we ask for nothing except what God allows. For, although God "bids us pour out our hearts before him, he still does not indiscriminately slacken the reins" to our "wicked emotions," and while he "promises that he will act according to the will of the godly," this does not mean "he yields to their willfulness."²¹

¹³ In this classification we also include intentions as well as the insufficiency of mere outward performance. See CO 2: 501-5 (*Inst.* 3.6); CO 2: 507-8, 510-12, 513 (*Inst.* 7.3, 6-7, 9); CO 2: 525 (*Inst.* 3.9.3); and CO 2: 528-32 (*Inst.* 3.10.1-5).

¹⁴ See CO 2: 502-3, 504-5 (*Inst.* 3.6.2-3, 5); CO 2: 506-8, 511-13 (*Inst.* 3.7.2-4, 7-9); CO 2: 515, 517-19, 522-23 (*Inst.* 3.8.1, 4-7, 11); CO 2: 523-24, 527-28 (*Inst.* 3.9.1, 6); and CO 2: 528-29, 530-32 (*Inst.* 3.10.1, 3-5).

¹⁵ See CO 2: 505-14 (*Inst.* 3.7); CO 2: 515-23 (*Inst.* 3.8); CO 2: 523-24, 525-27 (*Inst.* 3.9.1, 4-5); and CO 2: 528-32 (*Inst.* 3.10).

¹⁶ Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, 86ff discusses the importance of moderation from antiquity to the sixteenth century and in Calvin.

¹⁷ See CO 2: 507-8, 512-14 (*Inst.* 3.7.3, 8-10); CO 2: 518, 519-23 (*Inst.* 3.8.5, 7-11); CO 2: 523-28 (*Inst.* 3.9); and CO 2: 528-32 (*Inst.* 3.10).

¹⁸ Meditation on the future life is the subject of ch. 9; see CO 2: 523-28 (*Inst.* 3.9).

¹⁹ CO 2: 627; *Inst.* 3.20.4.

²⁰ CO 2: 628; *Inst.* 3.20.5.

²¹ "*eorum arbitrio se submittat*" (CO 2: 628; *Inst.* 3.20.5).

The Saints and their Indulgent God

Outside of the *Institutes* Calvin sounds these same notes. Yet, when we come to Calvin's commentaries and sermons the terrain upon which the reformer treads is not as smooth and manageable as it was in the previously-mentioned chapters. The vastness and honesty of the biblical record require him to deal with eccentricities which can easily be excised from a treatise or other general work. For clearly the saints whose lives are recorded in the Bible are often far from being paragons of the virtues which Calvin set forth.

One of the byproducts of this (perhaps surprisingly) is that in Calvin's exegesis of the Bible, most notably on OT books, God is often gentle and helpful; God is extremely cooperative, indeed, at times almost obsequious; God accommodates himself to his people's weaknesses in ways that are quite extraordinary. Though God says he requires self-denial and moderation from his creatures, he frequently waives these requirements and allows his people to cry and complain in a very immoderate way. Though in the aforementioned treatment of the believer's life Calvin could teach that God is not a helper of those who sin—"[w]ho can hope for the help of a divine blessing amidst frauds, robberies, and other wicked arts?"²²—yet when he comes to the OT, Calvin acknowledges that God is one who regularly dispenses such help even in the face of his children's offenses and improprieties. Though the Lord demands holiness from them, he rewards their tarnished deeds as if they were pure. Though he threatens judgment upon them, he often stays his hand. In numerous ways God, recalling his children's frailties, shows himself ready to indulge them.

Oaths, Vows, and Prayers

This accommodated behavior appears in a number of different ways and with a variety of nuances. A fairly tame example of it occurs in the Lord's willingness to grant to believers the use of oaths, a point on which Calvin comments in his lectures on Zephaniah. Noting their connection to divine worship and helpfulness "when a matter requires proof,"²³ Calvin lays down stipulations concerning oaths' proper use so as not to be taken up frivolously. But this prompts him to reflect upon the privilege the Lord has granted to his children in this practice.

For it is a singular indulgence on the part of God that he allows us to take up his name when there is any controversy among us, ... it is surely a great favor, for how great is the sanctity of that name though it also serves even earthly concerns? Nevertheless, God accommodates himself so far to us, that it is lawful for us to swear by his name.²⁴

Here Calvin uses *accommodo*²⁵ to describe God's concessive *conduct*. He conceives of accommodation simply as an allowance, an acquiescence, a concession. Thus, we find Calvin discussing accommodation in a behavioral context and in a way significantly broader than Battles and others envisaged as part of the Calvinian repertoire.

²² CO 2: 513; *Inst.* 3.7.9.

²³ CO 44: 11; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 198.

²⁴ "Nam haec singularis Dei indulgentia est, quod nobis concedit nomen suum accipere ... Deus tamen huc usque se nobis accommodat, ut liceat nobis iurare per eius nomen." (CO 44: 11; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 198, slightly altered).

²⁵ Issue needs to be taken with a statement made by Battles. He declares that "at least in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and presumably elsewhere, [Calvin] never uses the noun *accommodatio*, but always either the verb *accommodare* or *attemperare* when he has recourse to this principle" (Battles, "God Was Accommodating," 19). This is simply not the case; the verdict is not even one to which Battles himself adheres. For he refers at the end of his paper to an excerpt where Calvin speaks of God's accommodation by means of the verb *submitto* and also by the phrase "*se...parvum facit.*" (Battles, "God Was

Psalm 116:14, “I will pay my vows to the Lord” evokes a similar response from Calvin. He insists that vows are not intended to procure approval from God through flattery. Rather, the Lord gives the practice of vowing to his children “in their infirmity”²⁶ as an aid to them. “[F]or by this means their most merciful father condescends to allow them to enter into familiar converse with him.”²⁷ God wishes his people to be strengthened with confidence through this means. Thus, again the infirmity of God’s people moves God to condescend to grant to them something that will help them: he treats them according to their capacity.

When Calvin treats prayer the instances are not only more numerous but often bear a more lenient, indulgent, almost fawning, quality. God consents to allow believers to narrate to him at length matters concerning which he is already aware, to pour out before him their cares and sorrows, to make foolish requests, and even to place him in the dock. Like infants, his children cry to him. Like adolescents, they speak disrespectfully to him. And, like a parent, God often hearkens even to their silly desires. It should be noted again that both God and Calvin adjudged these things to be most inappropriate. Yet, in the Lord’s daily engagements with his children, his principles are relaxed and at times nearly discarded in order that he may have intimate fellowship with them.

Accommodating,” 38). A thorough inquiry into the language used by Calvin in reference to accommodation would be a welcome addition to Calvin research.

²⁶ CO 32: 199; CTS *Psalms*, 4, 371.

²⁷ “... *quia hoc modo ad eos descendit indulgentissimus Pater, ac secum permittit familiariter agi*” (Ibid.).

Despite his insistence upon reverence, Calvin notes how God permits his children to deal familiarly with him.²⁸ Hezekiah's prayer in Isaiah 37 offers a superb example of this. When war is threatened upon him via messengers carrying letters from the Assyrians, Hezekiah resorts to prayer and spreads the letters out before the Lord. Calvin observes, "he does not do this as if the Lord did not know what was contained in the letters, but God allows us to act in this manner towards him in accommodation to our weakness."²⁹

Not surprisingly, then, Calvin occasionally describes prayer as stammering. This is how he describes the abrupt language David uses in his prayer in Psalm 5:4, "You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil." He adds, "but this stammering is more acceptable to God than all the figures of rhetoric."³⁰ Calvin also acknowledges that "God allows the saints to plead with him in [a] babbling manner"³¹ when in their prayers they plead with him to arise or to awake up. Further, we find this in God's interaction with Jacob in Genesis 35. The patriarch had been commanded to go to Beth-el and build an altar to God who had appeared to him when he was fleeing from Esau. However, having done so, Jacob renames the place "El-beth-el" (Genesis 35:7), as a result of which some commentators accused him of being inappropriately familiar.³² While the event itself is not explicitly about prayer, Calvin's response seems to encompass it:

And as when God descends to us, he, in a certain sense, abases himself, and stammers with us, so he wants us to stammer with him. And this is to be truly

²⁸ Calvin often uses this phrase, "*familiariter secum agere*." For a sampling, see CO 31: 640, 826; CO 43: 496; slightly different constructions: CO 32: 62, 239; CO 36: 651; and CO 31: 116.

²⁹ "... *sed ita secum agi Deus permittit pro modulo nostrae infirmitatis*" (CO 36: 625; CTS *Isaiah*, 3, 119).

³⁰ "*haec balbuties*" (CO 31: 67; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 55).

³¹ "... *autem hanc balbutiem Deus in sanctorum precibus tolerat*" (CO 31: 447-8; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 171).

³² "*nimis crassum*" (CO 23: 469).

wise, when we embrace God in the manner in which he accommodates Himself to our measure. For in this way, Jacob does not keenly dispute concerning the essence of God, but renders God familiar to himself by the oracle which he has received. And because he applies his senses to the revelation, this stammering and simplicity (as I have said) is acceptable to God.³³

So, in these ways Calvin notes God's willingness to lower himself to the simplicity of his children.

Also, Calvin discerns God's accommodating behavior in the Lord's bending of his ear to the peculiar and offensive requests of his people. Looking at God's encounter with Abram in Genesis 15, when the patriarch is specifically promised that it would not be Eliezer but a son yet to be born to him that would be his heir, Abram responds by asking God how he could know that God's promise would come true. Calvin admits that Abram seems to be contesting the veracity of God's word, but explains "the Lord sometimes concedes to his children, that they may freely express any objection which comes into their mind."³⁴ Taking it further, Calvin even asserts that God does not deal "so strictly" with his people "as not to suffer himself to be questioned."³⁵

When David asks the Lord not to gather his soul with wicked men (Psalm 26:9), Calvin observes that this is of course a strange plea—as if God could not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked. Yet he explains, "God, with paternal indulgence,

³³ "Sicuti autem ad nos descendit, quodammodo se extenuat et balbutit nobiscum, ita etiam nos secum balbutire vult. ... Iacob ... familiarem sibi Deum facit. Quia autem sensus suos ad revelationem dirigit, grata (ut dixi) balbuties haec, et simplicitas Deo est" (CO 23: 469; CTS Genesis, 2, 238; slightly altered).

³⁴ "Dominum hoc interdum concedere filiis suis, ut libere obiiciant quae veniunt in mentem" (CO 23: 215; CTS Genesis, 1, 411).

³⁵ "Neque enim adeo praecise cum ipsis agit, quin patiatur se rogari" (Ibid., 411).

allows this freedom in prayer, that his people may themselves in this way correct their anxieties.”³⁶

And when believers urge the Lord to “make haste [and] answer me” (Psalm 102:2), Calvin acknowledges that the Lord “bears with our foolishness” very patiently, and “deals in a very tender way with us.”³⁷ Calvin draws this conclusion on the grounds that “to pour out our complaints before him after the manner of little children would certainly be to treat his majesty with very little reverence, were it not that he has been pleased to allow us such freedom.”³⁸ The same kind of impatient prayer in Psalm 83:1, evokes from Calvin a similar response: it is our duty to wait patiently on God, “but, in condescension to our infirmity, he permits us to supplicate him to make haste.”³⁹ In all these examples, the Lord descends to listen to his children’s requests and bears with their pettiness, impatience and impertinence.

In another set of material concerning prayer, Calvin identifies God’s accommodation in the way he answers his children. As God, because of “the insensibility and dullness of our natures,” often delivers us from danger even while we “sleep and are ignorant of it,”⁴⁰ so he also seems remarkably generous and compliant with respect to the things his children ask from him. An excellent example may be found in Lot’s dickering with the angel concerning the city to which he will be sent. When he is granted his request, some folk infer from this that the request was pleasing to

³⁶ “*Deus pro paterna indulgentia tam liberis expostulationes suis permittit, ut precando suas ipsi anxietates corrigant.*” (CO 31: 269; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 447).

³⁷ “*ineptias nostras sustinet, ... indulgenter nobiscum agere*” (CO 32: 62; CTS *Psalms*, 4, 98).

³⁸ “*... nisi hanc licentiam ultro concederet*” (Ibid.).

³⁹ “*... infirmitati tamen nostrae concedit festinationem hanc optare.*” (CO 31: 773; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 338).

God. But to Calvin this is an erroneous conclusion. It is not a new thing, he says, “for the Lord sometimes to grant, as an indulgence, what he, nevertheless, does not approve.”⁴¹ For God, Calvin asserts, “kindly and gently bears with even the evil wishes of his own people.”⁴²

God’s lavish kindness is also displayed in the speed with which he answers the prayer of Abraham’s servant. The text in question states that “before he had finished speaking” he was answered (Genesis 24:15). Such a remarkably quick response, states Calvin, manifests “the extraordinary indulgence of God, who does not suffer the man to be long harassed by anxiety.”⁴³

But perhaps the most impressive instances of this kind of accommodation are those occasions on which God seems to capitulate to the terms laid down by his children. We find one such instance in Calvin’s remarks on Psalm 145: 19, “he will perform the desires of those who fear him.” Calvin asks who man is that God “should show compliance”⁴⁴ to his will, yet the reformer contends, he “voluntarily condescends to these terms, that he may yield to our desires.”⁴⁵ And we witness the same behavior in God’s dealings with Ezekiel. For when the prophet vehemently entreats God to answer him respecting whether he would destroy even the remnant of Israel (Ezekiel 9:9), Calvin declares that God granted this to him in order to set his mind at rest.

⁴⁰ CO 31: 347; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 577. In the same way, Calvin explains (concerning the signs that the Lord gives his people) that, “signs being generally intended to aid our weakness, God does not for the most part wait till we have prayed for them” (CO 36: 652; CTS *Isaiah*, 3, 161).

⁴¹ “*Neque enim novum est, concedi interdum per indulgentiam a Domino, quod tamen illi non probatur*” (CO 23: 276; CTS *Genesis*, 1, 511).

⁴² “... *benigne et comiter pravis suorum votis morem gerat*” (Ibid.).

⁴³ “... *raram Dei indulgentiam ostendit, quod non patitur Deus diu cum anxietate luctari*” (CO 23: 334; CTS *Genesis*, 2, 19).

⁴⁴ “*se morigerum praebeat*” (CO 32: 419; CTS *Psalms*, 5, 282).

Hence, we also may learn of God's inestimable indulgence toward his people, because he so condescends to give an account of himself as if he wished to satisfy them. Surely people are carried forward into excessive rashness whenever they interrogate God. For who dares to oppose his judgments? ... But, in his amazing goodness, God descends so far as to give an account of his deeds to his servants to settle their minds, as I have said.⁴⁶

So, although Calvin declared otherwise in his discussion of prayer in the *Institutes*, here he acknowledges God's willingness to "yield to [his children's] willfulness."⁴⁷

In Calvin's judgement, then, God adjusts himself to his children's frail capacity by the way he behaves towards them in the areas of oaths, vows, and prayers. It is interesting to note how sensitive Calvin is to what we might call the social proprieties of divine-and-human engagements. In almost all of the examples cited, Calvin's concerns do not arise naturally from the text itself, but appear to be matters about which he is especially worried. He very clearly adheres firmly to the necessity of treating God with respect; thus reaffirming the emphasis upon sober reverence found elsewhere in his treatment of prayer in the *Institutes*. Nevertheless Calvin frequently draws attention to those occasions on which God seems to drop this requirement in order to condescend to the weakness and even the sinfulness of his children.

Good Works and Providential Chastenings

God also accommodates himself with respect to the way he rewards good works and chastens sin. This accommodation exhibits itself against the backdrop of God's

⁴⁵ "... se demittit ut nostris desideriis obtemperet" (Ibid.; slightly altered).

desire for a harmony between his own righteousness and his children's obedience. The two subjects will be covered in the order just mentioned.

Calvin declares that God acts very tenderly towards believer's sluggishness by appending promises to his commands in order to prompt us to obey them more eagerly. Thus Calvin frequently remarks, especially in his exposition of the law, on God's habit of "allur[ing] ... his people to obedience by the hope of his blessing."⁴⁸ "In order," Calvin explains, "that Israel may be more disposed to obedience, he gently attracts them by subjoining the promise."⁴⁹ Calvin's treatment of biblical history demonstrates the same phenomenon. When God commands Isaac not to go down to Egypt despite the famine that has come upon his own land, God promises Isaac his presence and blessing. Calvin asserts that this was intended to "render Isaac more prompt to obey."⁵⁰ Further, Calvin says the Lord does this in order to awaken his servants from their indolence.⁵¹ God does not purchase our services, but rather "he so condescends to our capacity that he invites and encourages us by the prospect of reward."⁵²

So it is not surprising that Calvin also notes how God rewards his children's good deeds by honoring their obedience to his commands though it is far from his standard of perfection and, in fact, is corrupted by sin. This observation finds ample testimony in Calvin's treatment of law, where he explains "[o]ur services only please

⁴⁶ "*Hinc etiam colligitur inaestimabilis Dei indulgentia erga suos, quod ita rationem dignatur reddere, ac si illis satisfacere vellet. ... Sed Deus pro immensa sua bonitate huc usque descendit, ut rationem reddat factorum servis suis ad sedandas ipsorum mentes*" (CO 40: 204; CTS *Ezekiel*, 1, 315; slightly altered).

⁴⁷ CO 2: 628; *Inst.* 3.20.5.

⁴⁸ "*Deus ... spe suae benedictionis ... allicit*" (CO 24: 241; CTS *Pentateuch Harmony*, 1, 388).

⁴⁹ "... *quo sint magis proclives ad parendum, adiuncta promissione blande eos allicit*" (CO 24: 214; CTS *Pentateuch Harmony*, 1, 345).

⁵⁰ "*ad parendum alacrior reddatur Isaac*" (CO 23: 358; CTS *Genesis*, 2, 59).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

God insofar as in his paternal indulgence he deigns to award to them the value of which they are by no means worthy.”⁵³ Such statements are quite common. They can also be found in the reformer’s exposition of OT history. Surely, the most impressive instances of this are those occasions when a believer clearly breaks God’s law in the midst of his or her service to God and in spite of it the work is honored. Two clear examples of this involve lying women, the first Rahab’s falsehood, the second the lie told by the two midwives.⁵⁴

In his commentary on Joshua 2:4-6, Calvin declares unequivocally that Rahab lied and that it was a sin. Arguing against the casuist’s notion of a “dutiful lie,”⁵⁵ the reformer avers that those who hold such a position “do not sufficiently consider how precious truth is in the sight of God.”⁵⁶ Yet, placing Rebecca’s deception in Genesis 27 alongside Rahab’s to help him make his point, Calvin explains that, with respect to both women, the kindness of God causes the fault of the lie to be buried such that it is “not taken into account.”⁵⁷ Thus, “the fault does not wholly deprive the deed of the merit of

⁵² “... eo tamen usque se demittit ad captum nostrum, ut ostenso praemio nos invitet atque hortetur” (Ibid.).

⁵³ “non aliter placent Deo nostra officia, nisi quatenus, pro paterna sua indulgentia, pretium quo minime digna sunt tribuere dignatur” (CO 24: 541; CTS *Pentateuch Harmony* 2, 381). Calvin also comments on this matter in several places in his sermons on Job, see, for example: CO 33: 491-506.

⁵⁴ Interestingly, the majority of instances of this sort of accommodation that this author has found involve women. Calvin seems to conceive of Rebecca’s deception in Genesis 27 as a virtual paradigm for understanding the phenomenon, at least with respect to lying (as the reader will see in the next two paragraphs); though Calvin does not specifically mention accommodation in his treatment of the text in his commentary, see CO 23: 374-5; CTS *Genesis* 2, 84-7. Furthermore, Calvin mentions God’s willingness to receive imperfect service in the strange case of Zipporah’s circumcizing of her son with a sharp stone; see CO 24: 65-6; CTS *Pentateuch Harmony* 1, 107-8.

⁵⁵ “mendacium officiosum” (CO 25: 440; CTS *Joshua*, 47). Concerning views on dissimulation in the sixteenth century and Calvin’s view specifically, see Perez Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution, and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1990) 63-82.

⁵⁶ CO 25: 440; CTS *Joshua*, 47.

⁵⁷ “ne in rationem veniat” (Ibid.).

holy zeal.”⁵⁸ Again then, we find that Calvin rests his case on the indulgence of God. Even though Rahab’s words were an outright fabrication, God passes over them, receives her service, and commends her for it. The customary mention of human infirmity is missing but the sense is still the same.

In treating the midwives’ deceiving of Pharaoh at the time of Moses’ birth, Calvin again refutes the idea of a dutiful lie, and declares the act to have been wrong. “They sinned,”⁵⁹ he says. When the women are praised for their fear of God, Calvin declares that there is no contradiction in this: “because in [God’s] paternal indulgence of his children he still values their good works as if they were pure, notwithstanding the fact that they may be defiled by some mixture of the purity.”⁶⁰ He explains that there is no work so pure that it is absolutely free from stain. He mentions Rebecca again (though curiously calling her Rachel),⁶¹ and adds that Scripture is full of instances which show that our actions are tainted by sin. Yet, Calvin says, we should not wonder that God “in his mercy should pardon” these defects or that he “should honor with reward those works which are unworthy of praise.”⁶² Thus, though the women did not behave flawlessly, because they acted “shrewdly and courageously,” God “endured in them the sin which he could have deservedly condemned.”⁶³ Further, Calvin urges this doctrine

⁵⁸ “*Neque ... vitium gratiam prorsus abrogat sancto eius studio*” (Ibid., 48).

⁵⁹ “... *duas mulieres ... peccasse*” (CO 24: 19; CTS *Pentateuch Harmony*, 1, 35).

⁶⁰ “... *Deus, ut paterne indulget filiis suis eorum virtutes, quamvis aliqua sordium mixtura inquinatas, in pretio nihilominus habet ac si purae essent*” (Ibid.; slightly altered).

⁶¹ Strangely, the translator of the CTS edition of the commentary does not seem to be aware of the mistake, but simply translates Rachel as Rachel and offers no comment regarding the inaccuracy. The editors of the CO note it by placing an asterisk next to her name.

⁶² “... *Deum pro sua indulgentia ignoscere ... mercede ornare quae laude atque etiam favore indigna erant opera*” (CO 24: 19; CTS *Pentateuch Harmony*, 1, 35).

⁶³ “... *mulieres, quia ... cordate et viriliter egerant, vitium quod merito damnasset, in illis toleravit Deus*” (Ibid.; altered).

upon us as a spur to our obedience, “since God is so graciously forbearing with respect to our infirmities”⁶⁴—here his attention to our weakness is explicit.

But Calvin argues that God not only accommodates himself with respect to his forbearance, but also displays his moderation in the way he chastens his children for their sins. “[W]hen,” says Calvin, “God sees that we are not submissive, and that we do not willingly come to him when he calls us, he strengthens his instruction by chastisements. He allures us at first to himself, he employs kind and gentle invitations; but when he sees us delaying, or even going back, he begins to treat us more roughly and more severely.”⁶⁵ However, even on these occasions Calvin’s God is considerate and tender and alters his ways with his children to suit their weak capacity.

This is amply testified to in several places. In Calvin’s sermons on Job, he comments on the fact that although God seems to afflict everyone without exception, he actually distinguishes between his own and the reprobate.⁶⁶ In this regard, God is careful with his children, seeking their good in afflicting them but also trying not to be too rough with them.⁶⁷ Thus, Calvin states, we have reason to give thanks that God regards our infirmity and scourges us according to what we are able to endure.⁶⁸ In a later sermon, Calvin notes that although chastisements are profitable for us, still God also spares us when he afflicts us, for he does not look to what our sins deserve, but to

⁶⁴ “... *quando tam benigne infirmitatibus nostris Deus parcit*” (Ibid.; altered).

⁶⁵ CO 44: 47; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 262-3.

⁶⁶ CO 33: 260.

⁶⁷ CO 33: 263-4.

⁶⁸ “... *Dieu ... regard à nostre infirmité, quand il nous afflige selon ce qu’il voit que nous le pouvons souffrir*” (CO 33: 118).

what we are able to bear.⁶⁹ God, says Calvin, tempers his scolding of believers and supports them because of the pity he has for their feebleness.⁷⁰ God knows what we are able to bear, and because of this he knows how to moderate our afflictions.⁷¹ In fact, God knows our infirmities better than we do,⁷² but, Calvin urges, if we find ourselves feeling weak under God's chastening, we should pray as Job did.⁷³ The reader of Calvin's 159 sermons on this enigmatic book will find the themes of affliction and God's care for believer's frailties discussed on numerous occasions.

In his comments on Psalm 125:3, Calvin approaches this matter from a slightly different vantage. This verse addresses the temptation to the righteous to turn to sin when they see the wicked prospering. Calvin interprets the text to mean that "God, from his willingness to bear with our weakness, moderates our adversities."⁷⁴ But this time the reasoning is rather complicated. God's tempering of his scolding is due to the fact that his children may be moved to forsake the way of righteousness if they are continually subjected to such harsh discipline. Calvin notes that God's behavior as it is explained here ought to teach us that he will take care of us such that, no matter how weak we are from afflictions, he will not allow us to forsake him. Calvin does go on to mention the benefits that may be accrued from God's reproofs, but reiterates again that the Lord "sets limits to our temptation, because he knows that we are too feeble to

⁶⁹ "... toutesfois qu'il nous espargne, et ne regarde point à ce que nos pechez requierent, mais ce que nous pouvons porter" (CO 33: 268).

⁷⁰ "il [leurs afflictions] attrempe avec telle mesure, que nous ne sommes point du tout opprimez, pource qu'il nous supporte ayant pitié de la foiblesse qui est en nous" (CO 33: 270).

⁷¹ "... cognoit nostre portee ... moderer la pesanteur des afflictions qu'il nous envoie" (CO 33: 337).

⁷² "... il cognoist nos infirmités mieux que nous" (CO 34: 614).

⁷³ CO 34: 613.

⁷⁴ "Nam hinc colligimus ideo temperari a Deo res adversas, quia infirmitati nostrae parcere vult" (CO 32: 315; CTS *Psalms*, 5, 92).

withstand them.”⁷⁵ Nor is this merely the case for the “weak” but it is also true of the “just who serve God in truth.”⁷⁶ No one possesses strength sufficient for enduring until the end “unless the Lord had a regard to our infirmity.”⁷⁷

What is especially clear in this example and what has been present in varying degrees in all of the instances cited thus far is Calvin’s teaching that God appears to be one who has chosen to subject himself in an almost unbelievably radical way to the same constraints as his creatures such that he seems trapped by these constraints. So, when God would chasten his people, he is limited by numerous factors including the possibility that they may leave him if he scolds them too harshly. One may ponder how this could be a hindrance for a God who, if he wished, could secretly empower his children to endure his corrections, yet such a question does not seem to enter the equation. For, though elsewhere Calvin repeatedly celebrates God’s freedom from all impediments and his supreme power, here the reformer leaves this image of the surprisingly human God who must grapple with and adjust himself to his children’s frailties untouched.

This is a common theme in Calvin’s statements on accommodation. Calvin regularly describes God as one who must take certain factors into account before he acts and as one who, were he to decide not to accommodate himself to his children’s debilities, would (it seems) be impeded in the pursuit of his desired outcome. Indeed, God’s accommodation is directly related to God’s interest in a certain outcome. Accordingly, God adjusts himself and his dealings with his people in order to bring said

⁷⁵ “... *quia videt nos impares esse ad resistendum*” (Ibid., 93).

⁷⁶ “*infirmi ... iusti*” (Ibid.).

outcome to pass. In this way, it becomes increasingly more apparent that, for Calvin, not only does accommodation characterize God's relationship with his children but that, in a rather inexplicable way, it has to characterize this relationship. For, though God rules the heavens and earth he is simultaneously one who must adjust himself to his children's capacity to achieve his desired ends.⁷⁸

God's accommodating of his discipline is discussed in many other places in Calvin's writings. In his commentary on Isaiah 57:16, Calvin rejects two possible interpretations and declares "for my own part, I think the prophet rises higher; for he shows that the Lord deals so gently and kindly with us, because he perceives how weak and feeble we are."⁷⁹ In his lectures on Zephaniah, Calvin observes, "we know, that God had always so moderated the punishment he inflicted on his people as not to render void his covenant, nor abolish the memory of Abraham's race."⁸⁰ And in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 10:13, the reformer asserts that God "regulates our temptations to the measure of our power."⁸¹ Thus, in many places Calvin highlights God's accommodating stance.

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⁷⁷ "... nisi Dominus infirmitatis nostrae rationem habeat" (Ibid.).

⁷⁸ We thought this insight was an origin one until we reread David Wright's essay on Calvin's Mosaic Harmony Commentary. He makes the same observation near the end of the paper. See, Wright, "Calvin's Pentateuchal Criticism," 49.

⁷⁹ "*Docent enim Dominum tam clementer atque indulgenter nobiscum agere, quod perspectum habeat quam debiles atque infirmi simus*" (CO 37: 318; CTS *Isaiah*, 4, 215; slightly altered).

⁸⁰ "*Scimus enim Deum ita semper temperasse poenas, ...*" (CO 44: 35; CTS *Minor Prophets*, 4, 240).

⁸¹ This is my summary translation; the full statement is: "*Novit enim facultatis nostrae quam ipse contulit modum; ad quem tentationes attemperat*" (CO 49: 463).

Raising the notions of God's rewarding and providential chastising also involves the more general matter of God's governing and guiding of his people. Here, accommodation has primarily to do with God's willingness to lessen the presence or severity of the various trials encountered by his people. Hence, though self-denial is supposed to be the sum of the believer's life, God accommodates his providence to the capacity of his people, making their way easier to trod.

Of course, God guides and instructs his flock by means of teachers, and in this Calvin finds evidence of accommodation. So he declares in his Mosaic Harmony commentary that it was "no common act of his indulgence" that God provided prophets from among the Israelite people themselves, "so that they do not need to run around ... in search of revelations, and at the same time that they might be taught familiarly according to their capacity."⁸² But, Calvin also perceives God's accommodating grace in the Lord's providential oversight of his people. An example of this can be found in the Lord's moving of his people from Marah to Elim following their murmuring against the bitterness of the water in Marah. Calvin explains that the move "was a concession to their infirmity, because they had borne their thirst so impatiently."⁸³ Instances such as this one can be found in Calvin's comments on historical books, but nowhere are they more frequent than in his remarks on Joshua.⁸⁴

⁸² "... *ut familiariter pro suo modulo docerentur*" (CO 24: 273; CTS *Pentateuch Harmony*, 1, 436; slightly altered). See also his sermon on Ephesians 4:11-14 (CO 51: 565-7; *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. Arthur Golding, revised by the Banner of Truth Trust, [Edinburgh: the Banner of Truth Trust, 1973], 376-7).

⁸³ "*Hoc autem illius infirmitati fuisse concessum ...*" (CO 24: 164; CTS *Pentateuch Harmony*, 1, 267).

⁸⁴ The fact that this was the last book on which Calvin commented raises interesting questions about the chronological development of this aspect of accommodation, but we will not be able to sound these out at this time.

Calvin notes the Lord's indulgence following the report of the spies who brought back news about the promised land. The simple promise should have been sufficient. But "the Lord is so very indulgent to their weakness, that, for the sake of removing all doubt, he confirms what he had promised by experience."⁸⁵ Furthermore, when the Lord causes the kings of the Amorites and Canaanites to be terrified by Israel, Calvin declares that this was done so that victory might be easier for his people. "Thus God spared their weakness, as if he had opened up the way by removing obstacles, since in other respects they had already proven themselves to be far too sluggish and cowardly."⁸⁶ The same kind of care is observed in the fact that God sends such a large number of people to fight against Ai; for by so doing, "God had regard for their weakness by laying no greater burden on them than they were able to bear."⁸⁷ Additionally, when, after hearing what Joshua had done to Jericho and Ai, a large number of kings combined to fight against Israel, Calvin wonders that these kings waited so long to form this allegiance. Yet, he notes that "in this way God spared the weakness of his people, to whom the combined forces of so many nations would have caused no small fear."⁸⁸ And when a new league against Israel was formed, Calvin reflects on the Lord's kindness by remarking that while it would have been easy for the Lord to destroy the entire opposing army at once, "yet he did not want to bear down excessively upon his own people, who were feeble in

⁸⁵ "*eo tamen usque indulget Deus suorum infirmitati, ...*" (CO 25: 445; CTS *Joshua*, 55). Calvin makes a similar point in a sermon on Deuteronomy 1:22-28 where he refers to God's bearing with the people by appointing spies to be sent out, and then applies the lesson to his hearers. He suggests that if God bears with us by giving us means according to our infirmity, (*qu'il nous donne des moyens convenables à nostre infirmité*), we should stir ourselves up to obey him (CO 25: 663-4).

⁸⁶ "*atque ita eorum infirmitati pepercit Deus, ... quia plus satis alioqui timidi et pigri erant*" (CO 25: 458; CTS *Joshua*, 77; altered).

⁸⁷ "... *eorum infirmitati consuluit Deus ne plus iniungeret oneris, quam essent ferendo ...*" (Ibid., 122; slightly altered).

any case, lest the excessive numbers of the enemy should strike them with terror, and drive them to despair.”⁸⁹ In these ways then the Lord shows himself sensitive to his children’s fears and frailties and out of consideration for them he chooses to lighten their load. Thus, as Calvin notes in his commentary on the Psalms, although a “continual warfare” of cross-bearing is enjoined upon us by divine appointment, nevertheless “sometimes, it is true, a truce or respite is granted to us, because God has compassion upon our infirmity.”⁹⁰

Concluding Remarks

Expanding our Search

On the basis of this study, according to Calvin, God alters his conduct in relation to his children’s frailties. To be sure, Calvin rarely uses *accommodo* or *attempero* to refer to this behavior. Yet, he clearly has in mind the idea of accommodation as his constant references to human infirmity indicate. While it remains to sound out our rather cursory findings, the goal of this essay was simply to demonstrate the existence of a behavioral aspect to Calvin’s notion of accommodation.

Given the limited scope of this study, a number of other topics need further investigation. God’s work of creation and employment of angels immediately come to mind.⁹¹ Furthermore, much more work needs to be done on providence. Worthy of

⁸⁸ “*Verum hoc modo pepercit Deus suorum infirmitati, ...*” (Ibid., 136).

⁸⁹ “*... noluit tamen praeter modum suos alioqui debiles premere, ...*” (Ibid., 166; altered).

⁹⁰ “*Verum quidem est, interdum inducias vel relaxationem dari, quia infirmitati nostrae Deus parcit...*” (CO 31: 447; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 170; slightly altered).

⁹¹ These topics come to mind in part because instances concerning both of them are raised by Dowey and Battles, in their writings on the subject. Both topics have to do with behavioral accommodation, but this is not acknowledged by either of these authors. Dowey cites Calvin’s commentary on Genesis 1:5 with reference to God’s work of creation (Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 9; see CO 23: 18; CTS *Genesis*, 1,

mention here is Calvin's occasional tendency to describe God as one who "*non gravatur*"—does not disdain, begrudge, mind, or resent—the care he bestows upon his flock.⁹² This implies, of course, that he might have minded; that God might have withheld this care from his children, and thus that there is a kind of accommodation to be noted in these instances. And finally, in a more thematic vein, we will suggest that the fatherhood of God,⁹³ a motif to which we have alluded throughout this article, deserves more careful consideration in relation to accommodation. Many of Calvin's remarks on God's motives in accommodating point to the Lord's paternal love for his children, indicating that this may very well be fertile ground for digging.

Of course, this article may have raised questions that it fails to answer. For example, given our broadening of Calvin's concept of accommodation, the question of the delimiting of accommodation is surely one with which we will have to deal at some

78); and Battles mentions God's use of angels in his providential care for us as Calvin discusses it in *Institutes* 1.14.11 (Battles, "God Was Accommodating," 26; see CO 2: 125; *Inst.* 1.14.11). In neither case does Calvin mention God's accommodating of knowledge. In fact, Calvin specifically denies this in the Genesis 1:5 quotation—in a portion not quoted by Dowey. Further, regarding the Lord's employment of angels, Calvin notes this on a number of other occasions, and does not mention God's accommodating of knowledge but of his governing of the world. See, for example, "The power of God alone would indeed be sufficient of itself to perform this; but in mercy to our infirmity he vouchsafes to employ angels as his ministers (*sed ut nostrae infirmitati indulgeat, angelos adhibere ministros dignatur*) (CO 31: 339; CTS *Psalms*, 1, 562-3). "... God, although he cannot stand in need of auxiliaries, has seen fit, in accommodation to our infirmity, to employ a multitude of them in the accomplishment of our salvation (*infirmittatis tamen nostrae causa multis adiutoribus ad salutem nostram utatur*)" (CO 31: 542; CTS *Psalms*, 2, 340). "But it contributes much to aid our weakness that he has appointed (*constituerit*) heavenly messengers to be our defenders and guardians" (CO 36: 642; CTS *Isaiah*, 3, 145-6).

⁹² I have not investigated the occurrence of this phrase sufficiently. I have come across it a number of times in my reading and think it is worthy of further investigation. The CTS occasionally translates it as "condescends" which seems a slightly unhelpful rendering or at least one that removes from it part, if not all, of the sense of inconvenience inherent in it. (I wish to thank professor David Wright for his helpful input on this question as well as for his suggestive comments concerning this article.) "[God] did not disdain to humble (*descendere gravatus non*) himself" (CO 31: 738; CTS *Psalms*, 3, 265). "It may be more important to notice, that God's fatherly care of his people is celebrated on the account that he condescends to attend (*prospicere non gravatur*) to even the smallest matter which concerns their advantage" (CO 32: 411; CTS *Psalms*, 5, 269-70).

point if we wish our conclusions to be readily received by scholars. This is plainly a complex subject and, as much as we would like to, we cannot set out our understanding of it as this time. However, it is an issue that arises from the Calvinian *corpus* itself, as we have attempted to demonstrate in this essay. Thus, as a problem, it is one with respect to which all interpretations of accommodation in Calvin will have to come to terms.

Despite the other lines of investigation, this study demonstrates that Calvin repeatedly paints God as a father who interacts with his children in a very intimate way and who, like a human parent, seems to indulge them. God not only condescendingly provides the use of his holy name to his sons and daughters when it is for their good, but also lets his children be quite bold, almost strident, in their approach to him, accepting their foolish and crude expressions as familiar babbling. He not only allows his people to cast their troubles on his breast, but hastens to answer his children quickly when they call, grants to them what he knows are foolish requests, permits them to decry his inactivity, and even allows them to call him to account when he behaves in a puzzling way. God does not only instruct his flock in what is right, but labors to encourage them to do good, even offering them promises—treats (as it were)—to stimulate them, and then willingly accepts and rewards their works even though blemished by manifest sin. Even when he threatens to punish the rebellious daughter or son, he often lessens or withholds that punishment because his fatherly love moves him toward tenderness. Furthermore, he strives in numerous ways to lighten the burden his people have to bear.

⁹³ I am indebted to Timothy Trumper, assistant professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, PA (U.S.A.), for pointing out to me how important the theme of

By acting in these ways, God submits himself to the timidity, sluggishness, stupidity and arrogance of his church even when it is to his own embarrassment in order that he may care for them, guide them and, ultimately, have a relationship with them.

The picture that Calvin paints also involves a God who seems less than omnipotent in practice. In this strand of Calvin's thought, God does not wield his absolute power to bring about the outcomes he desires, but instead labors under and allows his actions to be influenced by many of the same conditions and constraints to which his creatures are subject. Thus, it appears that he *must* accommodate himself to his children. Just as a father uses different approaches with each of his children, adjusting himself according to what works and what does not, so God seems to have subjected himself to the same limitations.

Though this is not a typical rendering of Calvin's theology, it is no doubt an intriguing one and one that is not entirely lacking in biblical justification, when the reader considers the peculiarities (which seem at times to be more the rule than the exception) that may be observed in God's interactions with his people throughout Old Testament history. But, to be sure, it is a portrait that needs further elucidation. What we have provided is only a glimpse of the matter. Nevertheless, in this sketch, Calvin's accommodating God appears not so much as a Grand Orator but as a Grand Shepherd (or even a Grand Parent), one who, with respect to each of his own, "treats it according to its capacity."⁹⁴

fatherhood is in Calvin's thought.

⁹⁴ CO 37: 15; CTS *Isaiah*, 3, 216.

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