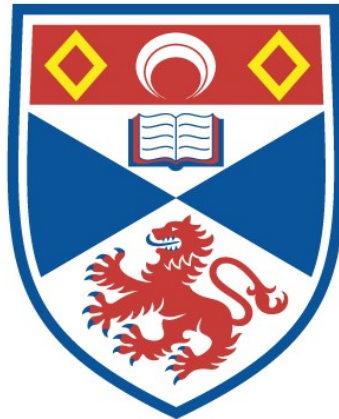


GOD'S DISPOSITION TOWARD HUMANITY IN THE  
THEOLOGY OF JOHN CALVIN: ONE WILL OR TWO? AN  
ANALYSIS OF CALVIN'S TEACHING ON THE KNOWLEDGE  
OF GOD, PREDESTINATION, AND THE ATONEMENT

Forrest H. Buckner

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews



2015

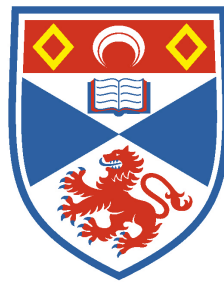
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***God's Disposition Toward Humanity in the Theology of  
John Calvin: One Will or Two? An Analysis of Calvin's  
Teaching on the Knowledge of God, Predestination,  
and the Atonement***

Forrest H. Buckner



University of  
St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews

14 May 2015



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## **Abstract**

In the course of this study, we find that for Calvin, God has one righteous will that is expressed as two, decidedly asymmetrical dispositions toward humanity. For Calvin, the only God that can be known, proclaimed, and trusted is God the Father, the God of creation, election and redemption who relates to his people according to his fatherly love; for reasons known only to him, God inexplicably creates some whom he does not rescue from their sinful state of rebellion against him. We first examine Calvin's teaching on the knowledge of God and discover that God has revealed his unchanging nature to those with faith. God's loving, righteous, wise, good, powerful, judging (of evil), and holy nature is exhibited in creation and providence, in Scripture, and most of all in Christ. We next explore Calvin's teaching on predestination and discover that God's one, secret, righteous will is expressed in two, decidedly asymmetrical wills toward humanity: (1) God's disclosed electing will that directly corresponds with God's nature and is extended to all but only effected in the elect; (2) God's veiled reprobating will toward the reprobate that, from the human perspective, only corresponds to God's nature in part. We continue by examining Calvin's teaching on the reconciling work of Christ, finding that, for Calvin, creation and redemption clearly exhibit God's disclosed disposition toward humanity while demonstrating God's veiled disposition only in very small part. We then provide constructive analysis in three related areas: (1) Calvin's teaching on the intra-trinitarian relations, (2) the locus of mystery in Calvin's, Arminius', and Barth's accounts of predestination, and (3) the reclaimed logic of Mosaic sacrifice in relation to Calvin's atonement teaching. In the context of a concluding summary, we consider three biblical accounts that depict God as possessing one rather than two dispositions toward humanity.



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## **Abbreviations**

<i>CD</i>	Karl Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i> , 4 vols. in 13 parts, trans. G. F. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1975).
<i>ST</i>	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologica</i> , 5 vols., trans. Fathers of the Dominican Province (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1948).
<i>Tabula</i>	Theodorus Beza, <i>Summa Totius Christianismi</i> , in <i>Tractationes Theologicae</i> , 3 vols., (Geneva: 1570-82), 1:170-205; Theodore Beza, <i>A Brieve Declaration of the Chief Points of Christian Religion</i> , trans. William Whittingham (London: Tho, 1613).

### **Works by John Calvin**

<i>1538 Catechism</i>	“Catechism 1538,” trans. F. L. Battles, in <i>Calvin’s First Catechism</i> , ed. I. John Hesselink, p. 1-38 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).
<i>BLW</i>	John Calvin, <i>The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defence of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice Against Pighius</i> , ed. A. N. S. Lane, trans. G. I. Davies, Texts & Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996).
<i>Congrégation</i> <i>CO</i>	<i>Congrégation sur l’élection éternelle de Dieu.</i> <i>Ioannis Calvinii Opera quae supersunt Omnia</i> , ed. Wilhelm Braum, Edward Cunitz and Edward Reuss, 59 vols. <i>Corpus Reformatorum</i> : vols 29-87 (Brunswick: Schwetchke, 1863-1900).
<i>CTS</i>	<i>Calvin’s Commentaries</i> , 45 vols (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-1856).
<i>De Aeterna</i>	<i>Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God</i> , trans. J.K.S. Reid (London: James Clark, 1961).
<i>Harmony of Moses</i> <i>Harmony of Gospels</i>	<i>Harmony of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.</i> <i>Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke.</i>
<i>Sermons on Ephesians</i>	John Calvin, <i>Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians</i> (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973).
<i>Inst.</i>	<i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> , ed. J.T. McNeill, trans. F.L. Battles, 2 vols (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

## **Chapter 1—ONE DISPOSITION OR TWO? FRAMING THE QUESTION**

On 1 December 1551, Swiss Reformer Heinrich Bullinger wrote his friend John Calvin, “Now believe me, many are offended by your statements on predestination in your *Institutes*...it is my opinion that the Apostles touched on this sublime matter only briefly, and not unless compelled to do so and even in such circumstances they were cautious that the pious were not thereby offended, but understood God to desire well for all people [*omnibus hominibus*] and in Christ to offer [them] salvation...”<sup>1</sup> Bullinger highlights a topic that has been a question in Reformed theology since its beginning, namely God’s disposition toward humanity.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, in light of the Reformed teaching that God’s grace can only be received through God’s empowering, it appears that God has one disposition (of love) toward the elect and a different disposition (of just hatred) toward the reprobate. On the other hand, the Bible’s teaching on God’s love for all people along with the Reformed commitment to preach the gospel to all seem to indicate that God is of one disposition toward all humanity, namely, paraphrasing Bullinger’s words, desiring well for all people.

Some Reformed divines have determined that God has two separate and opposite dispositions toward human beings based on their identity as elect or reprobate. As a stark example, John Owen explains that God gives temporal good things “to the very people that He hates, whom he has a fixed determination to punish, and whom He has declared to be reserved for eternal punishment and destruction” not because God is trying to reveal his love to them; on the contrary, “as sovereign, [God] is fattening them up for the coming day of slaughter [*diem mactationis*].”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *CO* 14:215. Translation from Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 206-207.

<sup>2</sup> As Heiko Oberman says, “The history of theology can well be written in terms of a constant effort to reconcile and relate God’s love and God’s wrath,” Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, Third ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1983), 186.

<sup>3</sup> John Owen, *Biblical Theology*, trans. Stephen P. Westcott (Pittsburgh, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1994), 78-79. Latin: John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 17 (Edinburgh: 1850-1855), 76.

Karl Barth responded to such teaching in the Reformed tradition by asserting that God is of one disposition toward humanity, as revealed in Jesus Christ. Barth says,

We cannot say that God ordains equally and symmetrically as man's end both good and evil, both life and death, both his own glory and the darkening of this glory...Without overlooking or denying the accompanying shadow we will, in fact, speak of God only as Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer; as the One from whom only a **good** gift [*nur gute Gabe*] can only be expected. The concept which so hampered the traditional doctrine was that of an equilibrium or balance in which blessedness was ordained and declared on the right hand and perdition on the left. This concept we must oppose with all the emphasis of which we are capable.<sup>4</sup>

In light of this dilemma, we set our sights on Calvin's understanding of God's disposition toward humanity. Although Calvin is just one voice in the variegated Reformed tradition, the lucid brevity of his writing, his non-speculative and pastoral methodology, and his commitment to carefully interpret Scripture have resulted in Calvin's ongoing vitality in Reformed theology. Understanding his teaching on God's disposition toward humanity would thus be beneficial for contemporary Reformed churches and theologians. Before providing a preview of what lies ahead, I shall explicate the scope of the project and provide a few important definitions.

### ***SCOPE OF THE PROJECT***

A study of a theologian as prolific as Calvin necessarily requires clarity as to the scope of one's research and exposition. Here I shall explain the key decisions regarding the scope of this project before defining two important concepts.

First, although an analysis of Calvin's interrelations with others in the Reformed or broader Christian tradition regarding God's disposition toward humanity would be worthwhile, in order to let Calvin's voice be heard, this analysis focuses on Calvin himself. When Calvin clearly refers to another theologian, his

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<sup>4</sup> *CD* II/2, p. 171; *KD*, p. 187. My translation in part. Emphasis orig.

reliance is noted, but since Calvin's use of sources is difficult to track,<sup>5</sup> we shall primarily rely upon Calvin's direct teaching.

Second, as valuable as it would be, this is not a chronicle of the development of Calvin's thought, but instead an integrated account of his theology as it is known through his extant writings. Accordingly, we shall engage with Calvin's commentaries, sermons, and occasional writings alongside the 1559 mature Latin version of the *Institutes*.<sup>6</sup> In agreement with recent developments in Calvin scholarship, we shall thus draw from Calvin's teaching across his corpus instead of giving primacy to the *Institutes* at the expense of his exegetical work.<sup>7</sup>

Third, we shall focus our efforts on relevant primary sources. Within Calvin's broad corpus, we have necessarily selected writings in which Calvin specifically addresses the topics at hand. As a result, we have engaged little with Calvin's sermons and even less with his letters. Further analysis of our findings about God's disposition toward humanity in Calvin's letters and sermons would be an excellent task for future Calvin research. Besides Calvin's work, significant secondary literature has been consulted throughout the project. However, no claims have been made that all existing secondary literature has been examined. Doing so would have overwhelmed the footnotes and likely distracted from our task of seeking *Calvin's* understanding of God's disposition toward humanity.

Finally, this is primarily a project in historical theology, not constructive theology. Although I shall note questions for further consideration and possible contradictions, the bulk of the project in Chapters 2-4 is a synthetic exposition of Calvin's teaching itself. Instead of taking Calvin's theology as a means to a

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. A. N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> The Latin title is *Institutio Christianae Religionis in Libros Quator*. *Institutio* is in the singular and has the inherent meaning of foundation or groundwork, as in a building. Thus, a more appropriate English translation might be "The Foundation of the Christian Religion in Four Books." Although the Latin title is singular, as a result of its four volumes, *Institutes* has become the popular English rendering, which I shall utilize throughout.

<sup>7</sup> For Calvin, the *Institutes* are not a modern systematic theology or a comprehensive account of all of his theological endeavors. Calvin told his readers (Christians, particularly ministers in training), that the *Institutes* should be a guide for reading Scripture as well as a place for Calvin to take up "doctrinal discussions" (*disputationes*) and "commonplaces" (*loci communes*), *Inst.* "Letter to the Reader," p. 4-5; *CO* 2:1-4. Cf. David Gibson, *Reading the Decree: Exegesis, Election and Christology in Calvin and Barth* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 155-156. Cf. Richard Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 101-117. In short, the *Institutes* and the commentaries have a mutually-informing, symbiotic relationship and will be engaged accordingly.

preconceived theological end, I have sought to explicate Calvin's teaching as faithfully as possible. This includes giving Calvin the benefit of letting his teaching be heard, even when apparent contradictions result. In Chapter 5, I provide limited constructive analysis of Calvin's teaching, but this project leaves room for future constructive endeavors building upon Calvin's teaching.

Having established the scope of the project, we now define two fundamental terms for our use, namely disposition and will. First, by "disposition," we mean God's attitude, inclination, or orientation toward humanity. Specifically, we seek to discern if Calvin teaches that God's disposition toward humanity is one of love toward all or love toward some and dislike (or hatred) toward others.

Second, unless made clear by specific context, "God's will" refers to God's purpose or intent. God's will and disposition are closely related, but God's will implies an action whereas disposition indicates an attitude. For example, God's electing will describes the way God acts in election in accordance with God's loving disposition toward the elect. Note that we are not speaking about God's will in regards to his directives (e.g. God's will for my life to attend a certain university or God's will that the gospel should be preached to all) or his providential rule over the universe (e.g. God's ultimate willing of everything that comes to pass).<sup>8</sup> Also, consistent with Calvin's non-speculative and pastoral methodology, we are not discussing the multiple distinctions within God's one will that were intricately developed in the era of Reformed orthodoxy.<sup>9</sup>

With this scope and these definitions in mind, we now consider an overview of the project ahead.

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<sup>8</sup> E.g. Muller notes a distinction between God's revealed will (preach the gospel to all) and his ultimate or effectual will (not all are saved), Richard Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 105. Cf. Paul Helm, "Calvin, Indefinite Language, and Definite Atonement," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2013), 112.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, Ca. 1520 to Ca. 1725*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 443-475.

**PREVIEW: GOD'S TWO ASYMMETRICAL DISPOSITIONS TOWARD  
HUMANITY**

Our task is to determine God's disposition toward humanity in Calvin's theology. We shall do so by examining his teaching on the knowledge of God, predestination, and the atonement: (1) the knowledge of God because it reveals what we can know about God and how we come to that knowledge; (2) predestination because it is the doctrine that most explicitly reveals and informs the distinction between the elect and reprobate; and (3) the atonement because it describes the person and work of Christ in which God has most clearly revealed his disposition toward humanity.

In Chapter 2, we examine Calvin's teaching on the knowledge of God. We discover there that God can only be known by those with faith according to the ways he has accommodated himself to humanity in creation and providence, in Scripture, and most clearly in Christ. According to Calvin's non-speculative and pastoral methodology, he teaches that believers can have limited, skeletal knowledge of God's essential attributes and fleshed-out knowledge of God's relative attributes, or "powers" (*virtutes*), which describe God's unchanging nature. Therefore, since there is no neutral knowledge of God, any question about God's disposition toward humanity can only be asked in relation to the God who has made himself known to the faithful as loving, righteous, judging (of evil), powerful, wise, good, and holy.<sup>10</sup>

In Chapter 3, we discern God's disposition toward humanity in Calvin's teaching on predestination. In short, we find that God's one, secret, righteous will is accommodated to the elect in a two-fold but asymmetrical manner, namely as God's disclosed electing will extended to all humanity and effected in the elect and as God's veiled reprobating will toward the reprobate. God's electing disposition toward humanity is comprehensibly known by the faithful and corresponds directly with his nature, whereas God's reprobating disposition is exclusively known as a bare fact and corresponds to God's nature only in part.

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<sup>10</sup> As we shall see, this is not a comprehensive list.

In Chapter 4, we discover what Calvin teaches about God's disposition toward humanity in the atonement. In a survey of Calvin's biblically based account of creation, the fall, and Christ's multifaceted and complete reconciling work, we see that God's disclosed will of love toward all humanity is clearly manifest while God's veiled will is only seen in small part, namely in God's willing of the fall and in God's judgment on those who do not receive Christ's righteousness by faith.

In Chapter 5, we engage in a critical discussion in three areas: the Trinity, predestination, and sacrifice. First we examine what Calvin specifically teaches about the intra-trinitarian life of God and what possibilities Calvin leaves open for biblical and constructive depictions of the trinitarian "relations." Second, we provide a comparative analysis of Calvin's, Arminius', and Barth's teaching on predestination and find that all three accounts necessarily include a locus of mystery, albeit in different dogmatic locations. Third, we draw upon recent Hebrew Bible scholarship to demonstrate that an improved understanding of the logic of Mosaic sacrifice would have made Calvin's teaching more consistent and helped free him from a portrayal of God as an irate deity who is only placated by blood.

In the end, we find that according to Calvin's teaching, God has one righteous will that is expressed as two, decidedly asymmetrical dispositions toward humanity. For Calvin, the only God that can be known, proclaimed, and trusted is God the Father, the God of creation, election and redemption who relates to his people according to his fatherly love; for reasons known only to him, he inexplicably creates some whom he does not rescue from their sinful state of rebellion against him.

We begin our inquiry with what Calvin teaches can be known about God.



## **Chapter 2—THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD: GOD'S REVEALED NATURE**

The final goal of the blessed life, moreover, rests in the knowledge of God.<sup>1</sup>

The most perfect way of seeking God...is not for us to attempt with bold curiosity to penetrate to the investigation of his essence, which we ought more to adore than meticulously to search out, but for us to contemplate him in his works whereby he renders himself near and familiar to us, and in some manner communicates himself.<sup>2</sup>

This is the rule of sound and legitimate and profitable knowledge, to be content with the measure of revelation, and willingly to be ignorant of what is deeper than this. We must indeed advance in the acquisition of divine instruction, but we must so keep in the way as to follow the guidance of God.<sup>3</sup>

In our quest to understand Calvin's teaching regarding God's disposition toward humanity, we begin with an examination of Calvin's doctrine of God in order to discern, according to Calvin, what we can know about God and how we arrive at that knowledge. We shall find that the knowledge of God, though offered to all, is only accessible to those who have faith, which, in turn, is inevitably connected to piety. Secondly, we shall discover how the majestic, invisible God provides knowledge of himself to finite human creatures, namely through God's accommodation of himself to human capacity. Finally, it will become clear that the content of the knowledge of God which is accessible to believers is a practical and experienced knowledge of God's nature (or character) alongside a limited, skeletal knowledge of God's essence. In sum, we come to see that for Calvin, a reliable, practical knowledge of God's nature and skeletal knowledge of God's essence is available only to those who have faith in Christ as they receive God's accommodation of himself to humanity, primarily through God's works as interpreted and revealed in Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> *Inst.* 1.5.1, p. 51; *CO* 2:41.

<sup>2</sup> *Inst.* 1.5.9, p. 62; *CO* 2:47.

<sup>3</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Ex. 33:18; *CO* 25:108.

We shall examine the knowledge of God in Calvin's teaching in three parts, answering the questions: Who is able to receive knowledge of God and how? How does God communicate about himself? What is the content of God's self-communication? We shall conclude by discussing a few key implications in regards to our question of God's disposition toward humanity.

### ***WHO CAN KNOW: THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD OFFERED TO ALL BUT ONLY RECEIVED BY THE FAITHFUL***

In this section, we shall explore Calvin's interpretation of Scripture's teaching regarding who is able to access the knowledge of God and how they are able to appropriate that knowledge. First, we shall examine Calvin's assertions regarding the universal access of the knowledge of God. Then we shall explore Calvin's explicit doorway to right knowledge of God, namely pious faith in the Mediator.

#### **Universal Access to Knowledge of God: Receptive Capabilities Corrupted by the Fall**

Although Calvin titles the first book of the *Institutes* as the "Knowledge of God the Creator," it quickly becomes apparent that the knowledge of God that is mediated through God's creation and sustenance of creation is not in and of itself sufficient for accurate creaturely apprehension of God. In *Institutes* 1.3-5, Calvin directly addresses the knowledge of God the Creator that can be obtained without faith, as displayed in his intentional avoidance of the use of Scripture; "Now I have only wanted to touch upon the fact that this way of seeking God is common both to strangers and those of his household [*exteris et domesticis*]." <sup>4</sup> Besides a few other brief subsections, <sup>5</sup> these are the only chapters in the *Institutes* that describe the knowledge of God outside the interpretive lens of Scripture as apprehended by faith. In pursuing our question of God's disposition toward humanity, we shall

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<sup>4</sup> *Inst.* 1.5.6, p. 59; *CO* 2:46. Within these chapters, we also discover a concentration of Calvin's overt appeals to the pagan philosophers, including Plato, Cicero, Statius, Aristotle, and Plutarch, as opposed to his typical appeals to Scripture.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. *Inst.* 2.7.8, 10-16; *CO* 2:259-265, regarding the way the law terrifies and restrains unbelievers.

examine Calvin's argument in 1.3-5 in order to discern the extent to which Calvin teaches that those without faith can access knowledge of God. We shall find that although God has made himself known to all people both inwardly and through his works of creation and sustenance of that creation, such knowledge can only be rightly interpreted through Scripture and received by faith via the work of the Spirit.

In chapters 3 and 4, Calvin discusses the knowledge of God that is native to human existence. In God's first action toward humanity, he created humans to know him. Through the awareness of divinity (*sensus divinitatis*)<sup>6</sup>, which God placed in every human being, "men<sup>7</sup> one and all perceive that there is a God."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, all people contain the seed of religion (*semen religionis*),<sup>9</sup> which, "if Adam [and Eve] had remained upright" (*si integer stetisset Adam*), would have led humanity to right knowledge of God from his works in the created order.<sup>10</sup> Instead, because of the sinful corruption of human nature, the *sensus divinitatis* and *semen religionis* only lead humans to curiosity and empty speculations. Thus, "They do not therefore apprehend [*non apprehendunt*] God as he offers himself, but imagine him as they have fashioned him in their own presumption,"<sup>11</sup> resulting in various forms of idolatry or direct attempts to deny God's existence.<sup>12</sup> When life gets difficult, some people half-heartedly seek God in order to appease their fear of God's judgment, yet they still fundamentally trust in themselves instead of God. Thus, the "seed remains...that there is some sort of divinity; but this seed is so corrupted that by itself it produces only the worst fruits."<sup>13</sup> In short, according to Calvin, God has placed a witness to himself in the heart of every person that informs them of God's majesty and partially reveals to them their sinfulness, but because of sin, that seed never sprouts to true knowledge of God.

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<sup>6</sup> *Inst.* 1.3.1, p. 43; *CO* 2:36. Calvin also uses *sensus deitatis*, as in *Inst.* 1.3.3, p. 46; *CO* 2:38.

<sup>7</sup> Although I shall maintain the non-inclusive language of the CTS translations of Calvin's works, "men" in these passages connotes humankind.

<sup>8</sup> *Inst.* 1.3.1, p. 44; *CO* 2:36.

<sup>9</sup> *Inst.* 1.3.1, p. 44; *CO* 2:36. Cf. *Inst.* 1.4.1, p. 47; *CO* 2:38.

<sup>10</sup> *Inst.* 1.2.1, p. 40; *CO* 2:34.

<sup>11</sup> *Inst.* 1.4.1, p. 47; *CO* 2:38. Cf. *Comm. John* 1:5; *CO* 47:6.

<sup>12</sup> *Inst.* 1.4.2-3, p. 48-49; *CO* 2:39-40.

<sup>13</sup> *Inst.* 1.4.4, p. 51; *CO* 2:41. Calvin identifies some of these fruits as vice and superstition in *Comm. John* 1:5; *CO* 47:6.

Calvin then turns in chapter 5 to God's revelation of himself through his creating and ruling the universe. Affirming the fact that the blessed life (*beata vita*) is situated in the knowledge of God, Calvin offers a second way that God has made knowledge of himself available to all; "Lest anyone, then, be excluded from access to happiness [*felicitem*], [God] not only sowed in men's minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him."<sup>14</sup> Further, in his comments on Romans 1:20, Calvin says, "God is in himself invisible; but as his majesty shines forth in his works and in his creatures everywhere, men ought in these to acknowledge [*agnoscere*] him, for they clearly set forth their Maker."<sup>15</sup> Thus God's wisdom is available even to the "most untutored and ignorant persons," and through the magnificence of the heavens and the beauty, symmetry, and articulation of the human body, "there is no one to whom the Lord does not abundantly show his wisdom."<sup>16</sup>

Not only has God revealed himself in his works of creating the universe as a "theater of his glory,"<sup>17</sup> he also discloses himself in his providential care for the created order. Calvin says that the cause of God's creating and preserving his creation "is his goodness [*bonitatem*] alone. But this being the sole cause, it ought still to be more than sufficient to draw us to his love, inasmuch as there is no creature, as the prophet declares, upon whom God's mercy has not been poured out."<sup>18</sup> God's revelation of himself in his providential rule is not limited to sustenance of the natural order, but he also reveals his power and wisdom in his administration of human society and providential care for sinners that recalls them to his "fatherly kindness" (*paterna indulgentia*).<sup>19</sup>

However, just as in the case of the inner revelation of God through the sense of divinity, God's external revelation of himself to humanity, though more than sufficient in itself, is unable to find reception in human hearts and minds. Instead

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<sup>14</sup> *Inst.* 1.5.1, p. 52; *CO* 2:42. Cf. *Comm. Heb.* 11:3; *CO* 55:145-146.

<sup>15</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 1:20; *CO* 49:23.

<sup>16</sup> *Inst.* 1.5.2, p. 53; *CO* 2:43.

<sup>17</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 11:3; *CO* 55:146. Cf. *Inst.* 1.6.1, 1.14.20, p. 180; *CO* 2:131. Cf. 2.6.1, p. 341; *CO* 2:247.

<sup>18</sup> *Inst.* 1.5.6, p. 59; *CO* 2:46.

<sup>19</sup> *Inst.* 1.5.7, p. 60; *CO* 2:46.

of rightly seeking God, all people “became instantly vain in their imaginations, so that they groped in the dark, having in their thoughts a mere shadow of some uncertain deity, and not the knowledge of the true God.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, “the manifestation of God, by which he makes his glory known in his creation, is with regard to the light itself, sufficiently clear [*satis evidentem*]; but that on account of our blindness, it is not found to be sufficient [*non adeo sufficere*]. We are not however so blind that we can plead our ignorance as an excuse for our perverseness.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, because of the sinful state of humanity, God’s revelation in creation does not in actuality “signify such a manifestation as men’s discernment can comprehend; but, rather, shows it not to go farther than to render them inexcusable.”<sup>22</sup>

Although God has placed sufficient revelation of himself both in human hearts and in his creation of and ruling over the universe, sinful humans can only rightly apprehend that knowledge through faith and Scripture by the illuminating work of the Spirit. Calvin summarizes his argument in his commentary on Hebrews, “Men’s minds therefore are wholly blind, so that they see not the light of nature which shines forth in created things, until being irradiated by God’s Spirit, they begin to understand [*intelligere*] by faith what otherwise they could never grasp [*capere*].”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, as he nears the end of his exploration of the knowledge of God outside of faith in the *Institutes*, Calvin says, “the invisible divinity is made manifest in [God’s creative works], but...we have not the eyes to see this unless they be illumined by the inner revelation of God through faith.”<sup>24</sup>

Along with faith, we need Scripture to come to right knowledge of God. Calvin points out that although God has “set forth to all without exception” his presence in his creation, “it is needful that another and better help [*adminiculum*] be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe.” Thus, just as spectacles [*specilla*] allow an old man with weak eyes to read, “so Scripture, gathering up the

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<sup>20</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 11:3; *CO* 55:145.

<sup>21</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 1:20; *CO* 49:24. Cf. *Comm. Heb.* 11:3; *CO* 55:146. Cf. B. B. Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge God,” *The Princeton Theological Review* (1909): 234-235.

<sup>22</sup> *Inst.* 1.5.14, p. 68; *CO* 2:52. Cf. *Comm. Heb.* 11:3, *CO* 55:146.

<sup>23</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 11:3; *CO* 55:145. My translation. There Calvin also simply states, “It is by faith alone we know that it was God who created the world.” Cf. *Comm. John* 1:9; *CO* 47:9. Cf. Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine the Knowledge of God,” 237.

<sup>24</sup> *Inst.* 1.5.14, p. 68, *CO* 2:52. Cf. *Comm. 2 Cor.* 4:4; *CO* 50:51. Cf. *Inst.* 2.6.1; *CO* 2:247-248.

otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly [*liquido*] shows us the true God.”<sup>25</sup> Scripture, which receives its authority from God by the Spirit,<sup>26</sup> is the only source “of right and sound doctrine” (*rectae sanaeque doctrinae*), and from it “emerges the beginning of true understanding when we reverently embrace what it pleases God there to witness of himself.”<sup>27</sup>

For Calvin, Scripture and faith have a symbiotic relationship. Although God’s majesty is on display for all to see in Scripture, only believers, “who have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit have eyes to perceive.” Calvin proceeds to say that the primary content of what we are to learn from the Scriptures is faith.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, Scripture rightly witnesses to faith in Christ while being accessible only by faith in Christ to those who have been given eyes to see by the Spirit.

In sum, Calvin argues that God has sufficiently put forth knowledge of himself to all people through the *sensus divinitatis* and *semen religionis* in all humans and through his works of creation and providential rule over creation. However sin has so blinded the eyes of all humanity that God’s self-witness only leads to idolatry or the denial of God’s existence as humans chase their vain religious speculations. Only through the Spirit’s working in the inner revelation of God through faith and by means of the spectacles of Scripture do people come to true knowledge of God. In the *Institutes*, Calvin thus completes his exploration of the knowledge of God outside of faith in 1.5 and proceeds to discuss what can be known from Scripture as seen with eyes of faith, namely God’s self-witness to himself through his works as Creator and Redeemer. Therefore, the two-fold knowledge of God that Calvin puts forth as a possibility for humans is not a neutral revelation to all people through Creation and a special revelation to the elect through Christ’s work of redemption. On the contrary, although God has revealed himself to all humanity, it is only those with faith who are able to receive any revelation of God aright.

With this in mind, we now turn to explore more closely this means of obtaining knowledge of God.

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<sup>25</sup> *Inst.* 1.6.1, p. 69-70; *CO* 2:53. Cf. *Comm. Gen.*, “Argument”; *CO* 23:9-10. Cf. *Inst.* 1.14.1; *CO* 2:117.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Inst.* 1.7, p. 74-81; *CO* 2:56-61.

<sup>27</sup> *Inst.* 1.6.2, p. 72; *CO* 2:54.

<sup>28</sup> *Comm. 2 Tim.* 3:16; *CO* 52:383-384.

## Human Access to the Knowledge of God

As only those with faith are able to apprehend aright the knowledge of God that he offers all people, we shall now briefly examine Calvin's characterization of this faith. Discussing the foundations of human knowledge of God, Calvin says, "Here indeed is pure and real religion [*pura germanaque religio*]: faith so joined with an earnest fear of God that this fear also embraces willing reverence, and carries with it such legitimate worship as is prescribed in the law."<sup>29</sup> Thus Calvin lays out the two key human elements in the right reception of God's revelation of himself, namely faith in Christ and piety. We shall briefly explore them here.

### Faith in the Mediator: the Doorway to Knowledge of God

In his exposition of John 1:18 ("No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only has made him known"), Calvin says, "The knowledge of God is the door [*ianua*] by which we enter into the enjoyment of all blessings [*bonorum*]; and it is by Christ alone that God makes himself known [*patefaciat*], hence too it follows that we ought to seek all things from Christ. This order of doctrine is to be carefully observed."<sup>30</sup> Using *patefacio*<sup>31</sup> as a word picture, Calvin describes God as throwing open the door of the knowledge of himself through Christ's mediation alone. For Calvin, true knowledge of God is only possible through faith in Christ the Mediator.<sup>32</sup>

Calvin's comments on 1 Peter 1:21 illustrate the two key roles that faith in Christ the Mediator plays in our knowledge of God: Christ gives us a concrete object of faith through whom we rise to God,<sup>33</sup> and Christ the Mediator assures us that we sinners can confidently approach the majestic God as his children, instead

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<sup>29</sup> *Inst.* 1.2.2, p. 43; *CO* 2:35.

<sup>30</sup> *Comm. John* 1:18; *CO* 47:19.

<sup>31</sup> Literally, "to throw open."

<sup>32</sup> As Pitkin says, for Calvin, "all true knowledge of God is through knowledge of God's saving activity in Christ," Barbara Pitkin, *What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin's Doctrine of Faith in Its Exegetical Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Comm. John* 14:1; *CO* 47:321-322. Cf. *Inst.* 3.2.6, p. 548; *CO* 2:401. Cf. *Comm. John* 17:3; *CO* 47:376-377. Cf. *Inst.* 2.6.4, p. 346-347; *CO* 2:251-252. Cf. Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11.2.

of cowering before him.<sup>34</sup> In sum, for Calvin, faith in Christ is the only means of approaching God and gaining right knowledge of God.<sup>35</sup>

Having seen that faith in Christ is the entryway to proper knowledge of God, we now turn to explore faith's partner in one's approach to God, namely the fear of God, or piety.

### **Lived Knowledge: The Necessity of Piety**

For Calvin, piety necessarily accompanies faith in the acquisition of right knowledge of God as an embodied result of that knowledge. Calvin says, "We shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known where there is no religion or piety [*pietas*]." <sup>36</sup> He there defines *pietas* as "that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces [*conciat*]." <sup>37</sup> In his 1545 Geneva Catechism, Calvin similarly defines the love for God as "recognizing him as at once our Lord, and Father, and Preserver," which is to be joined with a "reverence for him, a willingness to obey him, trust to be placed in him." <sup>38</sup> Right knowledge of God as apprehended by faith necessarily results in trust in, love for, and obedience toward God.

Although it can appear at times that Calvin teaches that piety is a prerequisite for right knowledge of God,<sup>39</sup> a close look at the reformer's writings reveals that Calvin is explicating the insoluble connection between right knowledge of God and a worshipful, obedient life in a manner that highlights their correct order, namely that the knowledge of God is received by grace alone and necessarily results in piety.<sup>40</sup> Calvin's piety is not only individual but has communal and social aspects as well, as seen in his teaching on the Lord's Supper, in which believers are united

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<sup>34</sup> *Comm. 1 Peter* 1:21; *CO* 55:227. Cf. *Harmony of the Gospels*, Matt. 6:9; *CO* 45:196. Cf. *Comm. John* 1:16; *CO* 47:16-18. Cf. *Comm. John* 15:9; *CO* 47:342.

<sup>35</sup> Even human relationship with God in the Old Testament were mediated through Christ, though the visible means of relationship were the sacrifices and the Law, *Inst.* 2.6.2, p. 343; *CO* 2:248-249.

<sup>36</sup> *Inst.* 1.2.1, p. 39; *CO* 2:34.

<sup>37</sup> *Inst.* 1.2.1, p. 41; *CO* 2:34.

<sup>38</sup> John Calvin, "Catechism of the Church of Geneva, 1545," in *Tracts, Vol. 2*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, (Calvin Translation Society), Q218; *CO* 6:78.

<sup>39</sup> E.g. *Inst.* 1.6.2, p. 72; *CO* 2:54-55; *Inst.* 1.2.1, p. 39; *CO* 2:34; *Inst.* 1.4.4, p. 50; *CO* 2:40.

<sup>40</sup> The same concept can be observed in Calvin's teaching on sanctification, which is both a completed gift in Christ *and* lived out through a lifelong process of regeneration by the Spirit. Cf. *Inst.* 3.15.5-6; *CO* 2:582-584. See Chapter 4.



with Christ and thus with each other as part of his one body.<sup>41</sup> Calvin says that the “sacred bread of the Lord’s Supper is spiritual food, as sweet and delicate as it is healthful for pious worshipers of God, who, in tasting it, feel that Christ is their life, whom it moves to thanksgiving, for whom it is an exhortation to mutual love among themselves.”<sup>42</sup> Here we see all the elements of piety that inseparably flow from right knowledge of God as these pious worshipers approach the table with faith in the true God. As they experience the benefits of Christ, they properly express their piety in thanksgiving to God and in love for others.

Dowey summarizes well, “For [Calvin] the religious or existential response is not something that may or may not come in addition to knowledge of God, but is part of its very definition.”<sup>43</sup> For Calvin, true knowledge of God is inseparable from obedient reverence toward, trust in, and love for God.

In sum, for Calvin, although God extends the witness of himself to all people, the knowledge of God is accessed only by faith in Christ the Mediator which inevitably results in piety. Seeing who is able to grasp the knowledge of God, we now turn to examine *how* God reveals himself to those human creatures.

### ***HOW WE KNOW: GOD'S COMMUNICATION OF HIMSELF TO HUMANITY***

As we continue to seek Calvin’s teaching on the knowledge of God as it relates to God’s disposition toward humanity, we now turn to consider *how* God communicates the knowledge of himself to human creatures. A longer quote from Calvin here summarizes his teaching on human apprehension of God:

For how can the human mind measure [*definiat*] off the measureless essence of God [*immensam Dei essentiam*] according to its own little measure, a mind as yet unable to establish for certain the nature of the sun’s body, though men’s eyes daily gaze upon it? Indeed, how can the mind by its own leading come to search out God’s essence when it cannot even get to its own? Let us then willingly yield [*permittamus*] to God his knowledge [*sui cognitionem*]. For as Hilary says, he is the one fit witness to himself [*idoneus*]

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<sup>41</sup> *Inst.* 4.17.38; *CO* 2:1041. Cf. Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 30.

<sup>42</sup> *Inst.* 4.17.40; *CO* 2:1042.

<sup>43</sup> Edward A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 26.

*sibi testis*], and is not known except through himself [*per se*]. But we shall be 'yielding it to him' if we conceive him to be of such a kind as [*talem...qualem*] he reveals himself to us, without inquiring about him elsewhere than from his Word.<sup>44</sup>

For Calvin, the knowledge of God is not obtainable through human reason or inquiry. God can only be known because God has made himself known in a manner that humans can grasp. As Calvin says, "In short, God now presents himself to be seen [*conspiciendum*] by us, not such as he is [*non qualis est*], but such as we can comprehend [*qualem modulus noster eum capit*]. Thus is fulfilled what is said by Moses, that we see only as it were his back (Ex. 33:23), for there is too much brightness in his face."<sup>45</sup>

God accomplishes this self-revelation to humans through what Calvin often calls accommodation (*accommodare*).<sup>46</sup> As Kurt Richardson summarizes:

Calvin's view of revelation is that the knowledge imparted by any means to human beings is always an act of condescension on God's part in which he accommodates his own self-knowledge, or knowledge of creation as he made it and governs it, so that human beings may understand according to the conditions and contingencies of their knowing as human. God is otherwise and on his own terms incomprehensible according to the natural cognitive and speculative means and apertures of the body and mind.<sup>47</sup>

We shall first explain Calvin's logic for the necessity of accommodation, namely God's majesty and human limitations. Then we shall briefly examine the hierarchically structured means God uses to reveal himself to humanity: the created order, Scripture using human language, and most clearly, Jesus Christ.

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<sup>44</sup> *Inst.* 1.13.21, p. 146; *CO* 2:107. My translation. Cf. *Inst.* 1.4.1, p. 47; *CO* 2:41.

<sup>45</sup> *Comm. 1 John* 3:2; *CO* 55:331.

<sup>46</sup> With a similar meaning, Calvin also uses *attemperare*. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 1:19; *CO* 49:23.

<sup>47</sup> Kurt A. Richardson, "Calvin on the Trinity," in *John Calvin and Evangelical Theology: Legacy and Prospect*, ed. Sung Wook Chung, (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2009), 33. As Huijgen describes it, "Divine accommodation does not enlarge human capacity, but embraces humans in their limited capacity to lead them to the knowledge of God through the work of the Holy Spirit," Arnold Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation in John Calvin's Theology: Analysis and Assessment* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 292. Cf. Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 42. Cf. T. H. L. Parker, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1952), 51. Cf. Dowey, *Knowledge of God*, 17. Cf. F. L. Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," *Interpretation* 31, no. 1 (Jan 1977) 33.

Regarding the rhetorical dimensions of accommodation, see J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union With Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 36. Cf. E. David Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility in Calvin's Theology," in *The Context of Contemporary Theology*, ed. Alexander McKelway and E. David Willis, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), 48.

## The Majestic God and the Necessity of Accommodation

Accommodation is necessary because of God's majesty and human limitations. As Calvin says in his commentary on Romans, "God in his greatness can by no means be fully comprehended by us, and...there are certain limits within which men ought to confine themselves, inasmuch as God accommodates [*attemperat*] himself to our small capacities what he testifies of himself. Insane then are all they who seek to know of themselves what God is [*quid sit Deus*]." <sup>48</sup> Although we shall elaborate later on the content of the knowledge of God that Calvin teaches, here we briefly examine Calvin's teaching on God's majesty in relation to human limitations in order to understand why accommodation is necessary.

For Calvin, God's majesty is beyond human comprehension. Regarding God's majesty, Calvin commonly recalls 1 Tim 6:16, "God dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see."<sup>49</sup> For Calvin, God is infinite and spiritual (*immensus et spiritualis*) and thus inaccessible to creaturely knowing. As infinite, God exceeds the possibility of human senses or imagination. Because God is spiritual, humans are not allowed to imagine anything physical about God. He does not dwell on earth, "and yet as he is incomprehensible he also fills the earth itself."<sup>50</sup> Commenting on Psalm 104:1-2, Calvin says, "If men attempt to reach the heights of God, although they fly above the clouds, they must fail in the midst of their course. Those who search for God in his naked majesty [*in nuda sua maiestate*] are certainly very foolish."<sup>51</sup> In short, human limitations preclude their grasping God's majesty.<sup>52</sup>

These limitations on human access to God's majesty exist both because of Calvin's assumed ontological hierarchy and because of human sinfulness.<sup>53</sup> Highlighting Calvin's assumed hierarchy of being which elevates God above the spiritual angels who are in turn superior to embodied humanity, Huijgen points

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<sup>48</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 1:19, *CO* 49:23. We shall address Calvin's distinction between what God is (*quid sit Deus*) as unknowable to humans and God's nature (*qualis sit Deus*) as knowable below.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *Inst.* 1.6.3, p. 73; *CO* 2:55; *Inst.* 1.18.3, p. 234; *CO* 2:171; *Inst.* 3.2.1, p. 543, *CO* 2:398.

<sup>50</sup> *Inst.* 1.13.1, p. 121; *CO* 2:89.

<sup>51</sup> *Comm. Ps.* 104:1; *CO* 32:85. My translation. Cf. *Comm. 1 John* 2:23; *CO* 55:325. Cf. *Comm. Jer.* 50:25; *CO* 39:418.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 290.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. *Comm. 1 Tim.* 6:16; *CO* 52:332.

out according to Calvin's Genesis teaching, even before sin came into the world, God had to accommodate himself to corporeal humanity.<sup>54</sup> Regarding angels, Calvin says that "although the angels are said to see God's face in a more excellent manner than men, still they do not apprehend the immense perfection of his glory [*immensam gloriae perfectionem*], whereby they would be absorbed...For it must needs be that that incomprehensible brightness would bring us to nothing."<sup>55</sup> Thus, for Calvin, by nature of their corporeal being, humans cannot fully know God in his majesty.

Beyond the ontological barrier, the immense obstruction of human sinfulness also prevents humans from rightly perceiving God. When sinful humans apprehend God's life and light, the death and darkness that is within them is exposed.<sup>56</sup> For example, Calvin even chastises Moses for asking too much in his request to see God's glory; even though Moses asked with good intentions, his desire was "for more than is lawful or expedient" because if God granted Moses his desire, "it would be injurious and fatal to Moses."<sup>57</sup> In sum, for Calvin, God's immense glory cannot be comprehended, or even experienced, by limited and sinful human creatures.

However, even though we cannot know God in his glorious majesty, God has graciously chosen to accommodate himself to us by descending to us and limiting the light of his glory to match our humble capacity so that we might gradually attain to the knowledge of God for which we were created.<sup>58</sup>

In order to unfold Calvin's teaching on accommodation, we shall draw upon Huijgen's analogy of concentric circles that describe the levels of accommodation and the extent to which they reveal God: seeing the universe (outer circle), hearing the Word of God (more inward), touching (my addition) Christ the Mediator (inner circle). At the core is God who dwells in unapproachable light. Humans commune with God by the Spirit through Christ the Mediator as God's ultimate

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<sup>54</sup> Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 214-215.

<sup>55</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Ex. 33:20; CO 25:111. Cf. *Comm. Is.* 6:2, CO 36:128.

<sup>56</sup> *Comm. Is.* 6:5, CO 36:131. Cf. *Inst.* 1.1.3, p. 39; CO 2:33.

<sup>57</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Ex. 33:18; CO 25:108.

<sup>58</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Ex. 33:20; CO 25:111. Cf. *Inst.* 2.6.4, p. 346-347; CO 2:252.

accommodation of himself.<sup>59</sup> When considering this model of accommodation, it is important to recognize the interdependence of the circles as they all witness to God at the center. We shall now briefly explore these three levels of accommodation to develop Calvin's understanding of how God has made himself known to humanity.

### **Accommodation in and through Creation**

As have already seen, for Calvin, God has put forward in his works in the universe a clear witness to himself that can only be accessed by faith in Christ and through the spectacles of Scripture. Therefore, although God's accommodation of himself in the creation and sustenance of the universe is the most broadly visible revelation of God to humans, it is inseparably linked to the inner circles of Scripture and Christ. In short, the universe is a theater of God's glory which reveals God accurately when perceived via Scripture and Christ, by the Spirit.<sup>60</sup> As Calvin says in his comments on Psalm 104, God's essence is inaccessible, "but as he irradiates the whole world by his splendor, this is the garment in which He, who is hidden [*absconditus*] in himself, appears [*apparet*] in a manner visible [*visibilis*] to us." He goes on to say that to enjoy the sight of God, "we must cast our eyes upon the very beautiful fabric of the world in which he wishes to be seen by us."<sup>61</sup> We shall explore more fully below *what* God communicates through his accommodation of himself through his works in the universe, but for now we simply observe this outer circle of God's revelation of himself.

### **Accommodation in and through Scripture Using Human Language**

God also makes himself known to limited humans through Scripture, the next inner circle in Huijgen's accommodation diagram. Calvin explains, in Scripture "also emerges the beginning of true understanding when we reverently embrace

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<sup>59</sup> Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 305-312.

<sup>60</sup> *Inst.* 1.6.2, p. 72; *CO* 2:54. Cf. *Inst.* 1.14.20; *CO* 2:131. For a magnificent summary of Calvin's understanding of the interrelation of the knowledge of God as revealed in Christ and confirmed in God's works in the universe, see *Comm. Gen.* "Argument"; *CO* 23:9-12.

<sup>61</sup> *Comm. Ps.* 104:1-2; *CO* 32:85. Of course, this knowledge is only accessible by faith, *Comm. Ps.* 104:3-4; *CO* 32:86.

what it pleases God there to witness of himself.”<sup>62</sup> Again referring to God’s unapproachable light, Calvin says, “the splendor of the divine countenance [*vultus*]...is for us like an inexplicable labyrinth unless we are conducted into it by the thread of the Word [*verbi linea*].”<sup>63</sup> In Scripture, God makes himself known.

Since Calvin holds that all Scripture is directly inspired by God and self-authenticating,<sup>64</sup> an exegete may not pick apart Scripture as if some elements witness to God and others do not. Thus Huijgen describes, “We have to note that Calvin does not provide a theory of religious language, and the possibility of God-talk. He pictures the reverse movement: God employs human language to reveal himself.” Thus biblical language is not an account of experiences of God communicated in human language but actually “the way God presents Himself to human [*sic*] who otherwise cannot grasp Him.”<sup>65</sup>

However, in God’s self-presentation in Scripture, God still employs human language and concepts. Randall Zachman elucidates Calvin’s understanding of human language God’s accommodation in Scripture through a study of Calvin’s use of analogy and anagoge: “The method of divine accommodation, and hence of divine self-revelation, is understood by Calvin in terms of the analogy and anagoge between the sign and the reality signified, and...Calvin is therefore best understood when he is seen as an analogical and anagogical theologian.” Zachman then defines the terms, saying, “Analogy stresses the similarity amid difference between the sign and the reality signified, whereas anagoge stresses the elevation from the temporal sign to the spiritual reality it represents.”<sup>66</sup> God has given humanity visible images that are meant to be analogies by which we come to know God, which happens when we anagogically connect the earthly image to the eternal reality it depicts.

An example of Calvin’s teaching regarding analogy and anagoge comes from his comments on Jeremiah 23, where, speaking about Christ’s role as a wise and prudent king, he says, “And we know that Christ is often compared to earthly kings,

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<sup>62</sup> *Inst.* 1.6.2, p. 72; *CO* 2:54. Cf. *Comm. Is.* 40:18; *CO* 37:19.

<sup>63</sup> *Inst.* 1.6.3, p. 73; *CO* 2:55.

<sup>64</sup> *Inst.* 1.7.5, p. 80; *CO* 2:60.

<sup>65</sup> Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 271.

<sup>66</sup> Randall C. Zachman, “Calvin as Analogical Theologian,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51, (Jan 2009): 162.

or set forth to us under the image of an earthly king, in which we may see him; for God accommodates [*attemperat*] himself to our ignorance.” Thus, Calvin offers an analogy between earthly kings, which we know, and Christ as the heavenly king. Calvin goes on to point out that even though the analogy in human language and concepts is inadequate, “the comparison ought not to be deemed improper; for God speaks to us according to the measure of our capacities, and could not at once in a few words fully express what [sort] Christ is [*qualis esset Christus*].” After acknowledging the use of analogy, Calvin points out the anagoge, inviting elevation from the human analogy to the spiritual reality, “But we must bear in mind that from earthly kings we must ascend [*tenenda est anagoge*] to Christ; for though it is compared to them, yet there is no equality; after having contemplated in the type what our minds can comprehend, we ought to ascend farther and much higher.”<sup>67</sup> Calvin recognizes and affirms the use of human language and concepts in Scripture as God has accommodated himself there and leads us upward from the human concepts to the spiritual realities to which they point.

Utilizing Alan Torrance’s discussion of theological language in light of Wittgenstein’s work, it becomes clear that Calvin’s doctrine of accommodation could be seen to align with some of the major developments in language theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Torrance highlights the way that modern language theory since Wittgenstein has posited that the meaning of a word arises from its use. Therefore, right theological vocabulary must approach words *a posteriori* with the flexibility necessary to understand words within their given semantic reference.<sup>68</sup> Calvin’s teaching on accommodation hints at a similar understanding of theological language. Calvin recognizes the human familiarity with a term or concept and then invites the reader to ascend from what they know of the term to the spiritual meaning. In other words, the term must be “commandeered” by the Spirit. Thus

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<sup>67</sup> *Comm. Jer.* 23:5-6; *CO* 66:410.

<sup>68</sup> Alan J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion: An Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 332-335.

the language is neither univocal nor equivocal but dynamically interpreted through the Spirit based upon its Scriptural use.<sup>69</sup>

Further, drawing upon Eberhard Jüngel's work on the inherent meaning in metaphor, Torrance asserts that Scriptural metaphors, "should not be seen as serving to obscure the specific Reality of God (and, therefore, as theologically peripheral), nor as unwarrantable forms of anthropomorphic projection (similes), but as essentially creative means through which the *dissimilar* God comes to us in an *assimilating* or 'theopoietic' event, articulating his own reality for our understanding (expanding and deepening our conceptual categories to this end)."<sup>70</sup> Similarly, when Calvin describes Scriptural metaphors as accommodation, he implies that God is finding a way to make known his reality to our limited human capacities. In this way, humanity is thus invited to an engagement with God that transcends previously held definitions of terms.

God utilizes a variety of metaphors to accommodate himself to human understanding in Scripture. For example, Scripture describes God with physical body parts or human emotions. About such anthropomorphic statements, Calvin famously states, "For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to 'lisp' [*balbutire*] in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like [*exprimunt qualis sit*] as to accommodate [*accommodant*] the knowledge of him to our slight capacity."<sup>71</sup> This accommodation is also displayed when Scripture describes God as angry or repenting, which, according to Calvin's commitment that God is beyond all disturbance of the mind, do not refer to the same human phenomena occurring in God but describe our experience of God.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> This is contra Helm, who asserts that Calvin sees language about God as analogical and accommodated, "with elements of univocity but also with elements of equivocity," Paul Helm, *Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>70</sup> Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 354.

<sup>71</sup> *Inst.* 1.13.1, p. 121; *CO* 2:90.

<sup>72</sup> *Inst.* 1.17.13, p. 227; *CO* 2:165-166. E.g. *Comm. Rom.* 1:18; *CO* 49:23. Cf. Zachman, "Calvin as Analogical Theologian," 171. Regarding wrath, see Chapter 4.

Huijgen points out that Calvin's hermeneutical key regarding the passages of God's changing is based primarily on metaphysical assumptions, namely that all change is relegated to the creaturely realm. If Calvin had been more consistent in his methodology, he would have allowed God's accommodation as one repenting to provide knowledge of God equally as much as God's accommodation in Scripture that he does not change. In this way, since we humans cannot know



Calvin points out various other examples of God's accommodation in Scripture, including the way God communicates about himself differently in the Old Testament as compared with the New Testament,<sup>73</sup> Jesus' discussion of the manna as spiritual food,<sup>74</sup> and the gospel which acts as the bridge between God's accommodation of himself in Scripture and his accommodation in Christ, who is the lone *scopus* (goal) of Scripture.<sup>75</sup> Calvin says that the beauty of the gospel is that, as opposed to the law that only blinded, in the gospel, "Christ's glorious face is clearly beheld...the majesty of the Gospel is not terrific, but amiable – is not hid, but is manifested familiarly to all [*familiariter omnibus patefiat*]." <sup>76</sup> Thus, God's accommodation of himself to humanity in Scripture is most clearly accomplished in Christ, God's "lively image,"<sup>77</sup> and the final circle around God's unapproachable light in the diagram. It is to God's accommodation of himself in Christ to which we now turn.

### Accommodation in and through Christ

God's ultimate act of accommodation is the incarnation of Jesus Christ, through whom God reveals as much of his nature as believers can appropriate, providing reliable, saving, and creaturely knowledge of God.

Calvin teaches that in Christ, God reliably makes himself known. As Calvin speaks about this revelation in Christ throughout his corpus, I shall highlight just a few instances here. Commenting upon Colossians 1:15, Calvin points out that "Christ is the image of God because He makes God in a manner visible to us."<sup>78</sup> Christ does not reveal God's essence to us, but Christ's *homoousion* with the Father guarantees the *reliability* of Christ's revelation of God, "for Christ would not truly represent God if He were not the essential Word of God;" Calvin proceeds, "The

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God's unchanging essence, "we should hold to God's accommodated revelation, which means that in practice God shows Himself as changing," Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 275.

<sup>73</sup> *Inst.* 2.11.13-14, p. 462-464; *CO* 2:338-340.

<sup>74</sup> *Inst.* 2.10.6, p. 433; *CO* 2:316.

<sup>75</sup> *Comm.* 2 *Cor.* 3:16; *CO* 50:45. In light of the dynamic nature of Calvin's use of language discussed above, Christ is also the semantic *scopus* of Scripture's language. The ultimate meaning of Scripture's language finds its root and fulfillment in Christ.

<sup>76</sup> *Comm.* 2 *Cor.* 3:12; *CO* 50:44.

<sup>77</sup> *Comm.* John 1:18; *CO* 47:19.

<sup>78</sup> *Comm.* Col. 1:15; *CO* 52:84-85.

sum is, that God in Himself, that is, in His naked majesty [*in nuda sua maiestate*], is invisible; and that not only to the physical eyes, but also to human understanding; and that He is revealed [*revelari*] to us in Christ alone, where we may behold Him as in a mirror [*in speculo*].”<sup>79</sup> Calvin even proceeds to say, regarding Colossians 2:9, that in contrast with God’s previous, partial accommodation of himself through “figures or power and grace,” in Christ, God “communicates himself to us wholly [*totum*]...and has appeared [*apparuit*] to us essentially [*essentialiter*].”<sup>80</sup> At this point, it is important to remember that Calvin repeatedly teaches that humans cannot know God’s unknowable essence or immanent life,<sup>81</sup> even in Christ.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, Calvin is here making the point that what we see in Christ is wholly consistent with what we see in God; there is no variance from God’s revelation in Christ, nor is there any ground for seeking knowledge of God outside of what he offers us in Christ, including seeking knowledge of God’s unknowable essence.<sup>83</sup> In sum, for Calvin, God is “no other but he who is made known in Christ [*qui in Christo cognoscitur*].”<sup>84</sup>

For Calvin, not only is Christ the best witness of God that we have, he is the only way God is known.<sup>85</sup> “As God dwells in inaccessible light, He cannot be known [*cognosci*] but in Christ, who is his lively image [*viva sua imagine*].”<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Calvin notes regarding Matthew 11:27, “the Father, who dwells in inaccessible light, and is in himself incomprehensible, is revealed to us by the Son, because he is the lively image of Him, so that it is in vain to seek for Him elsewhere.”<sup>87</sup> In Christ,

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<sup>79</sup> *Comm. Col.* 1:15; *CO* 52:85.

<sup>80</sup> *Comm. Col.* 2:9; *CO* 52:104. “In [Christ] we find also God the Father, as he truly communicates himself to us by him,” *Comm. 2 Cor.* 5:19; *CO* 50:71. Cf. *Comm. Heb.* 1:3; *CO* 55:12.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. *Comm. 1 Tim.* 6:16; *CO* 52:332. Cf. *Inst.* 1.5.1, p. 52; *CO* 2:41. Cf. *Harmony of Moses*, Ex. 3:14; *CO* 24:44.

<sup>82</sup> *Comm. John* 14:10; *CO* 47:326.

<sup>83</sup> In light of Calvin’s teaching about God’s inscrutable essence, his use of the adverb, *essentialiter*, instead of the noun, *essentia*, in his comments on Col. 2:9 also highlights the way Calvin is describing *how* God has appeared in Christ—in a manner that is congruent with his essence—instead of saying that we see God’s essence *directly* in Christ. This contrasts with Huijgen’s reading (and translation) of the passage in which he concludes, albeit with later qualifications, “God’s essence can be known, and is known, but only in Christ,” Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 283-284.

<sup>84</sup> *Comm. 1 John* 2:23; *CO* 55:325.

<sup>85</sup> “God is comprehended in Christ alone [*Deum in Christo solo comprehendit*],” *Inst.* 2.6.4, p. 347; *CO* 2:252. Cf. *Comm. Isaiah* 6:1; *CO* 36:126. Cf. *Comm. Ezek.* 1:25-26; *CO* 47:56.

<sup>86</sup> *Comm. John* 1:18; *CO* 47:19. Cf. *Comm. Isaiah* 35:9; *CO* 36:421.

<sup>87</sup> This revelation only occurs as the Spirit opens one’s eyes to the glory of Christ, *Harmony of the Gospels*, Matt. 11:27; *CO* 45:320. Cf. *Comm. Heb.* 1:3; *CO* 55:12.

the problem of God's inaccessible majesty is resolved; "For the naked majesty of God would, by its immense brightness, ever dazzle our eyes; it is therefore necessary for us to look on Christ. This is to come to the light, which is justly said to be otherwise inaccessible."<sup>88</sup>

Calvin summarizes his view of God's reliable, salvific accommodation of himself in Christ when he says, "apart from Christ the saving knowledge of God does not stand...In this sense Irenaeus writes that the Father, himself infinite, 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."<sup>89</sup> Calvin goes on to say that the saving knowledge of God as merciful Father is only made possible through Christ. Therefore, God's accommodation to us in Christ as Mediator between God and humanity allowed believers to "truly taste God's mercy, and thus be persuaded that he was their Father."<sup>90</sup> In Christ, God has made himself known as a loving Father to believers so that they might trust in him for salvation.

Not only does Christ provide a reliable revelation of God to those who believe, he is also the anagoge, or means of ascent to God, through his work as Mediator. Zachman summarizes, "Christ is therefore the image of the invisible God, in whom God becomes somewhat visible to us, so that we might come to know the unknown God by analogy with what we know, and so that we might ascend to God by means of the anagoge between Christ and God."<sup>91</sup> Commenting on Thomas' delayed acknowledgment of Jesus as the resurrected Lord, Calvin says, "That our faith may arrive at the eternal Divinity of Christ, we must begin with that knowledge which is nearer and more easily acquired. Thus it has been justly said by some, that by Christ Man we are conducted to Christ God."<sup>92</sup> In Christ, God accomplishes his ultimate accommodating act in the Incarnate Son, making himself known to limited humanity, providing reliable and salvific knowledge of himself.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> *Comm. 1 John* 2:23; *CO* 55:325.

<sup>89</sup> *Inst.* 2.6.4, p. 347; *CO* 2:252. Cf. *Comm. 1 Pet.* 1:21; *CO* 55:227.

<sup>90</sup> *Inst.* 2.6.4, p. 347; *CO* 2:252. Cf. *Comm. 1 John* 2:23; *CO* 55:325.

<sup>91</sup> Zachman, "Calvin as Analogical Theologian," 179.

<sup>92</sup> *Comm. John* 20:28; *CO* 47:444. Cf. *Comm. Gen.* 28:12; *CO* 23:391. Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, 11.2.

<sup>93</sup> God's ongoing accommodation of himself in Christ continues not only through the witness of Scripture but in the Sacraments, through which we ascend from the signs of Christ and his work to a greater reality, namely our union with Christ by the Spirit, *Inst.* 4:17.33, p. 1407-1408; *CO* 2:1035. Cf. Zachman, "Calvin as Analogical Theologian," 185.

In summary, although humans cannot come to know the God who dwells in unapproachable light by their own means, God has made himself known at the level of human comprehension through his works in creation and providence, through Scripture, and most of all through the incarnate Christ.<sup>94</sup> As we have seen, the three levels of Huijgen's accommodation diagram are interdependent and founded upon Christ. Only through faith in Christ the Mediator can God be known at all, but Scripture, as perceived by faith and illuminated by the Spirit, is the primary means by which we come to know God's nature as it is revealed and confirmed in Christ. Further, God's works in the universe can only be rightly interpreted with the eyes of faith and the spectacles of Scripture; with those in place, God's providential work in the created order further confirms and illuminates God's accommodation of himself in Scripture and in Christ. For Calvin, although we cannot know God in his naked majesty, God has made himself known at the level of human comprehension by means of accommodation. Consequently, our resulting language about God is securely rooted in God himself as both from God and reliably witnessing to God.

Having seen how we come to knowledge of God and speak rightly about him, we now turn to explore the content of this revealed knowledge of God. *What* is it that we can say about God?

### ***THE CONTENT OF OUR KNOWLEDGE: PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD'S NATURE THROUGH HIS WORKS***

The content of our knowledge of God is commonly described via God's attributes or perfections. Some interpreters of Calvin have held that his distinct anti-speculative aversion to metaphysical discussions of the divine attributes stands in contrast with much of the medieval and Reformed scholastic tradition.<sup>95</sup> Others, like Calvin scholars Todd Billings and Richard Muller, have sought to

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<sup>94</sup> Included in this accommodation is the way that the preached Word and the sacraments flow from and witness to God's accommodation in Scripture and Christ by the Spirit.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. William Stacy Johnson and John H. Leith, *Reformed Reader: A Sourcebook in Christian Theology*, vol. 1 (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 75.

correct this claim, asserting catholicity and continuity in Calvin's doctrine of God.<sup>96</sup> However, in the midst of their helpful corrective, Billings and Muller have overstated their case by focusing on material continuity with the classical tradition, and in so doing, obscuring Calvin's non-speculative, pastoral methodology in his doctrine of God.<sup>97</sup> As we shall see here, Calvin teaches that humans can know little about God's essence and that they ought not speculatively inquire into what God is (*quid sit Deus*) but rather ought to occupy themselves with what God is like (*qualis sit*), that is, God's nature or character. In this section, we shall examine Calvin's teaching on the content of the knowledge of God, particularly recognizing the distinction in Calvin's teaching between the knowledge of the absolute (essential) attributes of God and the knowledge of the relative (personal) attributes of God.

We shall find that believers have access to limited knowledge of God's essence and ample practical knowledge of God's nature as described by God's powers (*virtutes*) and known through God's works. We shall address each of these elements in turn.

### **Knowledge of God's Essence: A Skeleton**

First, Calvin teaches that humans cannot obtain comprehensive knowledge of God's essence, nor should they speculate about that essence. However, God has accommodated himself in Scripture to provide limited, skeletal knowledge of God's essential attributes and triune being.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> "Whatever speculation Calvin was advising against, he was certainly not against an affirmation of key classical attributes of God. Indeed Calvin unequivocally affirms the classical attributes of God in a basic form," J. Todd Billings, "The Catholic Calvin," *Pro Ecclesia* 20, no. 2 (March 2011): 128-129. Muller, *P.R.R.D.*, Vol. 3, 206. Cf. Oliver Crisp, "Calvin on Creation and Providence," in *John Calvin & Evangelical Theology: Legacy and Prospect*, ed. Sung Wook Chung, (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2009), 61.

<sup>97</sup> For details of this argument, see the forthcoming essay, "Calvin's Non-Speculative Methodology: A Corrective to Billings and Muller on Calvin's Divine Attributes" in the Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht volume of papers from the Eleventh International Congress on Calvin Research.

<sup>98</sup> In line with Calvin's non-speculative theological methodology and reliance upon the creedal Christian tradition, Calvin does not attempt to define God's essence or describe how we know that God has an essence.

### No Comprehensive Knowledge of or Speculation about God's Essence

Calvin forwards a partially negative, or apophatic, approach to the absolute attributes of God, asserting that humans cannot comprehend, nor should they speculate concerning, God's incomprehensible essence.<sup>99</sup> Calvin says, "We know that the most perfect way of seeking God, and the most suitable order is not for us to attempt with bold curiosity [*audaci curiositate*] to penetrate to the investigation of his essence, which we ought more to adore than meticulously to search out."<sup>100</sup> Again he asserts that God's essence (*essentia*) "is incomprehensible [*incomprehensibilis*]; hence, his divineness [*numen*] far escapes all human perception."<sup>101</sup> Even in Christ, through whom we receive the most complete revelation of God, God's essence is not revealed. Commenting on Jesus' words in John 14:10, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me," Calvin says, "I do not refer these words to Christ's divine essence [*divinam...essentiam*], but to the mode of revelation. For Christ, so far as His secret divinity [*arcanam...deitatem*] is concerned, is no better known to us than is the Father."<sup>102</sup> Only in the eschaton, when we are clothed in "heavenly and blessed immortality," shall we have direct access to God; "The majesty of God, now hid, will then only be itself seen, when the veil of this mortal and corruptible nature shall be removed."<sup>103</sup> Even then, "our vision shall not grasp [*comprehendat*] the whole of God [*totem Deum*]."<sup>104</sup>

Because humans cannot access knowledge of God's essence, Calvin condemns any type of speculation about God or God's being beyond what God has provided through his accommodation in Scripture and in Christ.<sup>105</sup> Calvin says, "So, humans

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<sup>99</sup> J. Todd Billings, *Union With Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 68, 74.

<sup>100</sup> *Inst.* 1.5.9, p. 63; *CO* 2:47.

<sup>101</sup> *Inst.* 1.5.1, p. 52; *CO* 2:41. Cf. *Harmony of Moses*, Ex. 3:14; *CO* 24:44. Cf. Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 268. Cf. Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 126.

<sup>102</sup> *Comm. John* 14:10; *CO* 47:326.

<sup>103</sup> *Comm. 1 John* 3:2, *CO* 55:332. Cf. *Comm. 1 Tim.* 6:16; *CO* 52:333.

<sup>104</sup> *Comm. 1 John* 3:2; *CO* 55:331-332. My translation. Huijgen attributes this to Calvin's assumed hierarchy of being, Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 258.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. *Inst.* 1.13.19, p. 144; *CO* 2:106. Cf. *Inst.* 1.5.1, p. 52; *CO* 2:41. Cf. *Harmony of Moses*, Ex. 3:14; *CO* 24:44. This is in contrast with Thomas Aquinas's definition of speculation in which he, following Aristotle, asserts that both practical and speculative sciences are innately noble but with different ends, Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, trans. John P. Rowan (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1961), 2.2.290. Cf. *ST*, I-I, q. 1, a. 4-5.

Calvin, who likely had little to no direct contact with Aquinas' work, exclusively speaks of speculation pejoratively.

of themselves cannot approach God, but it is necessary that He approaches us, and that we conceive Him as He offers Himself in His word [*parole*], and be content with what is written in it [*contenu*].”<sup>106</sup> Calvin defines speculation as ungrateful<sup>107</sup> and impious inquiry<sup>108</sup> that pompously ignores God’s gracious self-witness in Scripture and in his works<sup>109</sup> and which results in cold, worthless knowledge<sup>110</sup> “flitting around in the brain.”<sup>111</sup> He thus says regarding Ezekiel’s throne room vision, “Nothing is more useful in such matters than wisdom tempered with sobriety and discretion;” we must not “do as scholastic theologians [*scholastici theologi*] do—philosophize with subtlety concerning God’s essence, and know no moderation in their dispute!”<sup>112</sup>

From a more positive perspective, as Huijgen points out, knowledge of God for Calvin is not meant to be speculative because it must be personal, revealing to us knowledge of God and ourselves (*Dei cognitione et nostri*).<sup>113</sup> Huijgen says, “The correlation of the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of ourselves, focuses theology, and reduces its task in comparison to scholastic forms of theology. For true theology is useful, and edifying, because she stays within the bounds of the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”<sup>114</sup> We shall further address this personal perspective below, but here we simply acknowledge that Calvin considers speculation regarding God’s essence as outside of the realm of proper theological inquiry.<sup>115</sup>

Having observed Calvin’s teaching regarding God’s incomprehensible essence and Calvin’s condemnation of speculation, it would be easy to conclude that Calvin

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<sup>106</sup> *Serm. Job 22:12-17; CO 34:300*; translation from Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 300. Cf. *Comm. Is. 6:4; CO 36:130*.

<sup>107</sup> *Comm. Col. 2:10; CO 52:104*. Cf. *Harmony of Moses*, Ex. 33:18; *CO 25:108*.

<sup>108</sup> *Inst. 1.4.1*, p. 47; *CO 2:38*. Cf. Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 118.

<sup>109</sup> *Inst. 1.4.1*, p. 47; *CO 2:38*.

<sup>110</sup> *Comm. John 1:3, CO 47:4*.

<sup>111</sup> *Inst. 1.5.9*, p. 61; *CO 2:47*.

<sup>112</sup> *Comm. Ezek. 1:25-26; CO 47:57*. Cf. *Comm. 1 Peter 1:20; CO 55:226*. Cf. Herman J. Selderhuis, *Calvin’s Theology of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 45-46.

<sup>113</sup> *Inst. 1.1.1; CO 2:32*. Cf. Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 305.

<sup>114</sup> Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 295. Cf. I. John Hesselink, *Calvin’s First Catechism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 52.

<sup>115</sup> Huijgen contends that Calvin violates this rule when he allows the metaphysical presuppositions of his day to significantly influence his doctrine of God, particularly regarding God’s immutability, Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 317-318. Likewise, van der Kooi rejects Calvin’s view of God’s changelessness as a byproduct of Calvin’s geocentric cosmology that interpreted change and relations as imperfections, van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 147.

is a non-speculative theologian who is disinterested in many of the classical attributes of God. However, even though Calvin considers God's essence to be inaccessible to human inquiry, Calvin still finds warrant in Scripture for limited knowledge of God's essence, to which we now turn.

### **Limited Knowledge of God's Essential Attributes**

Calvin finds in Scripture the grounds for limited, skeletal knowledge of God's essence that he directly links to occasional and pastoral ends. By "skeletal," I mean knowledge of God that provides a basic framework for talking about God in himself without claiming fleshed-out knowledge of God's essence. In short, it is knowledge *that* God is (e.g. spiritual) not knowledge of *what* God is (e.g. what makes up God's spiritual being metaphysically). We shall first discuss what Calvin does teach concerning God's essence before highlighting Calvin's unique approach to these essential attributes of God.

Calvin teaches regarding God's essential attributes that, among other things, God is infinite, spiritual, simple, eternal, *ase*, immutable, and omnipresent. None of these attributes of God provide positive knowledge of what God's essence actually is or how it is that God can be infinite, spiritual, and simple. For example, in his discussion of the Trinity in the *Institutes*, Calvin points out that God is infinite, spiritual, and simple, providing skeletal descriptions that set boundaries regarding our understanding of God as incomprehensible, immaterial, and non-composite. Calvin does not provide a material description of God's essence, a philosophical explanation of how it is that God can be infinite, spiritual, and simple, or a discussion of the logical ordering of the perfections. Notably, instead of being prompted by metaphysical speculation on the Trinity, the occasion here is Calvin's refutation of false teaching, which is typical of Calvin's teaching regarding the absolute attributes.<sup>116</sup>

It is also worth noting how infrequently and how little Calvin teaches about the essential attributes in the *Institutes*. For example, he provides no extensive lists of

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<sup>116</sup> His occasion here is the panentheism of Seneca, the dualism of the Manicheans, and the anti-trinitarian teaching of Servetus, *Inst.* 1.13.1-2, p. 120-123; *CO* 2:89-90. Cf. *Inst.* 2.14.2-8, p. 483-493; *CO* 2:353-361.



the essential attributes.<sup>117</sup> Although such a list may be amalgamated through careful searching,<sup>118</sup> each instance is typically driven by a dispute, false teaching, or doctrinal need. Formally, Calvin does not set aside a locus or even a subsection in the *Institutes* to discuss the essential attributes, even in his two books that are entitled, “The Knowledge of God.” This contrasts with the initial locus “About God” (*de Deo*) in Melanchthon’s 1535 and 1543 *Loci Communes*, which Muller persuasively argues, specifically about the 1535 edition, were key sources for Calvin’s organization of the *Institutes*.<sup>119</sup> Instead of following Melanchthon here, Calvin kept his particular order without a specific locus on God, further confirming his theological and pedagogical methodology regarding the essential attributes.

Regarding God’s essential attributes elsewhere in his commentaries, Calvin similarly teaches a skeletal knowledge of God’s being and links the teaching about God’s essence to occasional and pastoral needs.<sup>120</sup> For example, in his commentary on Exodus 3:14, when God reveals his name to Moses, Calvin points out God’s aseity (that God is not dependent upon anyone for existence and is the source of all that exists) and omnipotence (that God is not under the power of any) and immediately shows the pastoral import of the passage, namely to embolden Moses in his task of leading the Israelites out of Egypt.<sup>121</sup> In a passage from Numbers 23, when Balaam asks Balak if he would make God a liar, Calvin affirms God’s immutability but does so without engaging in any metaphysical speculation about how or why God cannot change. Instead, for Calvin, God’s immutability reminds us

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<sup>117</sup> The longest list Calvin provides is in *Inst.* 1.14.3 where he mentions God’s glory, eternity, self-existence, omnipotence, wisdom, and righteousness in response to the false teaching of the Manichees. Calvin quickly exhorts his readers toward teaching that has value for edification and away from “speculating more deeply than what is expedient” and thus wandering “away from the simplicity of faith [*fidei simplicitate*],” *Inst.* 1.14.3, p. 163; *CO* 2:119.

<sup>118</sup> E.g. B. B. Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of God,” *The Princeton Theological Review* (1909): 417-418. Cf. Muller, *P.R.R.D.*, Vol. 3, 206.

<sup>119</sup> Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 125. Calvin was also familiar with the 1543 revision as he wrote a preface to the 1546 French translation of the 1545 edition, Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 205.

<sup>120</sup> Cf. Selderhuis, *Calvin’s Theology of the Psalms*, 49.

<sup>121</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Ex. 3:14; *CO* 24:43. Cf. *Inst.* 1.10.2, p. 97; *CO* 2:73. Cf. *Harmony of Moses*, Ex. 6:2-4; *CO* 24:78.

that God's word is true and unchangeable, worthy of our unhesitating trust.<sup>122</sup> Similar examples occur in both the *Institutes* and the commentaries.<sup>123</sup>

Thus when Muller claims that if Calvin had compiled the *Institutes* out of his commentaries, "we can easily imagine a rather vast discussion of divine attributes,"<sup>124</sup> we must seriously qualify that statement. As a Biblical and exegetical theologian, Calvin carefully engaged each text, including those that speak of God's being. However, even though a list of attributes could be built by searching through all the commentaries and lectures, they do not include vast discussions of God's attributes, nor do they incorporate extensive speculation regarding God's absolute perfections.

Therefore, it is clear that Calvin affirms the classical attributes, in material agreement with the medieval and Reformed scholastic traditions. However, Calvin's methodology regarding the divine attributes is distinct as he provides non-speculative, skeletal knowledge of God's essence directly linked to doctrinal and pastoral needs of the church.

We shall now examine one particular instance of his teaching on God in himself to see how Calvin applies his theological methodology in his teaching on the Trinity.

### **Skeletal Knowledge of the Trinity**

Just as Calvin forbids extensive, speculative inquiry into God's essence but teaches from Scripture a skeletal knowledge of God's essence, Calvin sets forth a skeletal and pastorally relevant knowledge of the Trinity, making limited statements about God's triunity while avoiding discussions of God's immanent relations. In short, Calvin again teaches *that* God is triune but claims very little knowledge of *what* that triunity is within God, while linking that knowledge of God's triune being to the pastoral needs of the church. Here we shall briefly

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<sup>122</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Num. 23:18; CO 25:283. Cf. *Comm. James* 1:16-18; CO 55:391-392. Cf. *Comm. Ps.* 102:25-27; CO 32:73.

<sup>123</sup> E.g. *Comm. Josh.* 7:22-23; CO 25:479. Cf. *Inst.* 1.13.8, p. 130; CO 2:96. Cf. *1538 Catechism*, p. 22, s. 20i; CO 5:337-338.

<sup>124</sup> Muller, *P.R.R.D.*, Vol. 3, 207.

describe Calvin's skeletal teaching on the Trinity before highlighting his non-speculative, pastoral approach in his teaching on the Trinity.

Calvin summarizes his core teaching on the Trinity: "The essence of the one God is simple and undivided, and that it belongs to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit; and on the other hand that by a certain characteristic [*proprietary aliquam*] the Father differs from the Son, and the Son from the Spirit."<sup>125</sup> Along these lines, Calvin recalls Gregory of Nazianzus, "I cannot think on the one without quickly being encircled by the splendor of the three; nor can I discern the three without being straightaway carried back to the one."<sup>126</sup> Calvin distinguishes between the "persons" (or *hypostaseis* or subsistences—*subsistentiae*)<sup>127</sup> of the Trinity relative to one another as an expression of the special qualities or particularities (*proprietez* or *proprietates*<sup>128</sup>) which exist in the being of God (*l'essence de Dieu*).<sup>129</sup> Calvin describes this particularity in terms of relations as derived from the instances in Scripture when the persons are mentioned together, but by using "relations" (*relationes*), Calvin does not imply positive, i.e. loving, relations within the Trinity.<sup>130</sup>

Instead, in continuity with his non-speculative, pastoral approach, Calvin generally takes an agnostic stance regarding God's inner life while focusing on the economic implications of the Son's relations with the Father, thus illuminating God's powers or providing insight into Christ's mediatorial office.<sup>131</sup>

First, Calvin teaches that Christ is related to the Father in such a way that allows humans to know God's powers and God's nature through him. Christ tells his followers that he is in the Father in order to help them make the connection that what they see in him, e.g. goodness, wisdom, and power, is actually a manifestation of what God is like.<sup>132</sup> Calvin similarly interprets the words, "God is

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<sup>125</sup> *Inst.* 1.13.22, p. 147; *CO* 2:108. For an excellent and more extensive discussion of Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity, see Brannon Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Aseity of the Son* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>126</sup> *Inst.* 1.13.17, p. 140; *CO* 2:104. Cf. *Comm. John* 1:1; *CO* 47:3.

<sup>127</sup> *Inst.* 1.13.6, p. 128; *CO* 2:94. Cf. *Inst.* 1.13.2, p. 123; *CO* 2:90-91.

<sup>128</sup> *Inst.* 1.13.5, p. 126; *CO* 2:92.

<sup>129</sup> *Congrégation*; *CO* 47:473. Cf. *Inst.* 1.13.6, p. 128; *CO* 2:94. Cf. *Comm. Ezek.* 1:25-26; *CO* 47:56.

<sup>130</sup> *Inst.* 1.13.20, p. 144; *CO* 2:106. Cf. *Inst.* 1.13.6, p. 128; *CO* 2:94. Cf. Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 266.

<sup>131</sup> For more, see the discussion in Chapter 5 regarding Calvin's teaching on the intra-trinitarian life of God.

<sup>132</sup> *Comm. John* 14:10; *CO* 47:326. Cf. *Comm. Col.* 1:15; *CO* 52:85. Cf. *Comm. John* 10:30; *CO* 47:250.

love” in 1 John 4 not as referring to God’s essence but as describing the fact that it is God’s nature to love people, as most clearly demonstrated in Christ.<sup>133</sup> Instead of displaying the immanent relations of the Trinity, these passages speak of God’s powers and nature on display in Christ.<sup>134</sup>

Secondly, and even more commonly, Calvin interprets passages that seem to describe God’s immanent life as references to Christ’s mediatorial work as a human being. Calvin’s comments upon John 15:9, when Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you,” provide a luminous image of Calvin’s approach:

[The Apostle] intended to express something far greater than is commonly supposed; for they who think that he now speaks of the sacred love of God the Father, which he always had towards the Son, philosophize away from the subject; for it was rather the design of Christ [*concilium Christi*] to lay, as it were, in our bosom a sure pledge of God’s love towards us. That abstruse inquiry [*argutia*], as to the manner in which the Father always loved himself in the Son, has nothing to do with the present passage.<sup>135</sup>

Calvin teaches that inquiry into the the love between the persons of the Trinity is useless quibbling (*argutia*) and that the purpose of the passages is to show God’s love for the Church through Christ’s mediatorial role as the Head of the Church.<sup>136</sup>

In sum, for Calvin, instead of providing needless information about the loving relations within the Trinity, Christ the Mediator reveals God’s powers and makes God’s love known and accessible to his Body, the Church. Christ does not supply access to God’s essence or immanent life, but instead provides concrete, practical knowledge of God’s powers and nature, particularly God’s fatherly love, to those who have faith in him.

Having seen that Calvin consistently teaches only a skeletal and pastoral knowledge of God’s essence, including in his teaching on the Trinity, we now turn to explore the positive, material content of Calvin’s teaching on what humans *can* know of God.

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<sup>133</sup> *Comm. 1 John* 4:7-9; *CO* 55:352-353.

<sup>134</sup> Cf. *Comm. Heb.* 1:3; *CO* 55:11, where Calvin asserts that it is “not the Apostle’s object in this place to speak of what Christ is in himself, but of what he is really to us.”

<sup>135</sup> *Comm. John* 15:9; *CO* 47:342.

<sup>136</sup> Cf. *Comm. John* 17:24; *CO* 47:390.

## What Believers Can Know: Practical Knowledge of God's Nature Through God's Works

Referring to God's self-revealing words to Moses as he passed by him in Exodus 34:6-7, Calvin points out that after God's eternity and self-existence are announced simply in the Divine Name (יהוה), "thereupon his powers [*virtutes*] are mentioned, by which he is shown to us not what he is in himself [*non quis sit apud se*], but what he is like toward us [*qualis erga nos*]: so that this recognition of him consists more in living experience than in empty and high-flown speculation [*speculatione*]."<sup>137</sup> This passage captures the central thrust of Calvin's doctrine of God. Alongside the skeletal knowledge of God's essence (here, God's eternity and self-existence), Calvin teaches positively that we can know God's nature, or what sort God is (*qualis sit*), as described by his powers (*virtutes*) that are revealed through his works as interpreted and disclosed in Scripture.<sup>138</sup> The result is practical, personal knowledge of God that leads to a pious life of trust.

In short, instead of primarily pursuing the inaccessible knowledge of God's being, Calvin teaches extensively about the profitable understanding of God's nature and powers depicted in Scripture, to which we now turn.

### Qualis Sit (God's Nature)—What Sort God Is

Calvin's primary, positive teaching about God consists in his explication of God's unchanging nature, or what sort God is. In the *Institutes*, Calvin opposes those who ask the question, "What is God? [*quid sit Deus?*]" by responding, "It is

<sup>137</sup> *Inst.* 1.10.2, p. 97; *CO* 2:73. My translation. Cf. 3.2.6, p. 549; *CO* 2:402.

<sup>138</sup> This commitment to a limited knowledge of God's being and more extensive knowledge of God through his activities was common in patristic thinking as well. For example, Basil of Caesarea particularly forwarded the important distinction that humans speak rightly of God without having comprehensive knowledge of God's essence in his *Against Eunomius*. Lewis Ayres summarizes that for Basil, no *ousia* is ever fully known but God can be known by his diverse activities (*energeiai*) toward us, Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 196. Cf. Basil of Caesarea, *Against Eunomius*, trans. Mark DelCogliano and Andrew Radde-Gallwitz (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 1.8.

It is difficult to discern how much direct influence Basil's teaching had on Calvin. Although Battles claims that Basil was a significant influence on Calvin, including being the source for Calvin's twofold knowledge of God, Lane asserts that Basil had a relatively minor impact on Calvin through the Latin translation of Basil's works published in 1540, which Lane contends Calvin only read once, Lane, *Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, 82-83. None of Calvin's three citations of Basil in the *Institutes* refer to theological language or the description of God's essence and energies.

more important for us to know of what sort he is [*qualis sit*] and what is consistent with his nature [*eius naturae*].”<sup>139</sup> In a similar statement in his teaching about faith, Calvin says, “For it is not so much our concern to know who God is in himself [*quis in se sit*], as what he wills to be toward us [*qualis esse nobis velit*].”<sup>140</sup> In these examples, as well as in his words regarding Exodus 34:6-7 above, Calvin distinguishes between what/who God is himself (*quid/quis sit*) and God’s nature or character, or what sort God is (*qualis sit*).<sup>141</sup> Calvin’s extended comments in 1.10.2 most clearly display this usage. There Calvin points out God’s nature is his, “kindness, goodness, mercy, justice, judgment and truth.” He proceeds to use *qualis* again, saying, “In Jeremiah, where God declares in what character [*qualis*] he wants us to know him [*agnosci*],” God highlights his mercy, judgment, and justice, the three of which Calvin says imply God’s truth, power, holiness, and goodness.<sup>142</sup> In this passage, Calvin correlates God’s character or nature (*qualis*) with God’s powers (*virtutes*) which are revealed through God’s concrete actions.<sup>143</sup> Calvin’s comments on John 17:4 show how God’s nature relates to the incarnation of Christ. Calvin says, “God had been made known to the world both by the doctrine of Christ, and by his miracles; and the glory of God is, when we know what sort he is [*qualis sit*].”<sup>144</sup> In God’s works, including the person and works of Christ, he concretely reveals *qualis sit*, what sort he, or his nature or character, as far as creatures can comprehend.

For Calvin, God’s revealed nature is unchanging because God is unchanging.<sup>145</sup> As Calvin says in his comments on Psalm 77:11-12, “Because God’s heart [*animum*—seat of the will] and nature [*ingenium*] change not [*non mutat*], he

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<sup>139</sup> *Inst.* 1.2.2, p. 41; *CO* 2:34-35.

<sup>140</sup> *Inst.* 3.2.6, p. 549; *CO* 2:402.

<sup>141</sup> It is difficult to determine an appropriate English equivalent for *qualis*, particularly because Calvin was not always consistent in his use of the term. We shall typically refer to God’s “nature,” “character,” or “what sort God is” depending upon context.

<sup>142</sup> *Inst.* 1.10.2, p. 97-98; *CO* 2:73. My translation.

<sup>143</sup> See following subsection for our analysis of Calvin’s teaching on *virtutes* (powers).

<sup>144</sup> *Comm. John* 17:4; *CO* 47:378. The CTS translation mistakenly finishes the sentence with “what God is.” That would be a more appropriate translation of *quid sit*. Cf. *Inst.* 2.15.2, p. 496; *CO* 2:362.

<sup>145</sup> *Inst.* 1.2.2, p. 41; *CO* 2:34-35.

As in the case of Calvin’s non-precise use of *qualis*, Calvin is not always consistent in his differentiation between God’s essence and nature (e.g. Calvin speaks of God’s *natura* as simple and spiritual, *Comm. Is.* 44:15-17; *CO* 37:116).

cannot but show himself at length merciful to his own.”<sup>146</sup> Similarly, in his comments on Numbers 23:18, Calvin highlights the difference between human nature (or character) and God’s nature, asserting that God’s word can be trusted because God himself is true and unchanging. He says, “We, in our consideration of His nature [*natura*], should remember that He is liable to no changes [*conversionibus*], since He is far above all heavens.”<sup>147</sup> Regarding James 1:16-18, Calvin also links God’s unchanging goodness with his unchanging nature.<sup>148</sup> Thus, Huijgen identifies God’s nature as a roughly accommodated version of God’s essence, saying “God’s nature is ‘proper’ to God, as His essence is,” and thus believers should not think that God “could act contrary to his merciful character – even if that seems to be the case.”<sup>149</sup>

Although God makes his nature known, humans cannot have comprehensive knowledge of that nature. Calling upon his doctrine of accommodation, Calvin thus says regarding 1 John 3:2, again referring to Exodus 33-34, that “God now presents himself to be seen [*conspiciendum*] by us, not such as he is [*non qualis est*], but such as we can comprehend [*qualem modulus noster eum capit*].”<sup>150</sup> Therefore God reveals his nature to the extent that we can apprehend that revelation. God’s revealed nature is consistent and objectively true of God but only partially known by human creatures.

We now turn to examine the content of Calvin’s teaching regarding God’s nature, namely God’s powers revealed through his works.

### **The Powers: Calvin's Attributes of God**

Although Calvin famously says that we are to concern ourselves with who God is toward us (*erga nos*) instead of who God is in himself (*apud se*),<sup>151</sup> he is not affirming Occamistic nominalism in which our words have no direct reference

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<sup>146</sup> *Comm. Ps.* 77:11-12; *CO* 31:717. My translation.

<sup>147</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Num. 23:18; *CO* 25:283.

<sup>148</sup> “To do good is what properly belongs to him, as according to his nature [*naturale*]; and from him all good things come to us,” *Comm. Js.* 1:16-18; *CO* 55:391.

<sup>149</sup> Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 285. Cf. “The Relation of God’s Essence and Nature” below.

<sup>150</sup> *Comm. 1 John* 3:2; *CO* 55:331.

<sup>151</sup> *Inst.* 1.10.2, p. 97; *CO* 2:73.

point within God but is seeking to rule out speculation about God's being.<sup>152</sup> Warfield summarizes well, "[Calvin] is refusing all *a priori* methods of determining the nature of God and requiring of us to form our knowledge of Him *a posteriori* from the revelation He gives us of Himself in His activities."<sup>153</sup> Similarly, although Paul Helm describes Calvin's teaching about God's nature primarily in terms of how God is toward us,<sup>154</sup> Calvin is not teaching a subjective knowledge of God that changes based on one's perspective or experience. Instead, in his comments about the knowledge of God's nature "toward us," Calvin is describing the *only way* that humans come to know God, namely through faith as God accommodates himself to humanity in his concrete works in the world. Therefore, in his positive teaching about God, instead of listing "perfections" or "attributes"<sup>155</sup> of God, Calvin identifies the "powers" (*virtutes*) of God as they are expressed through God's specific actions.<sup>156</sup>

In Calvin's 1538 Catechism, Calvin outlines his teaching on what those with faith can know of God. Instead of attempting to investigate God in himself, we are to "search out and trace God in his works, which are called in the Scriptures 'the reflection of things invisible,' because they represent to us what otherwise we could not see of the Lord." From there, Calvin proceeds to highlight six characteristics of God that we recognize from the contemplation of his works: immortality (beginning of all), power (creator and sustainer of all), wisdom (governor of all), goodness (cause of all that exists), righteousness (defending the godly and condemning the ungodly), and mercy (gently dealing with our sin).<sup>157</sup> Thus, for Calvin, God's nature is concretely made known to us in his works and expressed via his powers. As Cornelis van der Kooi says, "Calvin's interest lies more with God's acts than with God's essence."<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of God," 401-402. Cf. Dowey, *Knowledge of God*, 6.

<sup>153</sup> Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of God," 402.

<sup>154</sup> Helm, *Calvin's Ideas*, 13.

<sup>155</sup> In the only use of *attributa* in the *Institutes* of which I am aware, Calvin uses it pejoratively regarding the way Sabellius spoke of the persons of the Trinity not as distinctions but as *attributa Dei*, *Inst.* 1.13.4, p. 125; *CO* 2:92.

<sup>156</sup> Parker, *Knowledge of God*, 53-54. Cf. Randall C. Zachman, *Reconsidering John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 9.

<sup>157</sup> *1538 Catechism*, p. 8, s. 3; *CO* 5:325.

<sup>158</sup> Cornelis van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror: John Calvin and Karl Barth on Knowing God: A Diptych*, trans. Donald Mader (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 125. Cf. *Comm. Ps.* 86:8; *CO* 31:794.



Calvin sets out his understanding of the relationship of God's works to his powers, and the purpose of both, in *Institutes* 1.5.10. There Calvin says that God's works, individually and especially as a whole, depict to us God's powers "not different from a painting [*non secus atque in tabulis*]." This painting is on display for all humanity (*universum hominum genus*) to see and be drawn into true happiness (*felicitatem*). As God's works reveal God's powers, our responsibility is to ponder these powers and contemplate how God shows us his "life, wisdom, and power" and exercises toward us (*erga nos*) "his righteousness, goodness and mercy."<sup>159</sup> Thus, through God's works in creation, providence, and redemption, God displays his powers for all to see, so that through them all people might come to recognize him.<sup>160</sup> In short, "God is known [*cogniscitur*] by means of his powers [*virtutibus*], and his works [*opera*] are evidences of his eternal divinity [*divinitatis*]."<sup>161</sup> As Parker says, Calvin's *virtutes* are the expression of God's Godhood (God's glory) in action.<sup>162</sup>

One way Calvin organizes his discussion of God's powers is the division in the *Institutes* between what God reveals about himself in his works as Creator (Book 1) vis-à-vis what he reveals in his works as Redeemer (Book 2). As we observed earlier, the division between the two books is not based upon what type of knowledge one could ascertain solely through creation and providence in Book 1 and subsequently through Jesus Christ in Book 2. Instead, any right knowledge of God as Creator or Redeemer must be perceived through faith and interpreted by Scripture. However, from the vantage point of faith and through the lens of Scripture, Calvin does first discuss what can be known of God through his works as Creator and providential Ruler and then through his works as Redeemer.

<sup>159</sup> *Inst.* 1.5.10, p. 63; *CO* 2:48. Cf. *Comm. Ps.* 111:2-4; *CO* 32:167-168.

<sup>160</sup> Cf. *Comm. Ps.* 77:11-12; *CO* 31:716.

<sup>161</sup> *Comm. Phil.* 2:6; *CO* 52:26. My translation. For Calvin, even God's powers are never fully understood by humanity; "Incomprehensible as is the immensity of the wisdom, equity, justice, power, and mercy of God, in his works, the faithful nevertheless acquire as much knowledge of these as qualifies them for manifesting the glory of God; only it becomes us to begin the study of his works with reverence, that we may take delight in them," *Comm. Ps.* 111:2; *CO* 32:168.

<sup>162</sup> Parker, *Knowledge of God*, 53-54. Cf. *Comm. John* 17:4; *CO* 47:378.

### God the Creator

As Creator and Ruler over creation, God displays his powers such as glory, kindness, goodness, mercy (love), righteousness (justice), judgment, truth, holiness, power, and wisdom in the created order, the “most glorious theatre” (*splendidissimo theatro*)<sup>163</sup> of his works.<sup>164</sup> God manifests his wisdom in forming all that exists in its intricacy and grandeur, his power in sustaining all that he has made, and his goodness, mercy, and love as he bears with sinful humanity while sustaining the whole human race. God is also the active governor and preserver of the whole created order, driving the celestial frame, sustaining, nourishing, caring for everything in creation as an expression of his special care which reveals “his fatherly favor [*paternus eius favor*].”<sup>165</sup> His earthly rule also shows forth his righteousness and judgment in his preservation of his church and condemnation of evil.<sup>166</sup> Drawing upon his passion for astronomy, Calvin must force himself to cut short his commentary on the majesty of God seen in the heavens, saying, “For there are as many miracles of divine power, as many tokens of goodness, and as many proofs of wisdom, as there are kinds of things in the universe.”<sup>167</sup>

Before examining the ways that God confirms and reveals his powers through his works as Redeemer, it is worth noting some translation problems that can cause confusion regarding God’s perfections. Although Calvin consistently employs *virtutes*, English translators often take liberty to use the word “attributes” or “perfections” instead of “powers.”<sup>168</sup> For example, in the Jeremiah commentary, the translator substitutes “power and perfections” for the singular *virtute*.<sup>169</sup> The most glaring example of a misleading translation appears in Calvin’s comments upon Romans 1:20 when he says that humans can have knowledge of God’s eternal power and divinity, and God’s divinity has become known to us, “which cannot exist except accompanied with all attributes of a God [*singulis Dei virtutibus*], since

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<sup>163</sup> *Inst.* 1.6.2, p. 72; *CO* 2:54.

<sup>164</sup> Cf. 1.5.10, p. 63; *CO* 2:48. Cf. 1.10.2, p. 97-98; *CO* 2:73. Cf. 1.14.20, p. 180; *CO* 2:131. Cf. 2.6.1, p. 341; *CO* 2:247. Cf. *Harmony of Moses*, Ex. 34:6-7; *CO* 24:44. Cf. *Comm. Ps.* 145:4-6; *CO* 32:413. Cf. Zachman, *Reconsidering John Calvin*, 10.

<sup>165</sup> *Inst.* 1.16.1, p. 198, *CO* 2:145. Cf. *Inst.* 1.2.1, p. 40; *CO* 2:34.

<sup>166</sup> *Inst.* 1.17.1, p. 210; *CO* 2:154.

<sup>167</sup> *Inst.* 1.14.21, p. 181; *CO* 2:133.

<sup>168</sup> “Excellencies” is another, more fitting, option that is used at times.

<sup>169</sup> *Comm. Jer.* 9:23-24; *CO* 38:51.

they are all included under that idea.”<sup>170</sup> Muller uses this verse to support his claim that Calvin clearly sees the attributes of God as “indivisibly and irreducibly belonging to the divine essence” as part of Muller’s broader argument that Calvin stands in general continuity with the later Reformed tradition in his teaching of God’s attributes.<sup>171</sup> However, one verse later in the Romans commentary, Calvin continues his argument regarding what is included in God’s divinity, “No idea can be formed of God without including his eternity, power, wisdom, goodness, truth, righteousness, and mercy.” Calvin proceeds to demonstrate how each of these powers can be observed from God’s works in the world, such as the way God’s wisdom is seen in how “he has arranged things in such an exquisite order.” Calvin concludes, “Since men have not recognized these attributes [*virtutes*] in God, but have dreamt of him as though he were an empty phantom, they are justly said to have impiously robbed him of his own glory.”<sup>172</sup> From Calvin’s use of *virtutes* here, it is clear that he is primarily referring to God’s relative, or communicable, attributes, not God’s essential attributes.<sup>173</sup> Contrary to what the translation (and Muller’s comments) suggests, Calvin is not primarily speaking about the classification of or ordering of God’s essential attributes. Instead, he is addressing the trustworthy, positive knowledge we can have of the one true God, namely his nature as described in his powers and revealed through his works.

As seen through the lens of Scripture by faith, in his works as Creator, Sustainer, and Ruler of the universe in general and humankind in particular, God reveals himself to be powerful, wise, good, merciful, just, glorious, and loving. However, Calvin does not teach that one can fully understand and experience God’s fatherly love, a central concept for Calvin’s doctrine of God, outside of God’s work as Redeemer.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 1:20; *CO* 49:24. The more recent translation makes the same mistake, utilizing “attributes” here, John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Ross MacKenzie, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 31.

<sup>171</sup> Muller, *P.R.R.D.*, Vol. 3, 206.

<sup>172</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 1:21; *CO* 49:24.

<sup>173</sup> It is worth pointing out that although Calvin is predominantly concerned with God’s powers as known through his acts here, he is not averse to including God’s eternity in the list.

<sup>174</sup> *Inst.* 1.2.1, p. 40; *CO* 2:34. Cf. *Inst.* 2.6.1, p. 341; *CO* 2:247.

### God the Redeemer

God's work in the person and actions of Jesus Christ the Redeemer confirm and magnify the powers exemplified through God's works as Creator and Ruler.<sup>175</sup> We have already shown in detail the ways that Calvin sees God's accommodating himself to humanity in Christ, so three brief examples will suffice here. First, commenting on Colossians 1:15, Calvin points out that "in Christ [God] shows us His righteousness [*iustitiam*], goodness, wisdom, power [*virtutem*], in short, His entire self [*se denique totum*]."<sup>176</sup> Second, as we shall see in our exposition of God's work of election in Chapter 3, when we contemplate God's love for the elect through Christ, we behold "God's paternal love towards us all."<sup>177</sup> Third, as we shall see in Chapter 4, God's gracious, multifaceted reconciling work through Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension reveal God's love, righteousness, and judgment of evil more clearly than any other works of God.

While Christ confirms and magnifies all of God's powers, he most clearly reveals God's fatherly love for his children. Van der Kooi summarizes,

Precisely in the school of Christ can creation, providence and the hidden work of the Spirit be called upon. In fact the school of Christ includes classes and grades where initially a faint notion of God is given, then a more powerful impression of his majesty and role as judge is imparted, and finally Christ appears as the image of the loving Father as the centre and goal of the knowledge of God.<sup>178</sup>

God has put his powers on display in Jesus Christ.<sup>179</sup>

According to Calvin, in God's concrete actions of creation, providence, and redemption, God has revealed his powers, the positive content of Calvin's doctrine of God. These powers generally reveal God's nature or character. However, Calvin

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<sup>175</sup> This statement is true when we reason chronologically regarding how God has made himself known. However, in light of the order of knowing, Calvin reverses this and says that God's works in creation actually confirm and elucidate the true knowledge of God that we have already received in Christ, *Comm. Gen.* "Argument"; *CO* 23:9-12.

<sup>176</sup> *Comm. Col.* 1:15; *CO* 52:85. Cf. *Comm. John* 14:10; *CO* 47:326.

<sup>177</sup> *Comm. John* 15:9; *CO* 47:342. Cf. The "sweet fruit" of knowing God's free mercy through the God's work in election, *Inst.* 3.21.1, p. 921; *CO* 2:679.

<sup>178</sup> Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 83.

<sup>179</sup> Hesselink, drawing upon a survey of Calvin scholarship, concludes that divine Fatherhood is Calvin's central way of discussing God's nature and character, Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism*, 117. Cf. Julie Canlis, "The Fatherhood of God and Union With Christ in Calvin," in *'In Christ' in Paul*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 399-426.

specifically highlights a few powers which display the core of what believers can know about God's nature. It is to that core we now turn.

### The Synopsis of God's Revealed Nature

Although all of God's attributes and powers are interrelated,<sup>180</sup> Calvin summarizes God's revealed nature as God's mercy, justice and righteousness, while God's mercy revealed in Christ is the most important element of God's nature for humans to know. Regarding Jeremiah's depiction of God's exercising mercy, judgment, and justice on earth, Calvin says that God "declares in what sort [*qualis*] he would have us know him." Calvin goes on, "Certainly these three things are especially necessary for us to know: mercy [*misericordia*], on which alone the salvation of us all rests; judgment [*iudicium*], which is daily exercised against wrongdoers, and in even greater severity awaits them to their everlasting ruin; justice [*iusititia*] whereby believers are preserved, and are most tenderly nourished." Calvin says that all of God's powers are summed up in these three.<sup>181</sup> At the center of God's revealed nature, God expresses his fatherly love as he mercifully cares for his children in his righteousness while judging all that stands opposed to him. This synopsis of God's powers corresponds with Calvin's consistent description of God as Judge and Father throughout his writings.<sup>182</sup>

Most notable in his descriptions of these powers is Calvin's definition of *iusititia* (justice or righteousness). He elucidates it further in his Jeremiah lectures, in which he particularly asserts that God's righteousness/justice (*iusititia*) is not the opposite of mercy; "The justice of God is not to be taken according to what is commonly understood by it; and they speak incorrectly who represent God's justice as in opposition to his mercy."<sup>183</sup> We shall see in Chapter 4 the way that Calvin also defines righteousness in relation to the law, but here (and in his Psalms

<sup>180</sup> Cf. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms*, 49.

<sup>181</sup> *Inst.* 1.10.2, p. 98; *CO* 2:73. Cf. Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 131.

<sup>182</sup> Cf. Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 117-177.

<sup>183</sup> *Comm. Jer.* 9:23-24; *CO* 38:51-52. See "No Tension Between Love and Justice" in Chapter 4.

Commentary), Calvin describes righteousness in action as God's faithfulness to his people.<sup>184</sup>

For Calvin, God's judgment is "the rigor which he exercises against the transgressors of his law."<sup>185</sup> In other words, God's judgment is his condemnation of all evil. God's judgment is expressed toward both believers and unbelievers, but it is received quite differently and accomplishes distinct ends. For the believer who is reconciled with God and clothed in Christ's righteousness, God's chastisement (*castigatio*) is the correction or admonition of a father that reveals God's paternal love, invites believers to recognize their deserts outside of Christ, and leads them to self-reflection, repentance, and avoidance of evil. God tempers his chastisement so as not to overwhelm believers. Toward the unbeliever who remains God's sinful enemy, God pours out his vengeance (*ultio*) as a judge and reveals his wrath (*ira*). Although they could take his judgments as a warning and flee to Christ, the non-elect harden their hearts instead and only come to know God as Judge and Avenger.<sup>186</sup> In short, God's judgment is experienced differently depending upon one's relation to Christ, and only through Christ can God be known as loving Father.<sup>187</sup>

Amongst God's powers, Calvin asserts that God's mercy is the single most important to know.<sup>188</sup> For Calvin, as in his comments upon Jer. 9:23-24 above, this mercy is a reference to God's חֶסֶד (*hesed*), God's steadfast, covenant lovingkindness revealed in Scripture.<sup>189</sup> In his comments on Psalm 145:8, Calvin says about Exodus 34:6 that the description there of God as "compassionate and gracious...abounding in love and faithfulness" gives us "more clear and familiar

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<sup>184</sup> Regarding God's *iustitia*, Selderhuis summarizes Calvin's view in his commentary on the book of Psalms, "Calvin interprets the righteousness of God as his faithfulness and mercy whereby he protects believers," Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms*, 157. Cf. *Comm. Ps.* 5:8; *CO* 31:69.

<sup>185</sup> *Comm. Jer.* 9:23-24; *CO* 38:51-52.

<sup>186</sup> *Inst.* 3.4.31-34, p. 658-663; *CO* 2:482-486. Cf. *Inst.* 3.11.1, p. 725; *CO* 2:533. Cf. Chapter 4.

<sup>187</sup> This brings up the question that if God is merciful toward all and sovereign over all, why, according to Calvin, are not all people reconciled to God in Christ. We shall address that question in Chapter 3, on predestination, where we find that from our human perspective, God's acts in election correspond directly with his revealed nature, whereas his acts in reprobation only correspond with God's nature as through a veil.

<sup>188</sup> Cf. Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 284-286.

<sup>189</sup> Calvin says that God relates to his people based on his "gratuitous liberality. For *hesed* is equivalent to kindness or beneficence [*mansuetudo aut beneficentia*]; but when it is applied to God, it generally signifies mercy [*misericordiam*] or paternal favor [*paternum favorem*], and the blessings [*beneficia*] which flow from it." *Harmony of Moses*, Deut. 5:9; *CO* 24:379.

[*clarius vel familiarius*] a description of the nature of God...than can anywhere be found.”<sup>190</sup> Calvin goes on to explain that God’s mercy is the most important *virtus* of God to know because God’s power placed before us apart from his mercy would overwhelm us with terror, but instead God reveals his mercy to us so that we might “fly to him without delay.”<sup>191</sup> Calvin here identifies the center of God’s nature, namely his mercy and faithfulness. Of course, as we have also observed, God’s nature is most clearly revealed in Christ, through whom we come to know God as loving Father.<sup>192</sup> Christ the Mediator is not only the means by which God’s love is exhibited but also the means by which people receive God’s love for them.<sup>193</sup> In Christ, therefore, we find the clearest, concrete expression of what God revealed in his name to Moses, namely God’s abundant fatherly love and mercy.

For Calvin, God’s righteousness, God’s judgment (of evil), and centrally, God’s mercy summarize God’s nature.

### **Practical, Personal Knowledge of God**

As we have seen, Calvin consistently condemns empty speculative knowledge of God. In its place, Calvin espouses practical knowledge of God that has direct impact on the lives and religious practice of Christian believers. In the *Institutes*, Calvin describes his practical theological and exegetical methodology,

Furthermore, in the reading of Scripture we ought ceaselessly to endeavor to seek out and meditate upon those things that make for edification [*aedificationem*]. Let us not indulge in curiosity or in the investigation of unprofitable things. And because the Lord willed to instruct us, not in fruitless questions, but in sound godliness, in the fear of his name, in true trust and in the duties of holiness, let us be satisfied with this knowledge.<sup>194</sup>

As seen in this passage and expanded on below, for Calvin right knowledge of God is pastorally edifying, experienced, and results in pious faith.

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<sup>190</sup> *Comm. Ps.* 145:8; *CO* 32:414. My translation. Calvin also says that “God’s nature [*natura*] is described” when the prophet says that God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,” *Comm. Joel* 2:13; *CO* 42:545.

<sup>191</sup> *Comm. Ps.* 145:8; *CO* 32:414. Cf. *Inst.* 3.2.30, p. 576; *CO* 2:422.

<sup>192</sup> *Inst.* 1.2.1, p. 40; *CO* 2:35.

<sup>193</sup> *Comm. John*, “The Argument to the Gospel of John,” *CO* 47:vi. Cf. *Comm. 1 John* 3:16; *CO* 55:340. Cf. Chapter 4.

<sup>194</sup> *Inst.* 1.14.4, p. 164; *CO* 2:120. Cf. *Comm. Ps.* 145:4; *CO* 32:413.

### Pastoral Knowledge

First, for Calvin, teaching about God must be pastorally edifying, or useful (*utilis*).<sup>195</sup> Van der Kooi defines usefulness as “that which does justice to the correct relation between God and man, or which promotes fellowship between man and God, and which motivates man to obedience and worship.”<sup>196</sup> We offer a few examples here of Calvin’s explicit connection between the knowledge of God and its pastoral usefulness. We have already seen that God reveals his mercy to allow us to approach him without fear<sup>197</sup> and that Scripture’s depiction of the Father’s love for the Son is toward the end that believers would know they are loved.<sup>198</sup> Knowledge of God’s fatherly love and power also have direct pastoral utility in the believer’s confidence to approach God and trust him in prayer.<sup>199</sup> More broadly, Calvin calls believers to meditate on God’s works continually in order to know God’s grace and be edified in their faith.<sup>200</sup> Not only is the knowledge of God’s powers meant to be edifying, but as we noted above, when Calvin provides skeletal knowledge of God’s essential attributes, he also consistently relates the attributes to the edification of the people, whether in refuting a false teaching or in pointing toward the pastoral benefits of an essential attribute attested to in Scripture. As Selderhuis explains, “Calvin always applies doctrine to the practice of faith.”<sup>201</sup> For Calvin, right knowledge of God is pastorally edifying and useful in leading believers closer to God.

### Experienced Knowledge

Consistent with his focus on the knowledge of God’s nature as revealed through his actions, Calvin also teaches that right knowledge of God is obtained “more in living experience than in vain and high-flown speculation.”<sup>202</sup> Calvin believes that God provides the faithful with grounds to know him concretely through experience. He says, “The Lord wishes to be acknowledged to be true, not by a bare

<sup>195</sup> Cf. *Comm. Ez.* 1:25-26; *CO* 40:58.

<sup>196</sup> Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 120.

<sup>197</sup> *Comm. Ps.* 145:8, *CO* 32:414.

<sup>198</sup> *Comm. John* 17:26; *CO* 47:390-391.

<sup>199</sup> *Harmony of the Gospels*, Matt. 6:9; *CO* 45:195. Cf. *Comm. 2 Tim.* 3:16; *CO* 52:332.

<sup>200</sup> *Comm. Ps.* 77:12; *CO* 31:717.

<sup>201</sup> Selderhuis, *Calvin’s Theology of the Psalms*, 56.

<sup>202</sup> *Inst.* 1.10.2, p. 97-98; *CO* 2:73.



and naked imagination, but by actual experience, that is, by preserving the people whom he has adopted.”<sup>203</sup> In his 1538 Catechism, Calvin writes that even if God’s powers are clearly manifest in heaven and earth, “yet we at last comprehend their real goal, value and true meaning for us only when we descend into ourselves and ponder in what ways the Lord reveals his life, wisdom, and power in us, and exercises toward us his righteousness, goodness, and mercy.”<sup>204</sup> However, Calvin is not promoting a solely subjective, religious experience as grounds for knowing God. Instead, he is advocating a move away from simple head-knowledge to personally certified knowledge of God’s powers.<sup>205</sup> Thus, Calvin asserts, “We cannot deny God’s claim to praise in all his powers [*virtutibus*], but we are most sensibly affected by such proofs of his fatherly goodness [*bonitas*] as we have ourselves experienced.”<sup>206</sup>

Another way Calvin emphasizes experience in his teaching of the knowledge of God is in his doctrine of the sacraments. As he says regarding the mystery of the reality of Christ’s presence in the bread of the Lord’s Supper, “I rather experience [*experior*] it than understand [*intelligam*] it.”<sup>207</sup> Calvin further declares, “In the sacraments, the reality is given to us along with the sign; for when the Lord holds out a sacrament, he does not feed our eyes with an empty and unmeaning figure, but joins the truth with it, so as to testify that by means of them he acts upon us efficaciously [*efficaciter*].”<sup>208</sup> He goes on to point out that in receiving the Lord’s Supper, the truth of Christ’s presence is not separated from the physically experienced sign. Thus, by faith and through the physical manifestation of the bread, we enjoy the body of Christ in fellowship with him.<sup>209</sup> Sacraments are

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<sup>203</sup> *Comm. Is.* 49:8; *CO* 37:198.

<sup>204</sup> *1538 Catechism*, p. 9, s. 3; *CO* 5:325.

<sup>205</sup> As Hesselink says, “Though Calvin defines faith as knowledge, it is more a knowledge of the heart than the head, more of the affections than the understanding,” Hesselink, *Calvin’s First Catechism*, 52.

<sup>206</sup> *Comm. Ps.* 145:7, *CO* 32:414. My translation. Cf. *Comm. John* 1:14, 47:15. Cf. *Comm. Heb.* 1:3; *CO* 55:12.

<sup>207</sup> *Inst.* 4.17.32, p. 1403; *CO* 2:1032.

<sup>208</sup> *Comm. Is.* 6:7; *CO* 36:133.

<sup>209</sup> *Comm. Is.* 6:7; *CO* 36:133. Calvin then says that unbelievers can also receive the sign, but because they lack faith, “they have no experience of the truth,” and therefore they do not “partake of Christ.” Faith, experience, and the knowledge of God are bound together.

another example of the role that experience plays in Calvin's doctrine of God. Right knowledge of God is experienced knowledge of God, as received by faith.

#### The End of Knowledge of God: Pious Faith

Finally, Calvin teaches that right knowledge of God results in pious faith, the same place that knowledge of God begins.<sup>210</sup> However, this is not circular reasoning but an ascension by faith into the knowledge of God via union with Christ by the Spirit.<sup>211</sup> Calvin defines faith as "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence [*benevolentiae*] toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit."<sup>212</sup> Thus faith for Calvin is not primarily about cognitive assent to doctrinal truths but about confidence in God's nature and assurance of God's attitude toward us. This fits soundly with what we have observed about Calvin's doctrine of God, namely that what we ought to know about God is his nature (what sort he is) as expressed in his works. Because God has shown himself to be trustworthy, merciful, powerful, wise, just, judging and most of all merciful,<sup>213</sup> we have been given grounds and impetus for faith in this God who has revealed himself. If pious faith does not result, then the knowledge of God has not been rightly comprehended.<sup>214</sup> As we shall see more fully in Chapter 4, for Calvin, justification and sanctification are distinct but inseparable gifts of God's grace in Christ that is received by faith. Therefore, the faith that emerges from the proper knowledge of God enables and demands a pious life of obedience to God as empowered by and graciously perfected in Christ.

Therefore, we have come full circle, but now we see that, staying consistent with his non-speculative, pastoral theological methodology, the knowledge of God about which Calvin is concerned is God's disposition toward us. Through God's

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<sup>210</sup> See "Human Access to the Knowledge of God" above.

<sup>211</sup> Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 107. Cf. *Inst.* 3.2.24, p. 570-571; *CO* 2:418. Cf. *Harmony of the Gospels*, Matt. 11:27; *CO* 45:320.

<sup>212</sup> *Inst.* 3.2.7; *CO* 2:403. Cf. *Inst.* 3.2.16; *CO* 2:411.

<sup>213</sup> *Inst.* 3.2.29, p. 575; *CO* 2:421.

<sup>214</sup> This faith is matched by a pious life of worship and obedience. As Calvin says, "Now, the knowledge [of God's mercy, judgment and justice] mentioned here produces two fruits, even faith and fear," *Comm. Jer.* 9:23-24; *CO* 38:52. Cf. Calvin, "Catechism of the Church of Geneva, 1545," Q6; *CO* 6:10. Cf. Dowey, *Knowledge of God*, 26.

concrete revelation of himself in his works as interpreted and revealed in Scripture, those with faith can have absolute confidence in God's benevolent will toward them according to God's nature. This nature has been made known most clearly in Christ; it can be described in short as God's mercy, or slightly longer as God's mercy, righteousness, and judgment. Through trust in God's disposition toward us as revealed in his nature and powers, we are assured of our identity as the children of our loving Father that permeates Calvin's teaching.

This brings up the question of the relation of God's nature to his essence, to which we now turn.

### **The Relation between God's Nature and Essence**

Although Calvin does not speak extensively on the relation between God's nature and essence, he is quite clear that God's nature is constant because it is rooted in God who is constant.<sup>215</sup> Commenting on Psalm 25:6, Calvin links God's merciful nature and essence saying, God "cannot divest himself of the feeling of mercy which is natural to him, and which can no more cease than his eternal existence."<sup>216</sup> Similarly, Calvin comments that David, in the midst of affliction and a dearth of God's presence, holds close "the consideration that although God, who from his very nature is merciful [*qui natura misericors est*], may withdraw himself, and cease for a time to manifest his power, yet he cannot deny himself; that is to say, he cannot divest himself of the feeling of mercy which is natural to him, and which can no more cease than his eternal existence [*aeterna eius essentia*]."<sup>217</sup> In his lectures on Jonah, Calvin again asserts that God's merciful nature is not accidental to God but is true of God's very self, and is thus consistent. Calvin points out that even though Jonah was tasked by God to preach God's judgment on Nineveh, Jonah knows from the "living representation of God" (*viva effigies Dei*) to Moses in Exodus 33-34 that God was wont to be merciful and would forgive the Ninevites as soon as they repented because "he would otherwise deny his own nature: God cannot be unlike himself [*Deus non potest esse sui dissimilis*], he cannot

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<sup>215</sup> Cf. *Comm. Is.* 6:1; *CO* 36:126. Cf. *Comm. 1 John* 3:2; *CO* 55:331. *Inst.* 1.2.2, p. 41; *CO* 2:35.

<sup>216</sup> *Comm. Ps.* 25:6; *CO* 31:253.

<sup>217</sup> *Comm. Ps.* 25:6; *CO* 31:253. Cf. *Inst.* 3.4.34, p. 663; *CO* 2:426.

put off that disposition of which he has once testified to Moses.”<sup>218</sup> Therefore, although there is an epistemological distinction between God’s nature and God’s essence, both are unchangeably rooted in the invariable God.

The secondary literature on the relation of God’s nature and essence is divided. Horton emphasizes the subjective experience of the human regarding our knowledge of God, saying that only through Christ’s mediation of revelation “are we assured that we will encounter a gracious and welcoming God instead of a terrifying judge.” According to Horton, God’s accommodation in Christ does not show us who God really is in himself but simply who God has chosen to be towards his people.<sup>219</sup> As we have previously demonstrated, Calvin’s concern with who God is “toward us” does not reflect a duality in God that changes based on the subject in view. Instead, Calvin teaches that God’s unchanging nature is revealed through his concrete works in the world. Horton is right to say that believers can only know God’s welcome through Christ, but (as we shall see more clearly in Chapter 4) this distinction is not based on variability in God’s nature but upon God’s inherent judgment upon evil. To those who remain in sin, God is seen as a judge, but to those who are clothed in Christ’s righteousness, God is known as a Father. God does not simply choose to act differently toward different people as Horton indicates, but he acts in accordance with who he is in himself, in accordance with his unchanging nature.

Holmes, Parker, and van der Kooi all clearly indicate a direct connection between God’s accommodation of himself to humanity and God in himself.<sup>220</sup> Holmes contends that in Calvin, God’s accommodation provides truth but not complete truth. Holmes points out that God has accommodated himself to us in Christ, allowing the immeasurable God to be known in the measurable person of

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<sup>218</sup> *Comm. Jonah* 4:2; *CO* 43:265-266. Cf. Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 286.

<sup>219</sup> Michael Horton, “Knowing God: Calvin’s Understanding of Revelation,” in *John Calvin and Evangelical Theology: Legacy and Prospect*, ed. Sung Wook Chung, (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2009), 4.

<sup>220</sup> Helm also links God’s essence and nature, saying, “God’s activities...partly reveal his nature and are, so to speak, endorsed or guaranteed by his immutable essence,” Helm, *Calvin’s Ideas*, 12. However, he does so using a speculative methodology that claims more knowledge of God’s essence than Calvin would espouse. He also seeks to affirm God’s freedom in a manner that aligns with a teaching of the *potentia absoluta* of God, something that Calvin vehemently opposed (*Inst.* 3.23.2, p. 950; *CO* 2:700). Cf. David C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 40-50. See “God is Just, Therefore God’s Will is Just” in Chapter 3).

Christ.<sup>221</sup> Parker asserts that “God reveals Himself to us for His Glory and for our salvation; and hence he reveals, not His *essentia* which no man can see and live, but His *gloria* and His *virtutes*; i.e. that He is God and that He will be God toward us.” God’s revelation through his powers does not reveal all of God, but “God does not reveal Himself as different from what He is in Himself. He who is revealed is He who reveals Himself...We know God truly, but we do not know God wholly.”<sup>222</sup> Finally, van der Kooi asserts that God is other and above us in such a way that humans cannot have knowledge of God’s essence but do receive knowledge of God that is consistent with who God is.<sup>223</sup> Simply put, although believers do not know God’s essence, they do know God’s unchanging nature.

### ***IMPLICATIONS: KNOWLEDGE OF GOD BY FAITH ALONE***

As we conclude, let us review our path thus far. We have sought a foundation for discussing God’s disposition toward humanity by examining Calvin’s teaching about what we are able to know about God and how we are able to access that knowledge. We first analyzed how human beings come to any accurate knowledge of God. We discovered that knowledge of God is offered to all but is only rightly discernible to those with faith in Christ the Mediator. In light of human sinfulness and creaturely limitations before God’s overwhelming majesty, we have found that all knowledge of God comes through God’s accommodation of himself to humanity. This accommodation occurs primarily through the created order (rightly interpreted), through Scripture and ultimately through the incarnate Christ. Next we examined what we can know about God. There, we discovered that for Calvin, humanity cannot know or speculate about God’s incomprehensible essence, but they can have limited, skeletal knowledge of God’s essence, which he relates to useful, pastoral ends. The positive content of Calvin’s teaching on the knowledge of God consists in God’s revelation of what sort he is (*qualis sit*), or his unchanging

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<sup>221</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, “Calvin on Scripture,” in *Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology*, ed. Neil B. MacDonald and Carl Trueman, (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2008), 158-159.

<sup>222</sup> Parker, *Knowledge of God*, 54. Cf. Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 285.

<sup>223</sup> Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 126.

nature, through his actions in the world. This nature is described by God's powers, which constitute the positive content of Calvin's teaching on the doctrine of God. This knowledge of God is meant to have practical usefulness, be experienced, and lead to pious faith that is certain of God's disposition toward us.

Therefore, in the end, right knowledge of God is something that only God can provide through accommodation to those with faith. The knowledge is limited, skeletal knowledge of God's essence and ample, concrete, positive knowledge of God's nature as expressed in his works. Those with faith can be absolutely sure of God's disposition toward them and thus respond with faith marked by a life of trusting obedience to and worship of the God revealed in his works, in Scripture, and most clearly in Christ.

In addition, there is no neutral place from which to study God's disposition toward humanity. Outside of the perspective of faith, no right knowledge of God can be accessed. In other words, for Calvin, there is no Archimedean point from which one could access and evaluate God (or any Christian doctrine). Only through trust in the Mediator can one have accurate knowledge of God as he has accommodated himself to humanity. This is not because those with faith have inherent, superior capabilities but because faith is the only way to receive the knowledge of God that Christ mediates to humanity. Therefore, as we consider God's disposition toward humanity in Calvin's teaching, we come knowing the trustworthy, unchanging nature of the merciful, righteous, and judging God who has made himself known most clearly and highlighted his mercy in the person and work of Christ.

Finally then, what the implications of this knowledge of God's nature for the rest of this study and for our question of God's disposition toward humanity? Simply put, although we cannot yet forward answers to the question regarding God's disposition toward humanity in Calvin's teaching on predestination and atonement, we now know the nature of the God who predestines and brings about atonement. For Calvin, the merciful, righteous, and judging Father is the God of predestination and atonement. Therefore, with God's unchanging nature in mind, we turn to the first of our two specific doctrinal studies to examine God's disposition toward humanity in Calvin's teaching on predestination.

### **Chapter 3—GOD'S DISPOSITION TOWARD HUMANITY IN PREDESTINATION**

A baffling question this seems to many. For they think nothing more inconsistent than that out of the common multitude of men some should be predestined to salvation, others to destruction. But how mistakenly they entangle themselves will become clear in the following discussion. Besides, in the very darkness that frightens them not only is the usefulness [*utilitas*] of this doctrine made known but also its very sweet fruit. We shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God's free mercy [*ex fonte gratuitate misericordiae Dei*] until we come to know his eternal election, which illumines God's grace by this contrast [*comparatione*]: that he does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation but gives [*dat*] to some what he denies [*negat*] to others.<sup>1</sup>

If any one again objects – this is making God act with duplicity, the answer is ready, that God always wishes the same thing [*semper idem velle*], though by different ways, and in a manner inscrutable to us. Although, therefore, God's will is simple [*simplex est Dei voluntas*], yet great variety is involved in it, as far as our senses are concerned.<sup>2</sup>

Calvin's doctrine of predestination<sup>3</sup> has long been identified as a central element of Calvin's theological project.<sup>4</sup> As van der Kooi writes, "If ever a doctrine has become notorious, if ever a person has become identified with and vilified for a doctrine, if a movement named for that person has ever become isolated through a doctrine, then that has been Calvin and his doctrine of predestination."<sup>5</sup> Although recent scholarship has moved away from identifying predestination, or any single doctrine, as the central dogma of Calvin's theological project,<sup>6</sup> predestination is still a key concept for Calvin's understanding of God's relation with the world, and, on a popular level, predestination is often considered synonymous with the

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<sup>1</sup> From the introductory section of Calvin's four chapters specifically addressing predestination; *Inst.* 3.21.1, p. 921; *CO* 2:679.

<sup>2</sup> *Comm. Ezek.* 18:23; *CO* 40:445-446.

<sup>3</sup> By "predestination," I refer to the doctrine that includes both (positive) election (to life and eternal communion with God) and (negative) reprobation (to death and damnation).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Wilhelm H. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (London: Lutterworth Press, 1956), 159.

<sup>5</sup> Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 159.

<sup>6</sup> Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 43-44. Cf. I. John Hesselink, "Calvin's Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 77-80.

(sometimes derogatory) term “Calvinist.”<sup>7</sup> In his day, Calvin was aware of the controversial nature of predestination. During his leadership of the church in Geneva, his doctrine of predestination received resistance from within Geneva and from neighboring Reformed communities. Albert Pighius, Jerome Bolsec, and Georgius of Sicily were a few outspoken opponents of the doctrine, in response to whom Calvin wrote his *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, published less than a year after the Genevan City Council ruled in Calvin’s favor against Bolsec’s challenges.<sup>8</sup> In Calvin’s attempts to unify the early Reformed churches, predestination also proved to be a point of disagreement between him and the key Swiss leader Heinrich Bullinger, who espoused the teaching of single predestination.<sup>9</sup>

Although we shall expand further below, for Calvin, predestination is God’s gracious work that is made known in Scripture, aligns with human experience, and stands in continuity with the traditional teaching of the church.<sup>10</sup> At the heart of Calvin’s teaching on predestination is the certainty and gratuity of salvation in Christ for those with faith (the elect).<sup>11</sup> However, the bare facts of predestination can be summed up relatively simply, “before men are born their lot is assigned to each of them by the secret will of God.”<sup>12</sup> The triune God as active subject chooses

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<sup>7</sup> In light of the fact that Calvin was only one contributor to the diverse Reformed tradition that developed over hundreds of years, we shall avoid using the term, “Calvinist.” Cf. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 277.

<sup>8</sup> CO 8:249-366. Cf. de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin*, 158-159.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bullinger to Calvin, 1 Dec. 1551, CO 14:215. Cf. Richard Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology From Calvin to Perkins* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1986), 45. Cf. Cornelis P. Venema, “Heinrich Bullinger’s Correspondence on Calvin’s Doctrine of Predestination, 1551-1553,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* XVII, no. 4 (1986): 435-450.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin most commonly draws upon Augustine for support. As Christian Link says, Calvin’s doctrine of predestination was not new, but had all of the same primary features as Luther and Augustine’s (and possibly Paul’s) doctrine of election, Christian Link, “Election and Predestination,” in *John Calvin’s Impact on Church and Society: 1509-2009*, ed. Martin E. Hirzel and Martin Sallmann, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 107. Cf. Eberhard Busch, *Gotteserkenntnis Und Menschlichkeit* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2005), 67. Cf. Augustine, “On the Predestination of the Saints,” in *Saint Augustine: Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1992). Cf. Martin Luther, “On the Bondage of the Will,” in *Discourse on Free Will*, (New York: Ungar, 1961),

<sup>11</sup> Gibson, *Reading the Decree*, 76. Cf. *Comm. John* 13:18; CO 47:310-311. Cf. *Harmony of the Gospels*, Matt. 11:27; CO 45:319.

<sup>12</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 9:14, CO 49:181.



some people from before time to rescue from their state of sin and others to leave in the just deserts of their sinfulness.<sup>13</sup>

The question that faces us is whether this doctrine of predestination reveals God as holding one or two dispositions toward humanity. It would be simple to provide proof-texts from Calvin's writings to support either a one-disposition or a two-disposition hypothesis. An often quoted two-disposition proof-text drawn from the *Institutes* is,

We call predestination God's eternal decree [*aeternum Dei decretum*], by which [God] compacted with himself [*apud se*] what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created [*creantur*] in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created [*conditus est*] to one or the other of these ends [*finem*], we speak of him as predestined to life or to death.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, one could choose an example like Calvin's commentary on John 3:16: "Christ brought life because the Heavenly Father loves the human race [*genus humanum*], and wishes that they should not perish [*perire nolit*]."<sup>15</sup> However, in Calvin's task as an exegete of the diverse texts of Scripture, no single text will illuminate Calvin's teaching on the matter.<sup>16</sup>

Instead of carefully selecting proof-texts to support a one-disposition or two-disposition hypothesis regarding God's stance toward humanity, we shall seek to understand Calvin's doctrine of predestination across the breadth of his theological project, acknowledging the various ways he (and the Bible) discusses the doctrine.<sup>17</sup> In the end, we shall see that in Calvin's account of predestination,

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<sup>13</sup> Gibson, *Reading the Decree*, 35-36. Although Calvin emphasizes the *electio Patris*, he also understands Christ as subject (*autorem*) of election as the divine Son (*Comm. John* 13:18; *CO* 47:311) and as executor of election as Mediator, Gibson, *Reading the Decree*, 76. Cf. Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> *Inst.* 3.21.5, p. 926; *CO* 2:683.

<sup>15</sup> *Comm. John* 3:16; *CO* 47:63-64.

<sup>16</sup> As van der Kooi says, "Calvin desired to be a Biblical theologian first and foremost, and with regard to the discussion of election sought to respect the Biblical-theological connections which he had discerned," van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 161.

<sup>17</sup> Although it seems foolish to ascribe no significance to the placement of the doctrine, that specific meaning remains unclear. Hesselink believes that the placement may have theological significance, "for [predestination] is not discussed theoretically in connection with the doctrine of God or creation, but is simply a discussion of the experiential fact in reference to the attitudes of believers and unbelievers," Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism*, 42-43. Muller has compellingly asserted that Calvin was likely following a *loci* approach to the ordering of the *Institutes* which does not indicate priority of significance based on order, Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 118-139. Trueman (Carl R. Trueman, "Election: Calvin's Theology and Its Early Reception," in *Calvin's Theology and Its*

God's one, secret, and righteous will is accommodated to the elect in a two-fold but asymmetrical way: (1) God's disclosed disposition toward humanity is extended to all and effected in the elect in a manner that corresponds directly with God's nature; (2) God's veiled, reprobating disposition is inscrutably enacted toward the reprobate in a manner that only corresponds with God's nature in part. To show this, we shall begin by briefly defining key terms. Then we shall describe the content and results of God's disclosed electing will before recounting what Calvin teaches regarding God's veiled reprobating will. We shall next explore the relationship between the united but asymmetrically related disclosed and veiled dispositions of God toward humanity that are only known by faith prior to examining two common critiques of Calvin's doctrine of predestination in light of our findings.

### **KEY DEFINITIONS**

To begin our examination of God's disposition toward humanity in Calvin's doctrine of predestination, we must define a few key terms, namely "God's will," "disclosed" will or disposition, and "veiled" will or disposition.

First, for Calvin, "God's will" refers to God's purposes and intent that are only known by God unless God chooses to reveal them. As noted above, although the terms are nearly synonymous, God's will is God's disposition in action. For Calvin, because God dwells in unapproachable light, his secret will is not something that can be scrutinized by limited humans, but because God has revealed his nature, we can know that God's one will corresponds with God's righteous nature, even if we are not able to fully discern how it does so.<sup>18</sup> Also, consistent with his non-speculative and pastoral methodology, Calvin does not discuss the multiple

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*Reception: Disputes, Developments, and New Possibilities*, ed. J. Todd Billings and I. John Hesselink, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 98.), Zachman (Randall C. Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian: The Shape of His Writings and Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 101), van der Kooi (*As in a Mirror*, 161), and Gibson (*Reading the Decree*, 170) all, with various emphases, also assert that Calvin's order serves his rhetorical aims for rightly communicating the story of salvation.

<sup>18</sup> As we have seen, Calvin passionately opposes the idea of a God of *potentia absoluta* who could act in a way that does not correspond to his nature. See "God is Just, So God's Will is Just" below.

distinctions in God's one will that were intricately developed in the era of Reformed orthodoxy.<sup>19</sup>

Instead of trying to comprehensively describe something that is beyond human ability to know (God's will), Calvin describes God's will from the perspective of those with faith by means of two categories, namely (1) what God has plainly made known to the faithful in the gospel through Scripture and (2) what is hidden in God's secret counsel but partially accommodated in Scripture. For instance, commenting upon 2 Peter 3:9, Calvin asks that if God wills that all should come to repentance, why are all not saved? He answers, "No mention is here made of the hidden purpose of God (*arcano Dei consilio*), according to which the reprobate are doomed to their own ruin, but only of his will as made known to us in the gospel (*de voluntate quae nobis in evangelio patefit*). For God there stretches forth his hand without a difference to all, but lays hold only of those, to lead them to himself, whom he has chosen before the foundation of the world."<sup>20</sup> Here, Calvin distinguishes between God's revealed disposition of salvation as expressed in the call and application of the gospel and God's veiled disposition of reprobation.

Drawing upon this distinction, we shall utilize the term "disclosed" will or disposition to refer to the disposition of God toward humanity that is revealed in Christ and in the gospel. As Calvin says regarding what we can know about election, "We must begin with what is revealed in Christ concerning the love of the Father for us and what Christ Himself daily preaches [*praedicet*] to us through the Gospel."<sup>21</sup> In Christ, Scripture, and the message of the gospel, God's electing will toward humanity has been disclosed to those with faith.

Returning to the 2 Peter text, Calvin describes God's reprobating will, or disposition, as his "hidden purpose" (*arcano...consilio*) because it is part of God's will about which we can know very little. For Calvin, the only humanly known reason for God's reprobating will is God's secret plan.<sup>22</sup> Instead of speaking of God's "hidden" will, we shall use the term "veiled" will or disposition because,

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Muller, *P.R.R.D.*, Vol. 3, 443-475.

<sup>20</sup> *Comm. 2 Pet.* 3:9; *CO* 55:475-476. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 11:34; *CO* 49:231.

<sup>21</sup> *De Aeterna*, p. 113, *CO* 8:307.

<sup>22</sup> *Inst.* 3.23.1, p. 948. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 9:14, *CO* 49:181.

although much about God's reprobating will is hidden, it is partially disclosed in Scripture and experience, as through a veil.

Now that the terms and basic definitions are in place, we shall begin our closer study of God's disposition toward humanity as expressed in Calvin's doctrine of predestination by briefly describing God's disclosed electing will.

### ***GOD'S DISCLOSED ELECTING WILL: UNMERITED GRACE EXTENDED TO ALL AND RECEIVED BY THE ELECT***

For though God invites all people indiscriminately [*totum populum promiscue*] to himself, yet he does not inwardly draw [*trahit*] any but those whom he knows to be his people, and whom he has given to his Son, and of whom also he will be the faithful keeper to the end.<sup>23</sup>

Introducing his commentary on the letter to the Ephesians, Calvin provides a glimpse into God's disclosed electing will. Calvin there says that Paul begins the letter by discussing election, which allows Paul to state,

that [the Ephesians] were now called into the kingdom of God, because they had been appointed to life before they were born. And here occurs a striking display of God's wonderful mercy [*admirabilis Dei misericordia*], when the salvation of men is traced to its true and native source [*vero et nativo fonte*], the free act of adoption. But as the minds of men are ill fitted to receive so sublime a mystery [*sublime arcanum*], he betakes himself to prayer, that God would enlighten the Ephesians in the full knowledge of Christ [*plenam Christi cognitionem*].<sup>24</sup>

In short, God's disclosed electing will is expressed in the gospel of unmerited grace that is extended to all and received by the elect.

### **The Gospel: Sola Gratia**

First, God's disclosed electing will is revealed through God's unmerited favor extended in the gospel. For Calvin, election is inseparable from the Reformation refrain of *sola gratia* because it roots salvation solely in God's grace as witnessed to in Scripture. Therefore Calvin can say, "We shall never be clearly persuaded, as

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<sup>23</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 11:2; *CO* 49:212.

<sup>24</sup> *Comm. Eph.* "Argument"; *CO* 51:141.

we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God's free mercy until we come to know his eternal election."<sup>25</sup> If any part of election found its source in humanity, salvation would no longer be a work of grace. As Trueman summarizes, "Election is part and parcel of the Protestant polemic against any notion of merit in the Christian life."<sup>26</sup>

Calvin highlights the unmerited nature of salvation by founding election on the eternal good pleasure of God alone. Calvin states in his sermon on Ephesians 1:4-6, "No other cause makes us God's children but only his choice of us in himself [*choisis a soy*]."<sup>27</sup> Calvin similarly says of our salvation that Paul "openly ascribes the whole cause [*causam totam*] to the election of God, and that gratuitous, and in no way depending on men; so that in the salvation of the godly nothing higher must be sought than the goodness of God [*Dei bonitate*]..."<sup>28</sup> Calvin's ultimate example of the unmerited nature of election is the election of Jesus Christ's undeserving humanity into the hypostatic union in the Mediator.<sup>29</sup>

Even responding to the calling is not based on human works; "All who are taught by God are effectually drawn [*efficaciter trahi*] so as to come."<sup>30</sup> By rooting election only in God's will and purpose, Calvin affirms God's freedom in the gift of grace; nothing outside of God compels God to bestow grace. Calvin says, "For to say that 'God purposed in himself' means the same thing as to say that he considered nothing outside himself with which to be concerned in making his decree...Surely the grace of God deserves alone to be proclaimed in our election only if it is freely given [*gratuita sit*]."<sup>31</sup>

Along the same lines, Calvin repeatedly and vehemently rules out the possibility of God's electing on the basis of foreknowledge of future human merit or the possibility of God's planting a seed of election resulting in good works that would merit salvation.<sup>32</sup> The complete sinfulness of humanity precludes God's

<sup>25</sup> *Inst.* 3.21.1, p. 921; *CO* 2:679. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 9:11; *CO* 49:177. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 11:6; *CO* 49:215.

<sup>26</sup> Trueman, "Election," 100.

<sup>27</sup> *Sermons on Ephesians*, 1:4-6, p. 39; *CO* 51:274.

<sup>28</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 9:11; *CO* 49:177.

<sup>29</sup> *Inst.* 2.17.1, p. 529; *CO* 2:386.

<sup>30</sup> *Comm. John* 6:45; *CO* 47:150. Cf. *Inst.* 3.24.1, p. 966; *CO* 2:712.

<sup>31</sup> *Inst.* 3.22.3, p. 935; *CO* 2:689.

<sup>32</sup> E.g. *Inst.* 3.22.3, p. 935; *CO* 2:689.

foreknowledge of any merit.<sup>33</sup> Thus, Calvin says that it is “impossible that God should foresee [*praevideat*] anything in man that was not worthy of destruction, until He should Himself have created him anew by His Spirit.”<sup>34</sup> In sum, for Calvin, God’s disclosed electing disposition toward humanity is *sola gratia*, founded upon, fulfilled by, and witnessing to the unmerited grace of God.

### **The Call to All, Faith as Gift to Some**

To whom does God extend his disclosed disposition? Is it only for the elect or for all humanity? Here we see a paradox in which Calvin asserts that God’s disclosed electing will is extended to all humanity via the call of the gospel but only received by the elect through faith, which is a gift from God.

First of all, God’s loving desire to be reconciled to men and women is communicated to all people indiscriminately through the gracious call of the gospel. For example, Calvin expounds the words of Ezekiel 18:23 that God desires all to come to life; “God wills not the death of a sinner, because he [hurriedly] meets [*occurrit*] him of his own accord, and is not only prepared to receive all who fly to his pity, but he calls them towards him with a loud voice [*alta voce*], when he sees how they are alienated from all hope of safety [*salutis*].” He goes on to explain, “We hold, then, that God wills not the death of a sinner [*nolle mortem peccatoris*], since he calls all equally to repentance, and promises himself prepared to receive them if they only seriously repent [*serio resipiscant*].”<sup>35</sup>

God calls all in a manner that reveals that he is ready to accept any who would come to their senses (*resipiscere*) by receiving his gift of grace. This corresponds with Calvin’s typical approach to passages that seem to indicate that God desires the salvation of *all people*, as seen in his commentaries on 2 Peter 3:9<sup>36</sup> and 1 Tim 2:4<sup>37</sup> and in his comments on Ezekiel 33:11 and 1 Tim 2:4 in the *Institutes*.<sup>38</sup> Calvin

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. *De Aeterna*, p. 155-156; *CO* 8:341-342.

<sup>34</sup> *De Aeterna*, p. 115; *CO* 8:308.

<sup>35</sup> *Comm. Ezek. 18:23*; *CO* 40:445. Cf. “He calls all men to himself, without a single exception, and gives [*destinat*] Christ to all, that we may be illuminated by him,” *Comm. Is. 42:6*; *CO* 37:65.

<sup>36</sup> “So wonderful is his love towards mankind, that he would have them all to be saved...God is ready to receive all to repentance, so that none may perish,” *Comm. 2 Peter 3:9*; *CO* 55:475.

<sup>37</sup> *Comm. 1 Tim. 2:4*; *CO* 52:268.

is concerned with the pastoral implications of God's disclosed disposition, namely that one who looks to Christ by faith would not doubt God's love for them. Along those same lines, when commenting on John 3:16, Calvin says, "For men are not easily convinced that God loves them; and so, to remove all doubt, He has expressly stated that we are so very dear to God, that on our account, he did not spare [*ne pepercerit*] even His only begotten Son."<sup>39</sup>

Here we also begin to see Calvin's two levels of love and election. For Calvin, the story of Israel's election is a microcosm of the election to faith.<sup>40</sup> Abraham and his children were generally elected as a nation to be God's people, but within Israel, God especially elected some individuals, as in the case of God's choice of Jacob over Esau. After Christ's coming, God's general election is observed in the preaching of the gospel to all people, while his special election comes to pass in those uniquely given the gift of faith by the inward call of the Spirit.<sup>41</sup> God's mercy is displayed in general election, but it is made even more clear in special election.<sup>42</sup>

These two levels of election and love provide the categories for Calvin to distinguish between the universal call of the gospel to repent and the particular gift of faith and repentance for the elect. Calvin says, "Experience teaches [*experientia...docet*] that God wills the repentance of those whom he invites to himself, in such a way that he does not touch the hearts of all."<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in his comments on John 3:16, Calvin says that God "shows He is favorable to the whole world when He calls all without exception to the faith of Christ, which is indeed an entry into life." However, God only makes the calling effective for some.<sup>44</sup> This calling is made effective by the enabling of the Spirit so believers know "that faith does not depend on the will of men, but that it is God who gives it."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Inst.* 3.24.16, p. 984; *CO* 2:726. Specifically drawing on the context of the 1 Timothy passage, Calvin says that Paul's words mean that God desires that there would be no discrimination in the preaching and hearing of the gospel based on social class.

<sup>39</sup> *Comm. John* 3:16; *CO* 47:65.

<sup>40</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 11:2; *CO* 49:212.

<sup>41</sup> *Inst.* 3.21.5-7, p. 926-931; *CO* 2:682-687.

<sup>42</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 9:6; *CO* 49:174-175. Cf. *Sermons on Ephesians*, 1:3-4, p. 23; *CO* 51:260.

<sup>43</sup> *Inst.* 3.24.15, p. 983; *CO* 2:725. Note how experience informs Calvin's exposition. We shall return to this concept below.

<sup>44</sup> *Comm. John* 3:16; *CO* 47:65.

<sup>45</sup> *Comm. John* 6:44; *CO* 47:149. Cf. *Comm. Heb.* 6:4-5; *CO* 55:72. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 10:16, *CO* 49:206.

To summarize, for Calvin God's disclosed, electing will is God's graceful disposition toward all people which is brought to fruition in the elect by the power of the Spirit. God's desire to rescue humans from sin in love ought to be expressed to all through the preaching of the gospel because God loves all generally and is ready to receive any who would repent and trust. However, highlighting the sinful state of humanity, Calvin is also clear that repentance and faith are unmerited gifts given by the Spirit to those whom God has chosen from before time to be adopted as God's children in Christ.

We are left with a question: Is God's disclosed disposition one of unmerited love toward all humanity or only to the elect? For Calvin it is both, on different levels. As Muller states, "Calvin was one of the many Reformation-era inheritors of an Augustinian exegetical tradition within which those biblical passages that refer to an offer of salvation to the whole world or declare the saving power of Christ's death to all people are understood as coherent with the divine intention to save only the elect."<sup>46</sup> Here it is helpful to recall Calvin's doctrine of God; Calvin is supremely confident of God's merciful, just, and judging nature as loving Father while also recognizing that human creatures cannot know God comprehensively. Thus, Calvin is content to place his confidence in God's merciful nature expressed in the legitimate offer of salvation to all people while also trusting the righteousness of God's secret counsel and providential reign. Therefore, Calvin does not speculate about God's attitude toward others but follows his own advice that "they are madmen who seek their own or others' salvation in the labyrinth [*labyrintho*] of predestination."<sup>47</sup> Only the gift of God's call *a posteriori* can show forth one's election. As a result, the elect embrace God's unmerited love for them and obey God's call to preach the good news of that love to all people, confident that God is ready to receive any who respond in faith.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 78.

<sup>47</sup> *Comm. John* 6:40; *CO* 47:147.

<sup>48</sup> As we shall see below ("Causality"), Calvin did not see a problem in saying that one event has two distinct causes; here human faith and God's electing will are both real (compatibilist) causes of salvation.

Calvin also sees God's extension of his mercy to all as a further witness to the guilt of the reprobate, *Inst.* 3.24.15, p. 983; *CO* 2:725.



With that in mind, we now note a few of the key results of God's disclosed electing disposition toward humanity. For Calvin, although the primary result of God's disclosed electing will is the adoption of individuals as sons and daughters of God by faith, this adoption includes other necessary effects, most importantly the assurance of salvation for the believer and the believer's humble ascription of glory to God.<sup>49</sup> Assurance comes primarily through an awareness of Christ and his work, but it is also bolstered by the knowledge of election that reminds believers that their salvation (and their faith) is rooted in God's power and grace.<sup>50</sup>

In addition, God's disclosed electing will results in God's glory and the believer's humility.<sup>51</sup> Calvin speaks of God's glory as both the revelation of his nature and the resulting, rightful praise ascribed to God.<sup>52</sup> In both respects, Calvin can call God's glory the "final cause" (*causa finalis*) of election.<sup>53</sup> As the sole originator and executor of election, God is made known and praised for his work of election. God's unmerited election also leads to proper humility as it illuminates the reality that everything good in a believer, including salvation, is from God.<sup>54</sup>

In sum, for Calvin, God's disclosed electing disposition toward humanity is exhibited as God offers unmerited grace to all people and enables a response of faith and repentance in the elect that results in assurance of adoption and humble worship of God. This disclosed will corresponds directly with God's revealed nature and is thus openly known by those with faith.

Having examined God's disclosed electing will, we now turn to examine the other element of God's one, righteous will, namely the veiled reprobating will of God.

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 170-171.

<sup>50</sup> *Comm. Eph.* 1:3; *CO* 51:146. Cf. *Inst.* 3.24.5, 970; *CO* 2:715. Cf. *Sermons on Ephesians*, 1:7-10, p. 60; *CO* 51:292.

<sup>51</sup> *Inst.* 3.21.1, p. 921-922; *CO* 2:679.

<sup>52</sup> "God will have the whole praise [*toute la louange*] of our salvation be attributed to him," John Calvin, *Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, trans. John Field (Willowstreet, PA: Old Paths Publications, 1996), 37; *CO* 58:38. Cf. *Comm. Mal.* 1:2-6; *CO* 44:409.

<sup>53</sup> *Comm. Eph.* 1:5; *CO* 51:148.

<sup>54</sup> *Inst.* 2.2.11, p. 269; *CO* 2:195. Cf. *Inst.* 3.23.13, p. 962; *CO* 2:709.

## **GOD'S VEILED REPROBATING WILL**

Recalling Calvin's comments on 2 Peter 3:9, we now come to the portion of our study in which we shall examine the "hidden purpose of God, according to which the reprobate are doomed to their own ruin."<sup>55</sup> Calvin treats God's reprobating will in a variety of ways, sometimes presenting it as seemingly parallel to God's electing will (as in his introductory statements to the predestination section of the *Institutes*) and other times giving it little to no attention (as in his commentary and sermons on Ephesians 1).<sup>56</sup> However, in an examination of texts across Calvin's project, we find that he teaches that God's veiled reprobating will is God's decision from before time according to God's secret counsel to create those whom he would leave in their sinful state to be condemned. Reprobation is caused both by God's sovereign rule over all contingent occurrences and by human rebellion against God. Calvin's key reasons for holding the doctrine of God's veiled reprobating will are the witness of Scripture, the testimony of human experience, Calvin's understanding of God's freedom, and the coherence of Calvin's broader theological project. We shall address these in turn.

### **The Causes of Reprobation**

God's veiled reprobating will is expressed in God's decision, as determined by his secret counsel, to create those whom he would leave in their sinful state to be condemned. Calvin describes the doctrine from two different angles, either emphasizing God or human sin as the cause of reprobation.<sup>57</sup>

In one sense, God is the ultimate cause of reprobation as it is hidden in his secret plan. In line with Calvin's commitment (like Augustine's) that God causes all that comes to pass,<sup>58</sup> Calvin links God's reprobating will with his providence, saying, "Since the disposition of all things is in God's hand, since the decision of

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<sup>55</sup> *Comm.* 2 Peter 3:9; *CO* 55:475.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Paul Jacobs, *Prädestination Und Verantwortlichkeit Bei Calvin* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968).

<sup>57</sup> For more on Calvin's compatibilist view, in which there could be more than one cause for the same event, see "Causality" section below.

<sup>58</sup> *Inst.* 3.23.2, p. 949; *CO* 2:700.

salvation or of death rests in his power, he so ordains by his plan and will that among men some are born destined [*devoti*] for certain death from the womb, who might glorify [*glorificent*] his name by their own destruction [*suo exitio*].”<sup>59</sup> Calling upon Augustine, Calvin also says, “Those whom the Lord unquestionably foreknew [*praesciebat*] would go to destruction have been created [*esse...creatos*] by him. This has happened because he has so willed it. But why he so willed it is not for our reason to inquire, for we cannot comprehend it.”<sup>60</sup> Calvin repeatedly asserts that there is no reason for reprobation beyond God’s will (counsel, secret plan, good pleasure, etc). For example, the only reason God chooses some and passes by others “from the foundation of the world” is “His own sheer pleasure” (*mero suo beneplacito*).<sup>61</sup>

In the other sense, human sin is the cause of reprobation. For Calvin, the universal and unforgivable sin of the reprobate is the denial of the gospel.<sup>62</sup> Since all humanity is “vitiating by sin” and “odious to God,” they are thus “subject to the judgment of death” in themselves.<sup>63</sup> Calvin says, “For the proper and genuine [*propria genuinaque*] cause of sin is not God’s hidden counsel but the evident will of man [*hominis voluntas*].”<sup>64</sup> In *De Aeterna*, remarking that God hates nothing that he has made except for the “degenerate nature,” (*degenerem naturam*) Calvin asserts, “For though God for secret reasons had decreed before the defection of Adam what He would do, yet we read in Scripture that nothing is condemned by Him except sin. It remains that God had just causes [*iustas...causas*] for reprobating part of mankind, though they are hidden from us; but he hates and condemns nothing in man except what is alien to His justice [*a iustitia sua alienum*].”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *Inst.* 3.23.6, p. 954; *CO* 2:703. My translation.

<sup>60</sup> Quoting from Augustine, *Letters* clxxxvi. 7.23, in *Inst.* 3.23.5, p. 952; *CO* 2:702. My translation. Cf. Augustine, *Letters*, Vol. 4 (165-203) (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1955).

<sup>61</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 11:6; *CO* 49:215. Cf. *Inst.* 3.23.1, p. 948; *CO* 2:699. Cf. 3.22.11, p. 947; *CO* 2:698. An obvious question here relates to Calvin’s anthropology. Do human beings inherently have value to God? We shall see in Calvin’s account of creation in Chapter 4 that Calvin’s answer is yes.

Nevertheless, Calvin’s commitment to the greatness of God’s majesty vis-à-vis human comprehension seems to provide space for this type of contradiction. In short, for Calvin, God’s posture does not make sense, but God knows what he is doing.

<sup>62</sup> *Inst.* 3.3.23, p. 619; *CO* 2:454.

<sup>63</sup> *Inst.* 3.23.3, p. 950; *CO* 2:700.

<sup>64</sup> *De Aeterna*, p. 122; *CO* 8:314.

<sup>65</sup> *De Aeterna*, p. 99-100; *CO* 8:295-296.

While recognizing the apparent tension between them, Calvin affirms two causes of God's reprobating will. Reprobation is both God's inscrutable will from eternity and the direct result of human sin. In short, God creates some from for destruction by leaving them in their state of sin and just condemnation.

### Calvin's Reasons for the Doctrine

Having examined the causes of reprobation, we now turn to briefly overview Calvin's key reasons for holding the doctrine as such, particularly Scripture, experience, God's freedom and glory, and doctrinal cohesiveness. Although space does not allow extensive elaboration, an overview of Calvin's reasoning for the doctrine enhances our understanding of why Calvin considers God's veiled reprobating will as necessary to his doctrine of predestination.<sup>66</sup>

#### Scripture's Witness

Faithful to his primary task as an exegete of Scripture,<sup>67</sup> Calvin draws chiefly and extensively on Scripture to develop the doctrine of God's reprobating will. In his comments on Romans 9, Calvin highlights his intended Scriptural, non-speculative theological methodology. After noting the human tendency to curiously enter into the dangerous "labyrinth" of predestination, Calvin wonders if the godly should altogether avoid considering predestination; he replies, "By no means [*minime*]: for as the Holy Spirit has taught us nothing but what it behooves us to know, the knowledge of this would no doubt be useful [*utilis*], provided it confined itself [*se confinebit*] to the word of God. Let this then be our sacred rule, to seek to know nothing concerning it, except what Scripture teaches us [*scriptura docet*]."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> In this section, it is particularly important to remember that for Calvin, "predestination" always refers to double predestination, including both election and reprobation.

<sup>67</sup> Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 5.

<sup>68</sup> *Comm. Rom. 9:14, CO 49:181*. My translation.

Although Calvin's primary text for explicating predestination, and especially reprobation, is Romans 9-11,<sup>69</sup> Calvin sees the doctrine taught or implied throughout Scripture. Besides Romans 9-11, in the the *Institutes* and in *De Aeterna*, Calvin utilizes many other key passages, including Ephesians 1:3-11, Romans 8:28-30, Malachi 1:2-6, John 6:37 and 44, Isaiah 6:9, and John 17.<sup>70</sup> Calvin also does not limit his discussion of predestination to texts that explicitly discuss it.<sup>71</sup>

In short, because reprobation is included in Scripture, Calvin teaches it, but he also believes that we must not go beyond Scripture's witness in our teaching of God's reprobating will.<sup>72</sup>

### Experience and Observation

Although Calvin's understanding of God's reprobating will is primarily based on Scripture, in line with his humanist approach, experience also confirms and informs the pastorally beneficial doctrine.<sup>73</sup> Calvin begins his section regarding predestination in the *Institutes* with an appeal to his observation of the unequal preaching and reception of the gospel to confirm his doctrine of predestination that he later explicates from Scripture.<sup>74</sup> Also in the *Institutes*, Calvin says, "We teach nothing not borne out by experience [*usu compertum*]: that God has always been free [*liberum*] to bestow his grace on whom he wills."<sup>75</sup> For Calvin, experience confirms what Scripture teaches, namely that some are chosen to eternal life and others are not.

Experience also informs Calvin's understanding of God's reprobating will. In particular, Calvin appeals to his experience of preaching the gospel in which only 20 out of 100 listeners would respond in faith as evidence that the number of the

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<sup>69</sup> E.g. *Inst.* 3.22.4-6, pp. 936-940; *CO* 2:690-693. For a detailed examination of Calvin's exegesis of Romans 9-11, see Gibson, *Reading the Decree*.

<sup>70</sup> All except the Malachi text are explicitly mentioned in *De Aeterna*.

<sup>71</sup> E.g. *Sermons on Election and Reprobation* from Genesis 25-27. Cf. E.g. *Comm. John* 3:16; *CO* 47:63-66.

<sup>72</sup> It is an open question whether Calvin abides by this rule, particularly in his estimation of numbers of the elect and reprobate.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. *Inst.* 1.1.1, p. 35; *CO* 2:31. Cf. Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 305.

<sup>74</sup> *Inst.* 3.21.1, pp. 920-921; *CO* 2:678-679.

<sup>75</sup> *Inst.* 3.22.1, pp. 932-933; *CO* 2:687.

reprobate is clearly greater than the number of elect.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Calvin observes that God apparently does not desire the salvation of the majority of the world because God allowed the Gentiles of the world to perish for thousands of years before Christ came to offer salvation to them.<sup>77</sup> Calvin, apparently finding Scriptural warrant in the nation of Israel and Biblical passages that speak of the limited numbers of the saved (e.g. Matt. 7:13-14), is seemingly unaware that this type of reasoning may have violated his non-speculative, Scripture-based methodological commitments by letting experience so strongly influence his interpretation of God's disposition toward humanity.

Calvin also appeals to God's predestination to provide pastoral support by helping his readers interpret their experience. For example, Calvin observes that although most of the world does not have faith in Christ, believers need not be nervous about or abandon their salvation, because God has only chosen a few out of the world as his.<sup>78</sup> Seeking to encourage pastors who are disappointed by the response to their preaching, Calvin explains that "Christ means that it is not astonishing [*nihil esse mirum*] if only a few obey His Gospel, because all whom the Spirit of God does not subdue to the obedience of faith are fierce and untameable beasts."<sup>79</sup> In this way, the doctrine of God's reprobating will provides comfort for the elect in their life experience. In sum, experience is confirmed by and informs Calvin's teaching on reprobation.

### **God's Freedom and Glory**

For Calvin, God's freedom and glory are also enacted in his doctrine of predestination.

Calvin's commitment to (his specific definition of) God's freedom also supports his doctrine of God's electing and reprobating wills and accentuates the unmerited nature of election. For Calvin, God's freedom means that God is not bound to offer

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<sup>76</sup> *Inst.* 3.24.12, p. 979. In his comments on John 17:20, the number of recipients is scarcely 1% (*vix centesimus*), *Comm. John* 17:20; *CO* 47:386.

<sup>77</sup> *De Aeterna*, p. 108; *CO* 8:302-303. For Calvin, any who were not of the people of Israel or directly respond to the preaching of Christ were assumed to be condemned in their sin. Cf. Gibson, *Reading the Decree*, 81.

<sup>78</sup> *Comm. John* 6:44; *CO* 47:149. Cf. *Comm. John* 6:65; *CO* 47:161.

<sup>79</sup> *Comm. John* 10:26; *CO* 47:249. My translation.

grace to all people or reject all people, but is able to offer grace to whomever he chooses.<sup>80</sup> Thus, “God has already shown that in his mere generosity [in the general election of Israel] he has not been bound by any laws but is free [*liberum esse*], so that equal apportionment of grace [*aequalis gratiae partitio*] is not to be required of him. The very inequality of this grace proves that it is free [*gratuitam*].”<sup>81</sup> God’s freedom also highlights the merciful nature of election because the basis for choosing lies only in God’s free, merciful choice and not in any human merit.<sup>82</sup>

For Calvin, even though “God’s chief praise consists in acts of mercy,”<sup>83</sup> God is also glorified as his nature is made known through his reprobating work.<sup>84</sup> Specifically, God’s reprobating work brings him glory by revealing his judgment of evil and by highlighting the contrast between the condemnation the elect deserve and the grace they receive, thus illuminating the grace of God and evoking worship and gratitude from the elect.<sup>85</sup>

Therefore, for Calvin God’s freedom is exercised and glory displayed in his election of some and reprobation of others.

### Doctrinal Cohesiveness

Finally, let us briefly examine the way that the doctrine of God’s veiled, reprobating will fits with the logic of Calvin’s theological project. Specifically, four of Calvin’s major doctrines are interdependent upon reprobation. These teachings are: (1) humanity is utterly sinful; (2) as a result of sin, humans have absolutely no merit to contribute to their salvation; (3) God actively and providentially reigns

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<sup>80</sup> Paul Helm, “John Calvin and the Hiddenness of God,” in *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. Bruce L McCormack, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 72. Cf. Gibson, *Reading the Decree*, 171.

<sup>81</sup> *Inst.* 3.21.6, p. 929; *CO* 2:685. This understanding that God is only free if he elects a portion of humanity betrays Calvin’s inadequate definition of God’s freedom. As Barth explains, God’s freedom is to be himself and act accordingly in “divine life and love,” *CD* II/1, p. 301; *KD*, p. 339.

<sup>82</sup> *Inst.* 3.23.10, p. 959; *CO* 2:707.

<sup>83</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 9:23; *CO* 49:188.

<sup>84</sup> *Inst.* 1.1.2, p. 43; *CO* 2:33. Cf. *Inst.* 3.22.11, p. 947; *CO* 2:698.

<sup>85</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 9:23; *CO* 49:188. Zachman asserts that Calvin’s assumption is that “the love of God is best revealed against the horizon of God’s wrath,” Zachman, *Reconsidering John Calvin*, 4. Cf. *Harmony of the Gospels*, Matt. 11:25; *CO* 45:317.

over every occurrence in the universe; and (4) not all people attain to salvation.<sup>86</sup> Together, these elements mean that salvation, and consequently reprobation, can only be directly caused by God. If any one of these doctrinal commitments were abandoned, reprobation would not necessarily fit into the doctrinal system, but as it stands, reprobation (and election) is logically necessary alongside Calvin's other doctrinal commitments.<sup>87</sup>

Calvin's doctrine of God's veiled, reprobating will is to create some people whom God would allow to receive the consequences of their sin. This reprobating will is factual but disconnected from the knowledge of God and his nature revealed in Christ, and therefore the divine reasons for reprobation are hidden in God's secret counsel. For Calvin, the doctrine is based on the witness of Scripture and experience, is an expression of God's freedom, results in God's glory as it reveals God's nature, and is essential for the coherence of Calvin's theological project.

### ***THE UNITY OF GOD'S DISCLOSED AND VEILED WILLS***

Having discussed God's disclosed electing will and God's veiled reprobating will separately, we now examine how Calvin perceives these seemingly contradictory dispositions of God toward humanity as unified in God's one, secret will.

In Calvin's final series of lectures before his death, he describes from the book of Ezekiel the two-fold picture of God's will toward humanity as God's accommodation to human understanding, not an indicator of a dipolar will within God.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, in his Gospels commentary, Calvin says, "If it be objected, that it is absurd to suppose the existence of two wills in God [*duplicem in Deo voluntatem*], I

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<sup>86</sup> Trueman, "Election," 100. Trueman asserts the first three, but I add the fourth to clarify against Augustinian universalism that logically provides the possibility of only one reprobate being, Oliver Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism: Broadening Reformed Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 97-124.

<sup>87</sup> According to Jacobs, Calvin includes his teaching on the doctrine of reprobation for the purpose of doctrinal cohesiveness, but Calvin wrongly extends the teaching in his defenses of the doctrinal system and God's free grace against attacks. He says, "The extension of the teaching of reprobation is understandable theologically-historically, but theologically-systematically it is not to be justified," Jacobs, *Prädestination*, 147. My translation. A closer evaluation of Jacobs' claims across Calvin's corpus would be in order, but at minimum, we see in Jacobs' detailed work further evidence of the asymmetrical nature of election and reprobation in Calvin's teaching.

<sup>88</sup> *Comm. Ezek.* 18:32; *CO* 40:459. Cf. *Comm. Ezek.* 18:23; *CO* 40:445-446, quoted in part above.



reply, we fully believe that his will is one and simple [*unicam et simplicem*]; but as our minds do not fathom the deep abyss of secret election, on behalf of our weakness [*pro infirmitatis nostrae*], the will of God is exhibited [*proponi*] to us in two little measures [*modulo bifarium*].”<sup>89</sup> In short, God has one secret will that is accommodated as two wills to limited humans: God’s disclosed electing will offered to all and made efficacious in the elect and God’s veiled reprobating will toward the reprobate.

For Calvin, to discuss God’s one secret will is to press the boundaries of human understanding; “Although to our perception God’s will is manifold, he does not will this and that in himself, but according to his diversely manifold wisdom, as Paul calls it [Eph. 3:10], he strikes dumb our senses until it is given to us to recognize how wonderfully he wills [*velle*] what at the moment seems to be against his will [*voluntati*].”<sup>90</sup> As we approach this question about the unity of God’s disclosed and veiled will, we approach a topic that, according to Calvin, we are not able to understand fully.

We shall first describe what can and cannot be known about God’s one secret will before specifically examining the asymmetrical relationship between God’s disclosed electing will and his veiled reprobating will.

### **An Article of Faith: Creaturely Knowledge of God's One Will**

In his explicit teaching on predestination, Calvin acknowledges its mysterious character through his repeated return to Romans 9:20, “Who are you O man to contend with God?” and Romans 11:33, “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways.”<sup>91</sup> In the midst of this mystery, a few important truths are revealed through Scripture and God’s works, namely that creatures have no ability or authority to

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<sup>89</sup> *Harmony of the Gospels*, Matt. 23:37; CO 45:317. My translation.

<sup>90</sup> *Inst.* 3.24.17, p. 986; CO 2:728. Cf. *De Aeterna*, p. 184; CO 8:366.

<sup>91</sup> These verses commonly occur throughout the four predestination chapters of the *Institutes* (3.21-24) and throughout *De Aeterna*. For an example of Calvin’s appeal to both verses in one place, see *Inst.* 3.23.5, p. 952-953; CO 2:702. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 9:20; CO 49:186.

judge God, God's secret will is known only to God, and God's secret will is righteous because God is righteous.

### **Creatures Cannot Judge God's Secret Will**

Sinful and limited creatures have no ability or authority to judge God their Creator but must humbly submit before God's secret will. As we have already discussed, Calvin sees humanity as utterly defiled by sin in such a way that it cannot rightly perceive or interpret God's works apart from Scripture by the Spirit. Calvin thus encourages his readers to worship and adore instead of question God in light of God's secret plan; "Let us with sobriety and modesty learn to look upon those works of God which are unknown [*incognita sunt*] to us, and to concede [*deferre*] to him the praise of supreme wisdom [*perfectae sapientiae*], although his counsels seem at first sight contradictory [*absurda*]." <sup>92</sup> Calvin concludes his discussion of predestination in *De Aeterna* by returning to this theme and condemning any who would put themselves in the place of God to judge the doctrine of predestination as it has been revealed in Scripture. <sup>93</sup> Therefore, regardless of the disagreeable or apparently contradictory nature of God's predestinating will, Calvin teaches that sinful and limited humans have no right or ability to judge God.

Similarly, although Calvin teaches that much of God's will has been made known in Scripture, the whole of God's will ultimately extends beyond human comprehension. Commenting on Romans 11:34, Calvin counsels, "we must bear in mind the distinction, which I have before mentioned, between the secret counsel of God [*arcanum Dei consilium*], and his will [*voluntatem*] made known in Scripture." He proceeds to explain that access to the riches of the Scriptures is opened by the Spirit to those with faith, "but the case is different with regard to his hidden counsel [*arcana consilii*], the depth and height of which cannot by any investigation be reached." <sup>94</sup> Calvin uses a variety of terms to describe God's hidden will,

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<sup>92</sup> *Comm. Ezek.* 18:25; *CO* 40:450. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 9:19; *CO* 49:185.

<sup>93</sup> *De Aeterna*, p. 161; *CO* 8:346-347. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 9:20; *CO* 49:186. Cf. *De Aeterna*, p. 64-66; *CO* 8:266-269.

<sup>94</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 11:34; *CO* 49:231.

including God's "secret counsel"<sup>95</sup> or "secret plan"<sup>96</sup> (*arcano Dei consilio*), "secret good pleasure" (*arcano suo beneplacito*),<sup>97</sup> "secret will" (*arcano Dei arbitrio*)<sup>98</sup> and "secret inscrutable plan" (*arcano et inscrutabili Dei consilio*).<sup>99</sup> Thus, there is no space for human inquiry beyond God's will. For example, when "one asks why God has so done, we must reply: because he has willed it. But if you proceed further to ask why he so willed, you are seeking something greater and higher than God's will, which cannot be found."<sup>100</sup>

Richard Muller highlights Moïse Amyraut as an example of someone who claims more knowledge of God's will than Calvin allows. Amyraut proposes two wills in God, namely one hypothetical, universal and conditional will and one effective, absolute, and unconditional will. After examining Amyraut's exegesis of Ezekiel 18:23 and his use of Calvin's exegesis of the passage, Muller concludes that Amyraut misinterprets Calvin.<sup>101</sup> Muller asserts that for Calvin the distinction between the extent of preaching (to all) and the extent of salvation (not to all) shows the difference between God's will *ad intra* and the revelation of that will *ad extra* without implying two wills *ad intra*.<sup>102</sup> Up to this point, Muller has made a consistent and clear rebuttal of Amyraut's misuse of Calvin. However, Muller goes too far when he asserts that we can know God's one will, concluding, "there was, in Calvin's view, one divine will and one will only, and that, to save the elect."<sup>103</sup> The "one will" that Muller asserts is actually only God's disclosed will toward the elect, which God has reliably made known, but Muller ignores God's veiled, reprobating will. Calvin, consistent in his anti-speculative methodology, does not think humans have adequate access to God's secret will to make statements about the content of

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<sup>95</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 9:22, *CO* 49:187.

<sup>96</sup> *Inst.* 3.23.4, p. 952; *CO* 2:702.

<sup>97</sup> *Inst.* 3.22.7, p. 941; *CO* 2:694.

<sup>98</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 9:14, *CO* 49:181.

<sup>99</sup> *Inst.* 3.24.12, p. 978; *CO* 2:722.

<sup>100</sup> *Inst.* 3.23.2, p. 949; *CO* 2:700. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 9:15, *CO* 49:181-182. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 11:34; *CO* 49:231.

<sup>101</sup> Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 107-125. "What Calvin in no way countenanced was a notion of a double will in God, one hypothetical to save all, the other absolute to save only the elect," p. 122.

<sup>102</sup> Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 119. The *ad intra-ad extra* terminology is Muller's, not Calvin's.

<sup>103</sup> Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 122. Regarding the secret counsel of God and the universal promise of the gospel, Muller also says "God always wills the same thing, presumably, the salvation of the elect," p. 114.

his “one divine will” which has been accommodated to humanity in a two-fold manner. God’s will *ad intra* is a secret to humans; we can only know what God has revealed to us of his will *ad extra*.<sup>104</sup>

In sum, God has substantially revealed his will to those with faith, particularly revealing his disclosed will of salvation toward the elect in Christ. However, God’s veiled will is only partially exhibited, and only God knows the unity of these two wills.<sup>105</sup> For Calvin, predestination is “a mystery which our minds do not comprehend, but which we ought to adore with reverence...Let us know, therefore, that God refrains from speaking to us [to explain predestination further] for no other reason than that He sees that His boundless wisdom cannot be comprehended in our small measure [*modulo*].”<sup>106</sup> As much as God has revealed regarding predestination, the explanation of the totality of God’s acts is hidden in his secret will. For the elect to attempt to look into such things “is the surest way to ruin themselves and to break their necks [*se rompre le col*].”<sup>107</sup>

### **God is Just, Therefore God's Will is Just**

Although much cannot be said about God’s one secret will, we can confidently affirm that God’s inscrutable plan is just and righteous (*iustus*) because God is just and righteous.<sup>108</sup> As Calvin says, “Not only is God’s wisdom incomprehensible, but his justice [*iustitia*] is the most perfect [*perfectissima*] rule of all justice [*iustitiae*].”<sup>109</sup> Remarking on Romans 9:22, Calvin asserts, “As far as God’s predestination manifests itself, it appears perfectly just [*meram iustitiam apparere*].” Therefore, Paul does not explain why some objects are made for wrath because “he indeed takes it as granted...that the reason is hid in the secret and inexorable counsel of God [*inexplicabili Dei consilio absconditum*]; whose justice

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<sup>104</sup> Regarding Calvin’s connection between soteriology and the partial but reliable revelation of God *ad intra*, see Gibson, *Reading the Decree*, 84.

<sup>105</sup> Like the knowledge of God, we have skeletal knowledge *that* God has one secret will without understanding *how* exactly that will is expressed in what appears to be two wills.

<sup>106</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 9:20; *CO* 49:186. Regarding a reason for choosing the elect and not the reprobate, Calvin says, “God does indeed have a definite, real reason for what he does, but it is too secret, sublime, and concealed [*recondita*] for it to be grasped by the measure of our mind, which is so narrow and mean,” *BLW*, p. 191; *CO* 6:365. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 9:18; *CO* 49:184.

<sup>107</sup> *Sermons on Ephesians*, 1:7-10, p. 59; *CO* 51:291.

<sup>108</sup> Latin *iustitia* can be translated into English as “justice” or “righteousness.”

<sup>109</sup> *Comm. Ezek.* 18:25; *CO* 40:450.

it behoves us rather to adore than to scrutinize [*scrutari*].”<sup>110</sup> Recalling that God’s will is the cause of all things, Calvin remarks, “For God’s will is so much the highest rule of righteousness [*summa est iustitiae regula*] that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous.”<sup>111</sup> Similarly, anyone who questions God’s good pleasure as the reason for God’s predestinating works “cannot allow God to reign in pure liberty so that what is pleasing to him might be received as good, just and rightful [*iuste*] without contradiction [*sans contredit*].”<sup>112</sup>

From these statements, one could deduce that for Calvin, God is a law to himself that transcends or redefines the human understanding of righteousness. However, Calvin clearly and repeatedly opposes the concept of a God with *potentia absoluta* who could act in contradiction with his own law and nature.<sup>113</sup> In short, Calvin summarizes, “God’s goodness is so connected with his divinity [*divinitate*] that it is not more necessary for him to be God than for him to be good [*bonum*].”<sup>114</sup> Calvin elsewhere explains, “We do not advocate the fiction of ‘absolute might’ [*absolutae potentiae*]; because this is profane, it ought rightly to be hateful to us. We fancy no lawless god who is a law unto himself...the will of God is not only free of all fault but is the highest rule of perfection [*summa perfectionis regula*], and even the law of all laws.”<sup>115</sup> That God is not redefining righteousness in a manner that contradicts his law is even more clearly visible in Calvin’s words from *De Aeterna*, where he writes that God lives according to the law (even if we cannot see it at times) because he is the law embodied:

Let these monstrous speculations be put far away from pious minds, that God should be able to do more than is proper to Him or to act without rule or reason [*modo et ratione*]. Nor indeed do I accept the suggestion that, because God in doing anything is free from all law, He therefore is without censure. For to make God beyond law [*exlegem*] is to rob Him of the greatest part of his glory, for it destroys His rectitude [*rectitudinem*] and His

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<sup>110</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 9:22; *CO* 49:187.

<sup>111</sup> *Inst.* 3.23.2, p. 949; *CO* 2:700.

<sup>112</sup> *Sermons on Ephesians*, 1:4-6, p. 42; *CO* 51:277.

<sup>113</sup> For an excellent summary of recent Calvin scholarship regarding *potentia absoluta*, see Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 262-263. Cf. Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 136. Cf. Steinmetz, *Context*, 40-50.

<sup>114</sup> *Inst.* 2.3.5, p. 295; *CO* 2:213.

<sup>115</sup> *Inst.* 3.23.2, p. 950; *CO* 2:700. Calvin also asserts that unlike creatures, God’s attributes match up exactly with his will; “For since God’s goodness, wisdom, power, righteousness, and will are united together by a kind of, so to speak, circular connection, it is the work of a wicked, devilish imagination to break this bond apart” *BLW*, p. 148; *CO* 6:334. Cf. *1538 Catechism*, p. 17, s. 13; *CO* 5:333.

righteousness [*iustitiam*]. Not that God is subject to law, except in so far as He himself is law [*lex est*].<sup>116</sup>

In his *Congregation on Eternal Election* preached in response to the controversy caused by Bolsec, Calvin says that we limited humans are incapable of understanding God's reasons for doing what he does; to try would overwhelm us with his glory and throw us into an abyss. Instead, "Let us hold for a certainty that God has just cause for doing what he does – even if it is hidden from us – and that things we do not know are still reality...Even if we do not see why God acts thus, we must be satisfied that he is just [*iuste*]."<sup>117</sup> God's secret will is not arbitrary but corresponds to God's nature as revealed in Scripture and reflected in the law. Therefore, even though we are not able to question or to comprehend God's one secret will, we can confidently know by faith (if not by sight) that God's secret will is unified in its conformity to the merciful, righteous/just, and judging character of God.<sup>118</sup>

### The Final End: God's Glory

One element of God's will that has been revealed in Scripture is the end of God's will, which, according to Calvin, is God's glory, a common theme in Calvin's works. In his John commentary, Calvin defines the term, saying, "The glory of God is, when we know his nature [*qualis sit*]."<sup>119</sup> Calvin says that God's purpose, no matter how hidden, is to "declare the glory of His name...In all His works [*factis*], the Lord has the reason of His own glory [*gloriae suae*]."<sup>120</sup> In short, God's glory is his acting

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<sup>116</sup> *De Aeterna*, p. 179; *CO* 8:361. Cf. "Nor must we, therefore, deem his power to be limited, when he is a necessity to himself [*dum sibi ipse est necessitas*]; or that anything of his liberty and authority is diminished, when he willingly and freely binds himself. And let us especially remember that his power is connected by a sacred restraint [*sacro nexu*] with his grace and with faith in his promise. Hence it may be truly and properly said, that he can do nothing but what he wills and promises," *Comm. Gen.* 19:22; *CO* 23:277. My translation.

<sup>117</sup> *Congrégation*, *CO* 8:105-106. Trans. from Philip C. Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy on Predestination, From 1551 to 1555* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 709-710. Cf. "Yet we should be always be sustained by this bridle - he is just [*ipse esse iustum*]," *Comm. Ezek.* 18:25; *CO* 40:451. Cf. *1538 Catechism*, p. 17; *CO* 5:333. Cf. Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 177. Cf. Niesel, *Theology of Calvin*, 167.

<sup>118</sup> "The rule of modesty prescribed by us, on the other hand, is that, where the reason for God's works lies hidden, we none the less believe [*credamus*] Him to be just." *De Aeterna*, p. 88; *CO* 8:286.

<sup>119</sup> *Comm. John* 17:4; *CO* 47:378. My translation.

<sup>120</sup> *De Aeterna*, p. 119; *CO* 8:312. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 11:36; *CO* 49:232. Cf. *Comm. Col.* 1:14; *CO* 52:84.

according to his nature and thus revealing more of his nature to the world, which leads people to rightly worship God.<sup>121</sup> As we pointed out above, Calvin teaches that both God's disclosed electing will and God's veiled reprobating will bring glory to God, primarily by illuminating God's mercy. In this way, once again, God's two-fold will is unified in its end toward God's glory.

In sum, regarding God's one, secret will, limited human creatures cannot judge God or fully grasp God's will, but they can know the character of that will, namely that it perfectly matches God's righteous nature and thus brings glory to God in the ways God's nature is revealed in its execution.

### **The Asymmetrical "Wills" of God**

If God's disclosed electing will and God's veiled reprobating will find their unity in the one, secret righteous will of God, what can we know about the relationship between these two dispositions toward humanity, both dogmatically and in practice? Simply put, we find that for Calvin, God's disclosed and veiled "wills" are asymmetrically related within God's one, secret will both dogmatically and pragmatically.<sup>122</sup> Here we shall see that although Calvin is committed to recognizing God as the ultimate cause of all things, Calvin introduces nuances of causality to help parse God's will (and actions) toward humanity; Calvin's intended audience in his teaching of predestination highlights the asymmetrical nature of God's will toward humanity; and finally, Calvin emphasizes election over reprobation in the practice of Christian mission.

#### **Causality**

First, in his descriptions of predestination, while affirming God's sovereign rule over all that comes to pass, Calvin introduces levels of causality that reveal the

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<sup>121</sup> Cf. Billy Kristanto, *Sola Dei Gloria: The Glory of God in the Thought of John Calvin* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011), 149-155. Cf. Parker, *Knowledge of God*, 54.

<sup>122</sup> Hesselink concurs that although Calvin teaches double predestination, "Calvin does not, however, teach that there is a symmetry or parallel between election and reprobation as taught by some later Calvinists," Hesselink, "Calvin's Theology," 84.

asymmetrical nature of God's electing will and God's reprobating will in relation to God's one secret will.

At times, Calvin describes election and reprobation in parallel. For example, in refuting Pighius' claim that God is gracious toward all without hating the reprobate, Calvin says, "For to the gratuitous love [*gratuito amori*] with which the elect are embraced there corresponds on an equal and common level a just severity [*iusta...severitas*] toward the reprobate."<sup>123</sup> Similarly, regarding Romans 11:7, Calvin makes it very clear that God cannot be excused from the responsibility of reprobating, "They reason absurdly who, whenever a word is said of the proximate causes [*propinquis causis*], strive, by bringing forward these, to cover the first, which is hid from our view; as though God had not, before the fall of Adam, freely determined to do what seemed good to him with respect to the whole human race."<sup>124</sup> God is the cause of all, including reprobation, and Calvin asserts that reprobation is parallel to election, particularly in regard to God's sovereign rule over all.

However, Calvin also utilizes Aristotelian categories of causality to nuance the human understanding of God's secret will, highlighting the asymmetrical relationship of God's disclosed and veiled wills. At the center of Calvin's understanding of causality is the way he affirms multiple causes for one event.<sup>125</sup> Calvin attests the fall of humanity as both fully the result of God's ordination<sup>126</sup> and fully the result of human will, which makes the human race culpable for its sin and deserving of its just condemnation.<sup>127</sup> Using contemporary terminology, Calvin would be considered a type of compatibilist, allowing for real human choice *and*

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<sup>123</sup> *De Aeterna*, p. 90; *CO* 8:287. Cf. *Inst.* 3.21.5, p. 926; *CO* 2:683. *Comm. Rom.* 9:11; *CO* 49:177.

<sup>124</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 11:7; *CO* 49:216. In conformity with his non-speculative and pastoral methodology, Calvin generally teaches an infralapsarian perspective in which he sees Christ's redeeming work as logically proceeding from the fall of humanity (e.g. *Comm.* 1 Peter 1:20; *CO* 55:225; *Comm. Gen.* 1:26-3:23; *CO* 23:25-80). However, particularly when reflecting upon God's sovereignty, Calvin can make supralapsarian statements, as seen here. Cf. *Inst.* 3.23.1, p. 947-948; *CO* 2:699. Note also here Calvin's reasoning: for Calvin, single predestination is not only non-biblical but also illogical.

<sup>125</sup> Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 168-169.

<sup>126</sup> God's "dreadful" (*horribile*) decree of the fall of humanity, *Inst.* 3.23.7, p. 955; *CO* 2:704.

<sup>127</sup> *De Aeterna*, p. 98, 101; *CO* 8:295, 297. Calvin also contends that since God is the remote cause of sinful actions caused proximately by humans, God is not the author of sin, *De Aeterna*, p. 181; *CO* 8:363.



God's sovereign determination of all.<sup>128</sup> God is thus sovereign over all and also not the author of sin or evil.<sup>129</sup> In addition, for Calvin, God's sovereign will does not rob humans of their active will. For example, the fall of Judas was ordained by God but was also his choice and responsibility,<sup>130</sup> and believers are exhorted to "act passively" (*passive...agere*) in the working out of their salvation which is completely a gift.<sup>131</sup> Therefore, for Calvin, one event can have multiple causes as perceived from different perspectives.

Although God is the ultimate cause of all aspects of predestination, Calvin's causal descriptions of reprobation and election are not parallel.<sup>132</sup> In *De Aeterna*, Calvin differentiates between the proximate cause (*causa propinqua*) of reprobation as the fall of humanity, and the remote (*remota*) cause as God's election of some and reprobation of others.<sup>133</sup> Later, he terms the foremost cause of reprobation as "unbelief [*increduli*] in the gospel."<sup>134</sup> Remarking on John 3:19, Calvin points out that the blame for reprobation falls not on Christ but on the those who reject the gospel; "it is their own wickedness [*pravitatem incredulis*] which hinders unbelievers from approaching to Christ."<sup>135</sup> Thus, while God is the ultimate cause of reprobation, human sin and unbelief are the proximate and epistemically accessible causes of reprobation.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Michael McKenna, "Compatibilism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2009/entries/compatibilism/>>. The compatibilist discussion was significantly shaped by P.F. Strawson's recovery of focus on moral responsibility and free will in the 1960s. Recently, Peter van Inwagen, an incompatibilist, has asserted that the concept of the free will is incoherent on both compatibilist and incompatibilist terms, which poses a leads to the "problem of free will" of how to explain what humans experience and identify as free will, Peter van Inwagen, "How to Think About the Problem of Free Will," *The Journal of Ethics* 12, no. 3-4 (Sept 2008): 327-341.

<sup>129</sup> Busch affirms that Calvin teaches us to hold to both the cause of humanity and the cause of God. We cannot understand how these are held together because God's counsel is simply beyond human understanding, Busch, *Gotteserkenntnis Und Menschlichkeit*, 78.

<sup>130</sup> *Comm. John* 17:12; *CO* 47:382.

<sup>131</sup> Commenting on Phil. 2:12-13 in *Inst.* 2.5.11, p. 330; *CO* 2:239.

<sup>132</sup> *Inst.* 3.24.14, p. 981; *CO* 2:724. Jacobs concludes that God's causality in reprobation is more mechanistic (*mechanischen*) than coercive, Jacobs, *Prädestination*, 157.

<sup>133</sup> *De Aeterna*, p. 100; *CO* 8:296. Cf. *Comm. Mal.* 1:2-6; *CO* 44:407.

<sup>134</sup> *De Aeterna*, p. 160; *CO* 8:346.

<sup>135</sup> *Comm. John* 3:19; *CO* 47:67. Just previous, Calvin says that any condemnation that arises out of Christ's coming "may be regarded as accidental," *Comm. John* 3:17; *CO* 47:66. Cf. *Inst.* 3.23.8, p. 957; *CO* 2:705. Cf. *Comm. Is.* 6:10; *CO* 36:137-138.

<sup>136</sup> Thus Calvin teaches both infra- and supra-lapsarianism, with proximate and material knowledge of infralapsarianism and skeletal knowledge of supralapsarianism.

In stark contrast to the causality of reprobation, Calvin's causes for election are solely founded in God and his freely given mercy. Explicitly utilizing Aristotelian categories in his comments on Ephesians 1:5-8, Calvin says of election, "the efficient cause [*causa efficiens*] is the good pleasure of the will of God; the material cause [*causa materialis*] is Christ; and the final cause [*causa finalis*] is the praise of His grace." A few verses later, he adds that the formal cause (*causa formalis*) of election is the preaching of the gospel.<sup>137</sup> In the *Institutes*, Calvin grounds the salvation of the elect in trinitarian causality, "The efficient cause [*effectum*] of our salvation consists in God the Father's love; the material cause [*materiam*] in God the Son's obedience; the instrumental cause [*instrumentum*] in the Spirit's illumination, that is faith; the final cause [*finem*], in the glory of God's great generosity."<sup>138</sup> In short, election is made known as the work of God from first to last. Thus, in contrast with reprobation that mysteriously finds its remote cause in God and its proximate cause in sin, election's terms of causality are directly related to the trinitarian God in accordance with God's revealed nature.<sup>139</sup>

Thus, election and reprobation are united in God's one, secret will, but the nearby causes (*causae propinquae*) are very different between the two.<sup>140</sup> At the divine level of causality, election and reprobation are somewhat parallel; in contrast, from the human perspective, the *causae propinquae* which are perceptible to humanity are not parallel. The *causae propinquae* of reprobation are rooted fully in humanity and the *causae propinquae* of election are rooted fully in God, highlighting the asymmetry of election and reprobation.<sup>141</sup> Election is comprehended as rooted in God from first to last whereas reprobation is mysteriously caused by God and openly caused by fallen humanity.

<sup>137</sup> *Comm. Eph.* 1:5, 8; *CO* 51:148, 150.

<sup>138</sup> *Inst.* 3.14.21, p. 787; *CO* 2:578. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 3:22; *CO* 49:60.

<sup>139</sup> Jacobs similarly points out that whereas God is the *fundamentum* of election, he is not the *fundamentum* of reprobation. Similarly, regarding sanctification and responsibility, there is a logically analytic (*analytisches*) relationship between Christ-election-sanctification whereas the relationship between reprobation and sin is solely logically synthetic (*synthetisches*) and has no personal grounding in Satan in the manner that election is grounded in Christ, Jacobs, *Prädestination*, 155-156.

<sup>140</sup> Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 169.

<sup>141</sup> Cf. *Congrégation*, *CO* 8:111. Trans. from Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy*, 714.

Along the same lines, without surrendering his commitment that God is the cause of all things, Calvin at times emphasizes God's passive role in reprobation, highlighting God's saving action for the elect alongside his *lack* of saving movement for the reprobate.<sup>142</sup> In his sermon on Ephesians 1:4-6, Calvin says, "Now some are accounted reprobates: and why is that but because God looking upon them in themselves passes them by [*les dedaigne*] But he chooses us in our Lord Jesus Christ and looks upon us there, as in a mirror [*en un miroir*] that is pleasing to him. And so you see how the difference comes about."<sup>143</sup> Again, even though Calvin believes it would be "highly absurd" (*plus...insulse*) to simply attribute election to God and reprobation to humanity, God's saving action in election is not directly paralleled with God's passivity toward the reprobate in their sinful state.<sup>144</sup>

Therefore, utilizing the nuances of causality, Calvin highlights the asymmetrical relation between the electing and reprobating wills of God; God's electing will takes primacy in its visible connection with human knowledge of God and his work in the world. Although Calvin teaches that God is the active cause of election and reprobation in one sense, he also teaches that election is directly caused by God and connected with God's revealed nature whereas reprobation is proximately caused by human sin and only caused by God in a way that is not humanly comprehensible. Further, God's mercy toward the elect is put on display as he actively elects as a result of his gracious mercy while passively willing the reprobate to remain in their state of sin and deserved condemnation.

### God's Glory

The asymmetrical nature of election and reprobation is further underlined in the way that God is glorified in the two different actions. As we have seen,<sup>145</sup> besides showing forth God's righteous condemnation of evil, reprobation brings God glory primarily because it highlights the merciful nature of election. For

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<sup>142</sup> As Link says, "There is thus no symmetrical balance between election and condemnation. This 'condemnation' is the passive manner in which God passes over certain people in his election," Link, "Election and Predestination," 118. Cf. *Congrégation*, CO 8:113-114. Trans. from Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy*, 716.

<sup>143</sup> *Sermons on Ephesians*, 1:4-6, p. 41; CO 51:275-276.

<sup>144</sup> *Inst.* 3.23.1, p. 947; CO 2:698. Cf. *De Aeterna*, p. 109, n. 3.

<sup>145</sup> See "God's Freedom and Glory" above.

example, regarding Romans 9:22, Calvin explains that when Paul speaks of the reprobate making known “the riches of [God’s] glory,” Paul is actually employing metonymy with the word “glory” to refer to the mercy of God toward the elect as it is highlighted in the display of their just deserts in the condemnation of the reprobate because “God’s chief praise is in acts of kindness [*benefactis*].” He proceeds to say, “The elect are instruments or organs, through whom God exercises His mercy, that through them he may glorify his name.”<sup>146</sup> Therefore, because the expression of God’s mercy brings him the most praise, reprobation subordinately glorifies God by highlighting God’s mercy. Once again, election and reprobation are asymmetrically related.

### Calvin's Audience: the Elect

Similar to the way that the true knowledge of God is only available to those with faith, predestination can only be rightly understood by the elect who have come to know God’s revealed nature through trust in Christ. As a result, Calvin’s Christian audience also exhibits the asymmetrical relationship between God’s electing and reprobating will in Calvin’s teaching. In short, Calvin teaches predestination to those with faith for the edification of the elect.

The bulk of Calvin’s teaching is explicitly directed towards Christians. Calvin’s stated purpose for the *Institutes* from 1539 onward is to “prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word.”<sup>147</sup> In his dedicatory letter for his first commentary, on Romans, Calvin explains his decision to write the commentary as follows, “I could not prevent myself from trying to see what good my efforts in this regard might achieve for the Church of God.”<sup>148</sup> Even in Calvin’s sermons, he trusts the testimony of the Spirit to reveal the authority of Scripture to his listeners.<sup>149</sup> Many of Calvin’s occasional writing, such as *De Aeterna*, are intended to defend the Church against blasphemous teachings, again assuming that the audience is Christians who are in danger of being led astray.

<sup>146</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 9:22; *CO* 49:188.

<sup>147</sup> *Inst.* “John Calvin to the Reader,” p. 4; *CO* 2:1-2.

<sup>148</sup> *Comm. John*, “The Epistle Dedicatory to Simon Grynaeus,” *CO* 10:403.

<sup>149</sup> *Inst.* 1.7, p. 74-81; *CO* 2:56-61. Cf. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 2.

Throughout Calvin's dogmatic teaching, his intended audience is the elect, the only ones who can receive the truth of God by the Spirit.

For Calvin, like all godly doctrine, what God has revealed about predestination is for the edification of the elect. Throughout Calvin's teaching on predestination, he focuses on how the doctrine benefits the elect by affirming the unmerited grace of God in election, by highlighting the depth out of which God has rescued the elect, by explaining the experiences of the elect in regard to the preaching of the gospel, and by engendering love for, obedience to, and worship of God by the elect.

Even Calvin's teaching on reprobation is for the good of the elect. Since election is fully the work of God by the Spirit, Calvin has no need to preach condemnation to the reprobate as if he could scare them out of their status as reprobate. On the contrary, even in Calvin's very brief teaching about the eternal destiny of the reprobate in the *Institutes*, he says the purpose of the teaching on reprobation is so "we [the elect] ought especially to fix our thoughts upon this: how wretched is it to be cut off from all fellowship with God." Instead of appealing to God's justice and glory in God's condemnation of the reprobate, Calvin uses the Bible's teaching on hell to encourage people to persevere in worshiping God "until he himself is 'all in all.'"<sup>150</sup>

Thus, Calvin's teaching on predestination is for the benefit of the elect and assumes that the recipients are the elect who know God's nature as witnessed to in election. Once again, God's electing will is primary while God's reprobating will is secondary.

### **God's Disclosed Will and Veiled Will in Christian Mission**

Having seen Calvin's dogmatic elevation of God's electing will and work over and above his reprobating will and work, we now turn to examine Calvin's practical teaching on Christian mission in light of God's disclosed electing and veiled reprobating will. We shall find that for Calvin, God's disclosed will guides the attitude and actions of the elect toward all humanity in preaching to all, hoping for

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<sup>150</sup> *Inst.* 3.25.12, pp. 1007-1008.

the salvation of all and praying for all, while God's veiled will reminds believers of God's sovereign rule over all.<sup>151</sup>

First, Calvin teaches that Christians are to proclaim the good news of God's fatherly love and mercy to all people. As Calvin says, "Until the day of revelation come, we are to do what our Lord commands and exhort [*hortemur*] all without exception to faith and penitence."<sup>152</sup> Not everyone receives this grace, but we should teach that "God's loving-kindness [*benignitatem*] is set forth to all who seek it, without exception," because those "on whom heavenly grace has breathed" will seek after it.<sup>153</sup> We have already observed that Calvin teaches regarding passages that speak of God's desire for all to come to salvation (e.g. 2 Peter 3:9, 1 Timothy 2:4, Ezekiel 18:23, 18:32) that God is ready to receive the repentance of any who turn to God. Calvin applies this concept to encourage the preaching of the gospel to all people, regardless of their social status or perceived readiness. The logic from the 1 Timothy 2:4 commentary follows these lines: preaching gives life; Scripture commands that we preach to all; therefore from our perspective, God regards all people as worthy to share in salvation; however, as far as results are concerned, God calls only the elect through the preaching.<sup>154</sup> Therefore, for Calvin, the responsibility and call of Christians is to proclaim to all people indiscriminately the good news of God's redeeming love in Christ, recognizing that any response of repentance and faith will be engendered by the Spirit in the elect.<sup>155</sup> Even though this proclamation may seem disingenuous in light of God's reprobating will towards some people, for Calvin it is an expression of God's nature spoken forth to all in obedience to God's command and in accord with God's mercy that is offered to all.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> For an interesting proposal regarding Calvin's logic here, see Helm, "Calvin, Indefinite Language, and Definite Atonement," 97-120. Cf. Chapter 4.

<sup>152</sup> *De Aeterna*, p. 158; *CO* 8:344.

<sup>153</sup> *Inst.* 2.3.10, p. 304; *CO* 2:220. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 11:2, *CO* 49:212.

<sup>154</sup> *Comm. 1 Tim.* 2:4; *CO* 52:268.

<sup>155</sup> Cf. *Comm. John* 6:65; *CO* 47:161.

<sup>156</sup> It is open to question whether this is a disingenuous manner of acting. One might say that this is like a person offering a pile of money to someone who is chained up and unable to receive the gift and then proceeding to blame the potential recipient for rejecting the gift. However, from Calvin's perspective, this illustration would fall short in the fact that it assumes too much knowledge of God's reprobating will and subjects God to limited human judgment. We are also ignorant of who is able to stand up and receive the gift. According to Calvin's logic, in the day of judgment, we shall

Reprobation is included in Christian teaching, but only to the end of edifying the faithful. As we have seen, Calvin requires that the doctrine of reprobation be taught according to God's accommodation in Scripture because it witnesses to grace, explains experience, engenders humility, and results in praise to God.<sup>157</sup> Although Calvin does assign reprobation to exceptionally rebellious biblical figures like Pharaoh,<sup>158</sup> he rejects any teaching that tells people that they are reprobate or that they "will not believe because they have been condemned." These approaches are cursing, not teaching, and result in sloth and evil.<sup>159</sup> Thus, even in teaching about reprobation, God's disclosed will takes priority.

Second, Calvin teaches that Christians should hope that God's disclosed will would be extended to and received by all. However, Calvin's hope for the salvation of all is not solely founded upon ignorance of who is reprobate and who is elect but also upon God's gracious work in people's lives that goes beyond our knowledge. Quoting Augustine, Calvin says, "For as we know not who belongs to the number of the predestined or who does not belong, we ought to be so minded as to wish that all men be saved [*omnes velimus salvos fieri*]." <sup>160</sup> He even says regarding Achan's detestable theft of the devoted things and he and his household's subsequent death penalty that their execution may have provided a possible chance for repentance.<sup>161</sup> John Thompson points out that for Calvin, since "*no one* can know the reprobation of another," believers are not to curse their enemies but to pray for them while trusting God's ultimate condemnation of injustice and evil.<sup>162</sup> It is worth noting that at times (e.g. John 6:64), Calvin hints at the fact that we can know the reprobate by their fruit, but even there he points out that only God (and

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know *that* some people did not receive the gift, but by trusting in God's merciful and just character, we trust that the events that transpired were somehow merciful and just.

<sup>157</sup> Cf. *Inst.* 3.23.13, p. 961-963; *CO* 2:708-710. Cf. *Sermons on Ephesians*, 1:3-4, p. 22-34; *CO* 51:259-270.

<sup>158</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Ex. 9:16; *CO* 24:112-113.

<sup>159</sup> *Inst.* 3.23.14, p. 963; *CO* 2:710. Cf. *De Aeterna*, p. 137-138; *CO* 8:327-328.

<sup>160</sup> *Inst.* 3.23.14, p. 964; *CO* 2:711. Quoted also in *De Aeterna*, p. 138; *CO* 8:328. Augustine, *On Rebuke and Grace*, trans. Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Publishing, 1886), XV.46.

<sup>161</sup> "It may be that death proved to them a medicine," *Comm. Josh.* 7:24; *CO* 25:480.

<sup>162</sup> John L. Thompson, *Reading the Bible With the Dead: What You Can Learn From the History of Exegesis That You Can't Learn From Exegesis Alone* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 65-66.

Emphasis orig. Cf. Dowey, *Knowledge of God*, 214.

the divine Christ) knows people's hearts, so conclusions must not be drawn too quickly.<sup>163</sup>

Calvin also applies this hope in God's unseen work in his doctrine of church discipline.<sup>164</sup> Besides protecting God's name from dishonor and the church from corruption, church discipline exists to bring about the repentance of a sinner. Calvin specifically teaches that excommunication does not determine that one is reprobate. Instead, it is "not our task to erase from the number of the elect those who have been expelled from the church, or to despair as if they were already lost." Instead the church is to hope for them and pray for them, allowing God to judge them and hopefully restore them.<sup>165</sup> Even when commenting upon Hebrews 6:4 that says that "it is impossible to restore again to repentance" those who have tasted of God's grace and turned away, Calvin retains hope that they might return to God. He says that those who rush forth to destruction do show their reprobation, "but when anyone rises up again after falling, we may hence conclude that he had not been guilty of defection [*defectione*]."<sup>166</sup> For Calvin, Christians are meant to live in such a way as to hope that God's disclosed will of mercy and love will be realized and received by all, while at the same time recognizing that that the gift of faith will only be given to some. God's disclosed, electing will has directive power, whereas God's veiled, reprobating will only has explanatory power. In this way, God's disclosed electing will again has priority over God's veiled reprobating will.

Third, Calvin shows the priority of God's disclosed will in the Christian responsibility to pray for all, regardless of their status as elect or reprobate. For example, Calvin's conclusion in his commentary on 1 Timothy 2:4 is that we are not to differentiate what type of people might hear the gospel, and we are "to be

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<sup>163</sup> *Comm. John* 6:64; *CO* 47:160. Rhetorically, Calvin seems periodically to violate this conviction, calling his opponents such titles as "dead dog," "worthless," and "monsters," *De Aeterna*, p. 54; *CO* 8:258-259. However, even with these enemies of the faith, Calvin typically avoids labeling them as reprobate. E.g. Michael Servetus, who was infamously executed by the Genevan council while Calvin was the chief minister; Calvin sought his return to the true faith right up to his execution, Gordon, *Calvin*, 223. Cf. Herman Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 203-206.

<sup>164</sup> *Inst.* 4.11-12, p. 1211-1254; *CO* 2:891-924.

<sup>165</sup> *Inst.* 4.12.9, p. 1237; *CO* 2:911.

<sup>166</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 6:6, *CO* 55:72.



solicitous and to do our endeavor for the salvation of all whom God includes in his calling, and to testify this by godly prayers.”<sup>167</sup> Calvin personally lived out this exhortation to pray for all. For example, in his sermons on Ephesians, it was his custom to end his sermons with a variation on the phrase, “And may it please him to grant this grace not only to us, but also to all peoples [*aussi à tous peuples*].”<sup>168</sup> For Calvin, the Christian responsibility is to pray for all people, regardless of their perceived status as elect or reprobate, again giving priority to God’s disclosed will of love toward all.

It is worth remembering that for Calvin, prayer for all people is guided by God’s disclosed will from our perspective but still humbly offered to God in submission to his veiled reprobating will. Commenting on Jesus’ prayer for the elect in John 17:9, Calvin says:

The prayers which we offer for all are still limited to the elect of God. We ought to pray that this man, and that man, and every man, may be saved and thus include the whole human race, because we cannot yet distinguish [*nondum distinguere*] the elect from the reprobate; and yet by desiring the coming of God’s kingdom we likewise pray that God may destroy all His enemies [*hostes suos perdat*]...we pray for the salvation of all whom we know to have been created after the image of God and who have the same nature with ourselves; and we leave to the judgment [*iudicio*] of God those whom he knows to be reprobate [*interitum*].<sup>169</sup>

For Calvin, since the reprobate are ones who remain in sin and are thus ultimately God’s enemies, our prayers cannot actually be extended to them because that would be rebellion against God’s will. Prayer is therefore a microcosm of the preaching of the gospel: we pray for all who are made in God’s image as an expression of his love; we pray for all because we are ignorant of whom God has chosen as his; we submit to God’s judgment in making our prayers efficacious for whomever God has secretly chosen to redeem; we trust in the God of mercy, justice, and judgment to rightly condemn his true enemies as only God has authority to do.

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<sup>167</sup> *Comm. 1 Tim. 2:4; CO 52:269.*

<sup>168</sup> *Sermons on Ephesians*, p. 21, 49, 65, etc; *CO 51:258, 270, 284*, etc. In the English translation, this line is included in every other sermon, whereas in the *CO*, it is the implied prayer at the end of every sermon.

<sup>169</sup> *Comm. John 17:9; CO 47:380.*

As we have seen here, Calvin retains the tension of God's two-fold will toward humanity in Christian practice. Regardless of how felt pastoral needs would incite one to silence regarding God's veiled reprobating will, Calvin does not allow such a step.<sup>170</sup> As Link rightly observes, "it speaks well of Calvin that he resisted the temptation to find a solution or an understandable intellectual, rational means to diffuse this dilemma."<sup>171</sup> Instead, Calvin calls us to look upon the mirror of Christ to contemplate our own election. Link concludes, "This mirror indeed becomes the manifestation of God's faithfulness. And is that not a basis with which those who have recognized the certainty of their election can share the promise of God's faithfulness with those who have yet to do so?"<sup>172</sup> In other words, Calvin's admonition to the elect is to witness to the God they have come to know in Christ and leave the results of that witness in the hands of that loving, powerful, and righteous God.

In sum, God's disclosed will has prescriptive power as it guides Christian practice as believers preach the gospel to all, hope for the salvation of all, and pray for all. In contrast, God's veiled will only has descriptive power, explaining why some people seemingly do not come to a place of saving faith. Once again, the two wills are asymmetrically related within God's one secret will.

Throughout this subsection we have been asking the question of the relationship between God's disclosed electing will and God's veiled reprobating will. Although Calvin is clear and consistent on the unity of God's will, we have found that Calvin gives priority to God's disclosed will, both dogmatically and practically. God's disclosed will of love for all that is specifically applied to the elect correlates directly with, and explicitly emerges from, God's merciful, just, and judging nature revealed most clearly in Christ. This disclosed will directly glorifies

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<sup>170</sup> *Inst.* 3.23.1, p. 947-949; *CO* 2:698-699. Calvin rejects the differentiation between God's will and permission that was later approved at the Synod of Dordt. For Calvin, such a distinction is meaningless because "the will of God is the necessity of all things." However, Calvin's rejection of God's permission does not impede him from designating the evident cause of condemnation (*evidentem damnationis causam*) as the sinful nature of humanity, *Inst.* 3.23.8, p. 956-957; *CO* 2:705.

<sup>171</sup> Link, "Election and Predestination," 121. As Busch says, the attempt to have that solution is to try, like Adam and Eve, to "be like God," Busch, *Gotteserkenntnis Und Menschlichkeit*, 78. Cf. van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 160n130. We shall revisit this concept Chapter 5 as we see how Barth, Arminius, and Calvin dealt with this inexplicable element of Christian teaching.

<sup>172</sup> Link, "Election and Predestination," 121.

God, edifies the elect, and provides the grounds and direction for Christian mission. On the other hand, God's veiled reprobating will provides only partial knowledge of God, partial witness to God's glory, partial edification for the elect, and explanations for unsuccessful Christian witness. Therefore, although united in God's one will, God's disclosed electing will and God's veiled reprobating will are asymmetrical causally, epistemologically, doctrinally, and practically.

### ***GOD'S TWO-FOLD WILL AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD***

Therefore, in light of our findings, how does God's two-fold and asymmetrically related will revealed in predestination make God known? In short, God's disclosed will, as it has been accommodated to the elect, provides direct knowledge of God in accordance with God's revealed nature, and God's veiled will flows from that same God in a mysterious way beyond human knowledge. Thus, Calvin teaches *that* God causes reprobation without explaining *how* or *why* God causes reprobation.<sup>173</sup> As Jacobs argues, Calvin finds ground for substantial teaching about election in the fact that election is mediated by Christ, and thus only known in and through Christ. However, all knowledge of reprobation occurs outside of Christ and God's nature revealed in Christ; for Calvin, reprobation is a Christ-less doctrine. According to Calvin's theological commitments, any teaching on reprobation can only have boundary-significance (*Grenzbedeutung*), providing "boundary lines [*Grenzlinie*] and not comprehensively describing the realm of reprobation."<sup>174</sup> Accordingly, Calvin repeatedly refers the reader to God's secret counsel as the only reason for reprobation. This veiled will is revealed in so far as we know it is a fact, but it only corresponds with God's revealed nature in part, namely confirming God as judge of evil and magnifying God's grace extended to the elect.<sup>175</sup>

Steve Holmes similarly asserts,

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<sup>173</sup> Using our previous terminology, God's veiled will provides only skeletal knowledge, while God's disclosed will provides the fleshed-out knowledge of God's electing work.

Muller asserts that there is no way to contemplate reprobation in God because our sins are the source of our reprobation, not God, Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 80.

<sup>174</sup> Jacobs, *Prädestination*, 144. My translation.

<sup>175</sup> Cf. Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 25.

The weakness in Calvin's account of predestination, I suggest, is that the doctrine of reprobation is detached, Christless and hidden in the unsearchable purposes of God. As such it bears no comparison with the doctrine of election, but remains something less than a Christian doctrine. There is, in Calvin's account, a fundamental difference between election and reprobation. Contra Barth, Calvin's failure is not that he teaches a symmetrical double decree...but that he has almost no room for the doctrine of reprobation in his account.<sup>176</sup>

In short, Calvin's veiled reprobating will does not result in the knowledge of God because it is epistemologically disconnected from Christ and God's revealed nature.

For Calvin, the God who is revealed in his works, including Scripture and the incarnate Christ, is the God of both election and reprobation. However, those with faith only gain direct and accurate knowledge of God and his will through his electing actions, while his reprobating actions provide veiled and unsure insight into God and his will. In short, the known God of election inscrutably causes reprobation.

### ***QUESTIONS FOR CALVIN: ASSURANCE, THE DEUS NUDUS ABSCONDITUS, BEZA, AND METHODOLOGY***

Having seen the way Calvin holds together the disclosed and veiled elements of God's one will, we now apply our findings according to our thesis of God's single, righteous will which has been accommodated to the elect in an asymmetrical, two-fold manner. We shall first address the questions of assurance of faith and the *Deus nudus absconditus* in Calvin's teaching on predestination before examining the relationship between Calvin's and Beza's teaching on predestination and providing a few brief questions regarding Calvin's methodology.

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<sup>176</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 129-130. Holmes suggests that Barth's uniqueness in the Reformed tradition is that he has a doctrine of reprobation whereas the tradition does not, p. 122.

### Assurance: Christ as Mirror

Calvin was aware of the desire for assurance of one's salvation in light of his teaching about God's secret counsel.<sup>177</sup> This question of assurance that has been posed since the earliest days of the Church (e.g. Romans 8:31-39) was present in Calvin's time as it is today,<sup>178</sup> particularly because of God's two-fold will expressed in predestination. In short, if God chooses some for salvation and passes over others, how am I to know that I am chosen? Although Calvin replied to this concern in a variety of ways, we shall highlight his three most important assurances of salvation, namely the gracious nature of election, the experience of election via calling, and most of all, the person and work of Christ who assures us of God's favorable disposition toward us.<sup>179</sup>

First, as we have already observed, Calvin's teaching on predestination reveals the utterly gratuitous nature of salvation. The elect come to faith based on no merit of their own. Consequently, the security of their salvation rests not in their power but in God's.

Second, recognizing that speculation about one's election in the labyrinth of predestination would not provide the needed assurance, Calvin teaches that the elect can be assured of their salvation through their experience of the calling of faith and its accompanying sanctification.<sup>180</sup> Instead of such speculation about "God's eternal plan [*concilium*] apart from his Word," Calvin advises his readers to find the unimaginable comfort of looking for certainty in God's Word via God's call (*vocatio*), through which God gives peace.<sup>181</sup> This assurance is founded on the truth of God's Word but experienced via one's personal call to faith, which Calvin explains elsewhere as embracing God's merciful promises in a manner "that

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<sup>177</sup> E.g. *De Aeterna*, p. 126; *CO* 8:318.

<sup>178</sup> E.g. Zachman's study on the quest for assurance in Luther's and Calvin's theologies, Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

<sup>179</sup> Huijgen demonstrates that Calvin taught assurance based upon sound soteriology, showing what is necessary for salvation, instead of certainty that is grounded in the doctrine of God, Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 270.

<sup>180</sup> Zachman, *Assurance of Faith*, 219. Cf. *Inst.* 3.24.8, p. 974; *CO* 2:719.

<sup>181</sup> *Inst.* 3.24.4, p. 968-969; *CO* 2:714-715.

renders the conscience calm and peaceful [*sedat et serenat*] before God's judgment."<sup>182</sup>

The fact Calvin teaches that God is ready to receive any who would respond to the call of the gospel in faith explains why Calvin sees calling as providing assurance. He says regarding Ezekiel 18:23, "the Prophet only shows here, that when we have been converted [*conversi fuerint*] we need not doubt that God immediately [*statim*] meets us and shows himself propitious."<sup>183</sup> For Calvin, election precedes faith, and faith attests to one's calling as a gift from the Spirit. Therefore, to simply have faith assures the believer that he or she is one of the elect and a recipient of God's disclosed will of merciful, fatherly love.<sup>184</sup>

However, Calvin's desire to be faithful to Scripture and interpret human experience led him to include some elements in his doctrine of calling that could undermine the assurance of God's call,<sup>185</sup> namely the teaching of God's temporary illumination, which can be seen as a subset of Calvin's teaching on God's veiled, reprobating will.<sup>186</sup> Addressing the description of the apostates in Hebrews 6, Calvin says that God at times provides a temporary faith to the reprobate which lacks the roots to endure.<sup>187</sup> Similarly, those who seem to fall away from Christ are unknowingly like Judas "who never cleaved to Christ with the heartfelt trust in which the certainty of election has, I say, been established for us." This false faith is even accompanied by "signs of a call that are similar [*similia*] to those of the elect."<sup>188</sup>

Instead of perceiving such teaching as a pastoral pitfall, Calvin says that these warnings should keep us "in fear and humility" as we recognize the weakness of our human nature while trusting God to strengthen our faith and "have us to remain and rest tranquil as in a safe haven [*in tutu porto*]."<sup>189</sup> Similarly, Calvin says that such instances of temporary faith should not disrupt the peace of our call

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<sup>182</sup> *Inst.* 3.2.16, p. 561; *CO* 2:411.

<sup>183</sup> *Comm. Ezek.* 18:23; *CO* 40:446.

<sup>184</sup> We are assured "by believing in Jesus Christ," *Sermons on Ephesians*, 1:4-6, p. 47; *CO* 51:281.

<sup>185</sup> Cf. Zachman, *Assurance of Faith*, 246.

<sup>186</sup> Cf. *Inst.* 3.2.10-13, p. 554-559; *CO* 2:405-410.

<sup>187</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 6:4-5; *CO* 55:72. Cf. *Inst.* 3.2.12, p. 556; *CO* 2:407.

<sup>188</sup> *Inst.* 3.24.7, p. 973; *CO* 2:718. Cf. *De Aeterna*, p. 151-152; *CO* 8:338-339.

<sup>189</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 6:4-5; *CO* 55:72.

because God does not allow any to fall away who have “true faith [*vera fide*].”<sup>190</sup> For Calvin, the doctrine of temporary faith urges believers on to faith and piety while finding assurance in God’s powerful, merciful, righteous nature. In short: from Scripture and experience, we recognize that some seem to have temporary faith; the sovereign God who causes all that comes to pass is the cause of this temporary faith; be careful not to fall away; and do not be anxious because the merciful and powerful God of Jesus Christ holds and sustains you in your faith.

Although Calvin perceives the call of faith as sufficient grounds for assurance of one’s reception of God’s disclosed, electing will, he offers the most substantial assurance in the *speculum electionis*, Jesus Christ, the mirror of our election.<sup>191</sup> In *De Aeterna*, Calvin says,

For whoever does not walk in the plain path of faith can make nothing of the election of God but a labyrinth of destruction [*exitialis*]. Therefore, that the remission of sins may be a certainty [*certa*] to us, our consciences rest in confidence of eternal life, and we call upon God as Father without fear, the beginning [*exordium*] is not to be made here. We must begin with what is revealed [*patefactum*] in Christ concerning the love of the Father for us and what Christ Himself daily preaches to us through the Gospel. Nothing higher is demanded of us than that we be the sons of God. But of the gratuitous election [*atqui gratuita*] by which alone we may attain this highest good, the mirror of adoption [*adoptionis speculum*], earnest and pledge is the Son, who came forth for us from the bosom of the Father to make us heirs of the heavenly kingdom by ingrafting us into His body.<sup>192</sup>

For Calvin, there is no further place to look for God’s fatherly love than Christ.<sup>193</sup> Calvin specifically teaches that one cannot inquire into the secret counsel

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<sup>190</sup> *Inst.* 3.24.7, p. 973; *CO* 2:718.

<sup>191</sup> Cf. Zachman, *Assurance of Faith*, 218.

<sup>192</sup> *De Aeterna*, p. 113; *CO* 8:307.

<sup>193</sup> *Comm. John* 15:9; *CO* 47:342. Cf. *Harmony of the Gospels*, Matt. 11:27; *CO* 45:320.

Zachman suggests the best solution to the problem of assurance for Calvin lies “in his understanding of Christ as the image of the Father.” However, Zachman says that the loving Father revealed in and through Christ provides everything in Christ except election, making election *and* Christ as the source of all good things, and thus undermining assurance once again, Zachman, *Assurance of Faith*, 246. This suggestion holds significant contemporary appeal, especially considering Calvin’s frequent references to God as loving Father, but for Calvin it would not fit with his broader doctrine of predestination that must include an understanding of God as righteous Judge. For Calvin, any true assurance must take into account God’s mercy, righteousness, and judgment, which are all displayed in Christ, the mirror of election. For Calvin, simple as it may sound, the only certainty comes by looking at Christ; if one is looking to Christ, they have no need to fear.

of God to find assurance of salvation: “Since the certainty of salvation [*salutis certitudo*] is set forth to us in Christ, it is wrong and injurious to Christ to pass over this proffered fountain of life from which supplies are available, and to toil to draw life out of the hidden recesses of God [*ex reconditis Dei abyssis*].”<sup>194</sup>

Christ as the mirror provides sufficient assurance of God’s will to answer any number of questions, including the mystery of God’s veiled reprobating will and Calvin’s doctrine of temporary faith. “If Pighius asks how I know I am elect, I answer that Christ is more than a thousand testimonies [*mille testimoniis*] to me. For when we find ourselves in His body, our salvation rests in a secure and tranquil place [*in segura tranquillaque statione*], as though already located in heaven.”<sup>195</sup>

In sum, Calvin perceives his doctrine of predestination as providing assurance of faith because it grounds the work of salvation solely in God’s grace that is attested to by one’s call to faith by the Spirit, which is only experienced by grace and is attested to by God’s gift of sanctification. Beyond his or her call to faith, the believer finds ultimate security by looking to Christ, the mirror of election, who reveals God’s nature and God’s disclosed electing will.

In light of this abundant assurance in Christ, neither the doctrine of temporary faith nor God’s veiled reprobating will undermine one’s assurance of salvation. Instead, since neither doctrine provides clear insight into God’s nature, they must be interpreted in light of God’s revealed nature and God’s disclosed will as directly displayed in the preaching of the gospel and most clearly in Christ. In its correct subordinate place, and from the vantage point of faith, God’s veiled reprobating will (including God’s will to provide temporary faith to some) is not a threat to one’s assurance of salvation but a fact that explains common experience and highlights the depths out of which the elect have been rescued.

Therefore, beyond the desire to believe that witnesses to our calling, by looking to Christ we see God’s merciful nature revealed in accord with God’s disclosed, electing will. For Calvin, to look to Christ is to find assurance of salvation.

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<sup>194</sup> *De Aeterna*, p. 126; *CO* 8:318. Cf. *Sermons on Ephesians*, 1:4-6, p. 47; *CO* 51:281-282. Cf. *De Aeterna*, p. 127; *CO* 8:318. Cf. Gibson, *Reading the Decree*, 65.

<sup>195</sup> *De Aeterna*, p. 130; *CO* 8:321.



### ***Deus Nudus Absconditus* and the Perspective of Faith**

In Karl Barth's critique of Calvin's doctrine of predestination, he accuses Calvin of separating the electing God from the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Barth says, "The fact that Calvin in particular not only did not answer but did not even perceive this question is the decisive objection which we have to bring against his whole doctrine of predestination. The electing God of Calvin is a *Deus nudus absconditus*. It is not the *Deus revelatus* who is as such the *Deus absconditus*, the eternal God."<sup>196</sup> Although it is outside the task of this study to carefully analyze and respond to Barth's claims, we shall look briefly at the way in which Calvin's teaching on the two-fold secret will of God addresses Barth's critique.

In approaching this question, it is helpful to see, drawing upon David Gibson's careful analysis of Barth's and Calvin's understandings of predestination, that Calvin places election within the economy of salvation while Barth situates it within the doctrine of God. Therefore, Calvin and Barth have different starting points and ending points when describing election. For Calvin, election is something God does in and through Christ, while for Barth, "Christ is the decree" as electing God and elected man.<sup>197</sup> This distinction aligns with Calvin's approach to the doctrine of God, in which God accommodates himself to humanity through his works (of which incarnation and redemption are the capstones), in contrast with Barth's christologically-centered approach, in which Christ is the first and last grounds for all knowledge of God.<sup>198</sup>

In his day, Calvin was aware that some people perceived the doctrine of election to undermine human confidence in God's loving disposition. For example, Jerome Bolsec of the famous Bolsec Controversy of 1551, whose opposition to

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<sup>196</sup> *CD* II/2, p. 110-111; *KD*, p. 119. Berkouwer similarly asks, "For although we do not attempt to penetrate into that which, according to God's revelation, must remain hidden for us, the fact of that hiddenness remains known to us and we wonder whether out of this hiddenness - this *deus absconditus* - a shadow is not also cast where the *deus revelatus* is preached with emphasis," G.C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 12.

<sup>197</sup> Gibson, *Reading the Decree*, 4.

<sup>198</sup> This corresponds with Gibson's categories (using Muller's terms) of Calvin's "soteriological christocentrism" and Barth's "principlial christocentrism," which helpfully identify both theologians as christocentric, albeit with different theological methodologies guiding their christocentric approaches, Gibson, *Reading the Decree*, 6. Cf. Richard Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 97.

Calvin spurred his writing of *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, charged Calvin with making God the author of evil.<sup>199</sup>

In the *Institutes*, Calvin responds to the charge that God's dealings with the reprobate make God into a tyrant.<sup>200</sup> There he focuses on the way that God's will is "the highest rule of righteousness" so that what looks evil to humans must be understood by faith to be righteous within the secret counsel of God. Calvin contends that God is not unjust in condemning the reprobate for their own sin, highlighting the human cause of reprobation. He appeals again to God's veiled will in regard to the fact that the fall of humanity also occurred according to God's secret, righteous ordinance which is beyond human understanding. He concludes his argument with a typical appeal to the "inscrutable" (*inscrutabilia*) will of God before which Paul stood in wonder (Romans 11:33-36), as we should.<sup>201</sup> As we see here, Calvin's appeal to God's unified, secret, and righteous will plays a large part in Calvin's logic, which presumably contributes to Barth's uneasiness and positing of a God "behind and above" (*hinter und über*) the God revealed in Jesus Christ in Calvin's doctrine of predestination.<sup>202</sup> However, in light of Calvin's broader teaching, Calvin knows that God's one will is righteous because God has revealed his nature to those with faith. In other words, those who know God's disclosed, electing disposition toward them already know that God is not a tyrant, so they interpret the skeletal facts of reprobation in light of God's revealed nature.

Even more directly to Barth's critique, in Calvin's final lectures, on Ezekiel,<sup>203</sup> Calvin addresses the concern that the doctrine of predestination precludes trusting God as loving Father. There, instead of appealing primarily to the veiled will of God hidden in his secret counsel, Calvin appeals to God's disclosed will, saying that everyone who repents finds God merciful. We do not receive insight into God's incomprehensible plans but are called to focus on the word of God as described in

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<sup>199</sup> Gordon, *Calvin*, 205. Cf. *Congrégation*, CO 8:93-118. Trans. from Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy*, 696-719. Cf. Pighius' claim that the doctrine of predestination made God into a God of sheer will and a being who is not worthy of love, *De Aeterna*, p. 115, 139; CO 8:308, 328. Cf. *BLW*, p. 40; CO 6:258.

<sup>200</sup> *Inst.* 3.23.2-5 p. 949-953; CO 2:699-703.

<sup>201</sup> *Inst.* 3.23.5, p. 953; CO 2:702.

<sup>202</sup> *CD II/2*, p. 110; *KD*, p. 118.

<sup>203</sup> Calvin presented his final lecture, on Ezek. 20:44, on February 2, 1564 (de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin*, 109). He died on May 27, 1564.

the law, prophets, and gospel (God's disclosed will); "All are called to repentance, and the hope of salvation is promised them when they repent: this is true, since God rejects no returning sinner: he pardons all without exception." However, Calvin does not ignore the veiled will of God, concluding, "Meanwhile, this will of God which he sets forth in his Word does not prevent him from decreeing before the world was created what he would do with every individual [*de singulis hominibus*]." <sup>204</sup> In this case, Calvin teaches that God's disclosed will of love provides the backdrop against which one contemplates predestination. Thus, God can be trusted by faith to be loving and righteous even in light of God's partially known reprobating actions.

Although Calvin's approach in the *Institutes* focuses on God's veiled will and Calvin's answer in Ezekiel emphasizes God's disclosed will, both replies hold together God's one, accommodated, and two-fold secret will.

Both approaches to the accusations of God as tyrant highlight Calvin's central point that one is only able to inquire into predestination through the means that God has provided, namely Scripture and Christ as accessed through faith. When people inquire by faith, they are already situated in the place of adoption, knowing God as Father, recognizing God's nature, and affirming God's disclosed, electing will toward them. For Calvin, the doctrine of predestination can only be known by those who have already recognized God's saving work in Christ. Therefore, it is only possible to evaluate God's electing and reprobating will when one is already convinced of God's merciful, loving, electing nature. As Gibson says, "Faith should look directly at Christ. Expressions like this, in Calvin's mind at least, would also serve to ward off the claims by Barth that a *Deus nudus absconditus* lurks at the heart of his doctrine of election." <sup>205</sup> God's disclosed, electing will as perceived in Christ is the starting point and only access point for any right contemplation of predestination.

Calvin also acknowledges the distinct otherness of God. The elect recognize that God is a righteous, judging, and loving Father, but they also know that they cannot understand the totality of God's inscrutable governance of all that comes to

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<sup>204</sup> *Comm. Ezek.* 18:23; *CO* 40:446.

<sup>205</sup> Gibson, *Reading the Decree*, 83-84.

pass. For Calvin, *God* is not hidden, but “the cause of eternal reprobation is so hidden [*absconditus est*] from us, that nothing remains for us but to wonder at the incomprehensible purpose of God [*incomprehensibile Dei consilium*].”<sup>206</sup>

As we have seen, for Calvin, one is not able to select between God’s disclosed electing will and God’s veiled reprobating will. They are inseparable parts of God’s single, righteous, and secret will. However, they are also asymmetrically related within God’s will in such a way that God’s disclosed will toward the elect is the starting and ending place for knowledge of God. For Calvin, God’s transcendent otherness must be acknowledged and submitted to through an attitude of humble awe in light of the limits of humans knowing. However, along with the accommodated knowledge of God’s nature, reliable knowledge of God’s disposition toward them has been granted the elect. God’s reprobating will is factual but inscrutably comes from the God whose nature corresponds to his disclosed electing will.<sup>207</sup> There is no knowledge of election or reprobation apart from the perspective of faith as adopted children of the loving, righteous, and judging Father.<sup>208</sup>

For Calvin, there is no *Deus absconditus* but only the transcendent, loving Father of the disclosed electing will and veiled reprobating will who is reliably apprehended but not comprehended by the elect through faith in Christ.

### Beza and Calvin on Predestination

It has been claimed that Theodore Beza, Calvin’s successor in Geneva, corrupted Calvin’s “christocentric” teaching by moving predestination into the center of Reformed theology.<sup>209</sup> Beginning in Calvin scholarship with Muller’s *Christ and the Decree* in 1986, the Beza thesis (along with the Calvin vs. the Calvinist claim) has been thoroughly refuted, primarily through the demonstration

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<sup>206</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 11:7; *CO* 49:216.

<sup>207</sup> For the contemporary interpreter, this contradiction between God’s nature and God’s actions may indicate a *Deus nudus absconditus*, but because of the primacy of God’s revealed nature, it did not do so for Calvin.

<sup>208</sup> As Muller puts it regarding the inseparability of predestination and the triune God’s work in Christ, “This means that there can be no *Deus nudus absconditus*, no God abstractly considered apart from his work, in Calvin’s system,” Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 18.

<sup>209</sup> E.g. R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

that the Reformed tradition developed from Medieval theology through a range of theologians over a number of years.<sup>210</sup> Specifically regarding Beza, the argument for continuity is especially convincing because Calvin unmistakably knew about Beza's teaching on predestination.<sup>211</sup> However, a glance at Beza's *Tabula Praedestinationis* diagram<sup>212</sup> reveals statements that contrast with this chapter's conclusions regarding Calvin's teaching on predestination. For example, at the top of the chart, Beza depicts God's parallel decree to "elect in Christ those to be saved" and "to reject those to be damned by their own fault" to the end of God's glory. Further down, Beza depicts a symmetrical relationship between the eternal life given to the elect and the just punishment of sinners, which he explains happen "in accordance with His eternal decree" as the glory of God is manifest through God, "the supremely merciful and the supremely severe." The inherent limits of any diagram aside, Beza's depiction indicates a symmetry in God's two dispositions toward humanity, an elevation of a certain definition of God's glory as the *telos* of predestination, and an order of logic that begins with God's decree, all of which contrast with Calvin's account. How are these differences to be accounted for?

Space here does not permit a full comparison of Beza's and Calvin's teaching on predestination. Instead, drawing on Muller's careful discussion,<sup>213</sup> we find that Beza's account of predestination, particularly in his *Tabula*, reveals general, material continuity with Calvin's teaching while also displaying discontinuity in specific emphases. We shall note the context of the document, highlight three

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<sup>210</sup> Cf. Muller, *Christ and the Decree*. For a concise summary of the developments in Calvin scholarship on this topic, see Raymond A. Blacketer, "The Man in the Black Hat: Theodore Beza and the Reorientation of Early Reformed Historiography," in *Church and School in Early Modern Protestantism*, ed. Jordan J. Ballor, David S. Sytsma, and Jason Zuidema, (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 227-241. Cf. Raymond A. Blacketer, "Blaming Beza: The Development of Definite Atonement in the Reformed Tradition," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2013), 121-142. Cf. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*. In light of this updated understanding, Calvin can be appropriately appreciated for both his continuity and discontinuity with the Christian tradition before, during, and after his time, as exhibited in this comparison with Beza.

<sup>211</sup> E.g. Beza's letter to Calvin requesting feedback on the document, July 29, 1555, *CO* 15:701-705.

<sup>212</sup> See Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thompson (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 147-148.

<sup>213</sup> Richard Muller, "The Use and Abuse of a Document: Beza's *Tabula Praedestinationis*, the Bolsec Controversy, and the Origins of Reformed Orthodoxy," in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005): 33-61.

important areas of continuity and three elements of discontinuity before providing a brief summary.

First, regarding its context, Beza's *Tabula* was written in response to the Bolsec controversy of 1551 in order to provide an orderly and scripturally-supported account of the doctrine of predestination.<sup>214</sup> Correspondence suggests that Beza began writing the document during the Bolsec affair in Geneva, likely at Calvin's bidding, and completed it in 1555. Contrary to what the complete title, *Summa Totius Christianismi*, may suggest, Beza does not seek to provide a summary of Christian theology in the *Tabula*.<sup>215</sup> Instead, Beza felt that Calvin's *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* was insufficient because it primarily responded to Pighius' arguments instead of expounding the doctrine of predestination in proper order. Therefore, in Muller's words, Beza provides an orderly account of "the relationship of the various elements of the *ordo salutis* to the divine decree, with an emphasis on Christ and the graciously given faith that receives Christ."<sup>216</sup> To understand the diagram aright, one must also examine the accompanying text that includes eight chapters of explanation with over 600 Scripture citations.<sup>217</sup>

Second, Beza's *Tabula* demonstrates general continuity with Calvin's teaching on predestination.<sup>218</sup> All of Beza's claims can be substantiated in Calvin's teaching, even the statements that seem at odds with Calvin's overall understanding. We note three examples here that relate to our study of God's disposition toward humanity. First, Beza claims that the final end of God's counsel (*ultimus est consiliorum Dei finis*) is "neither the salvation of the elect nor the damnation of the reprobate, but the setting forth of his own glory [*ipsius gloriae*] in saving the one by his mercy [*per misericordiam*] and condemning the other by his just judgement

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<sup>214</sup> Muller, "Use and Abuse," 35.

<sup>215</sup> As Blacketer points out, it provides "the 'sum total' of Christianity in the same way that John 3:16 might be said to be the sum total of the faith," Blacketer, "The Development of Definite Atonement," 132.

When Beza wrote his own summary of Christian doctrine, *Confessio christianae religionis*, in 1558, predestination was not the central dogma, organizing principle, or even a specific locus, Muller, "Use and Abuse," 74. Cf. Joel R. Beeke, "Theodore Beza's Supralapsarian Predestination," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 12, no. 2 (2003): 75.

<sup>216</sup> Muller, "Use and Abuse," 34.

<sup>217</sup> In the original Latin version, the text is broken up into short "aphorisms" of one to five sentences, followed by extensive Scripture prooftexts [*probationes*] printed in full.

<sup>218</sup> Cf. Muller, "Use and Abuse," 33-61.

[*iusto iudicio*].”<sup>219</sup> Similarly, in Calvin’s polemic against Pighius, Calvin says regarding predestination, “In all His works, the Lord has the reason of His own glory [*suae gloriae*].”<sup>220</sup> Second, Beza teaches that God created people “in two thoroughly different ways” (*duobus modis penitus diversis*) in order to set forth his glory in mercy to one and condemnation to the other.<sup>221</sup> Along the same lines, as we noted above in Calvin’s starkest statements about predestination, he teaches that “All are not created [*creantur*] in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others.”<sup>222</sup> Finally, in continuity with Calvin, Beza describes a drastic asymmetry between election and reprobation in many respects. For example, election is caused only by God in his mercy whereas, “the whole fault [*tota...culpa*] of the Reprobates’ damnation lies in themselves [*in ipsis haereat*].”<sup>223</sup> Again, the elect are certain of their own election as it is revealed by the Spirit, but no one (including the reprobate) knows who the reprobate are.<sup>224</sup> We are called to preach the gospel to all, even the most heinous sinners, in hopes they will respond in faith through God’s mercy, even in the last hour of their lives.<sup>225</sup> Finally, even though the diagram suggests the opposite, Beza is clear that teaching about the decrees comes only *after* one knows God’s electing will and nature by faith, demonstrated in the fact that gospel proclamation does not begin with the heights of God’s incomprehensible majesty as displayed in God’s decree but instead moves from “the bottom” (*imum*) of sin, law, and grace.<sup>226</sup> As demonstrated here, Beza’s account largely agrees with Calvin’s teaching on predestination.

However, Beza’s teaching also displays discontinuity with Calvin in his specific emphases. For example, as seen above, and often drawing upon Paul’s teaching in Romans 9:20-23 about the potter and the clay, Beza implies that God is equally glorified in his merciful rescue of the elect and in his just condemnation of the

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<sup>219</sup> *Tabula*, 3; 1:179.

<sup>220</sup> *De Aeterna*, p. 119; *CO* 8:312.

<sup>221</sup> *Tabula*, 2; 1:173. My translation.

<sup>222</sup> *Inst.* 3.21.5, p. 926; *CO* 2:683.

<sup>223</sup> *Tabula*, 3; 1:178. Both Calvin and Beza teach that the fall and reprobation still occur according to God’s ordination, even though sin emerges from humanity, not from God.

<sup>224</sup> *Tabula*, 8; 1.204.

<sup>225</sup> *Tabula*, 8; 1.204.

<sup>226</sup> *Tabula*, 7; 1.197. Cf Muller, “Use and Abuse,” 53.

reprobate.<sup>227</sup> In contrast, although Calvin states that God is glorified in all his works, Calvin describes an asymmetrical relationship between God's glory and God's expression of mercy and wrath. To reiterate, in his commentary on Romans 9:20-23, Calvin says that God's glory is displayed in the condemnation of the reprobate "because the greatness of divine mercy towards the elect is hereby more clearly made known."<sup>228</sup> Although Beza makes a similar point at times, Calvin goes even further by saying that God's "glory" mentioned in this verse "has been used [as a metonymy] for God's mercy...for his chief praise is in acts of kindness."<sup>229</sup> For Calvin, although as a rule God is glorified in all his works, God's glory is not equally manifest in expressing condemnation and mercy.<sup>230</sup> There is an asymmetrical relationship between the two, as God's nature is plainly displayed in election but only partially shown in reprobation.

As another example of discontinuity, even though Calvin abides by the logic of his doctrines of predestination and providence to teach that God creates some people to save and others to condemn, Calvin's teaching on creation (and his typical approach elsewhere) reveals that God's primary purpose in creation was not to create humanity for condemnation.<sup>231</sup> This stands in contrast with Beza's supralapsarian diagram and indication that God created "in two thoroughly different ways." Thus, Muller says, that Beza's teaching provides a "point of transition between supralapsarian aspects of Calvin's thought and a more strictly defined doctrinal model."<sup>232</sup>

As a final example, this time of a perceived discontinuity between Calvin and Beza, Beza's diagram works from the order of being (*ordo essendi*) whereas (as we have seen) Calvin consistently works from the order of knowing (*ordo cognoscendi*), allowing knowledge of God's decree only after one has come to know

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<sup>227</sup> Romans 9 is a central text for Beza's predestination teaching. Rom. 9:20 and Prov. 16:4 both appear at the top of the published diagram, *Tabula*; 1.170.

<sup>228</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 9:23; *CO* 49:188. Calvin's translation decision there also highlights this exegetical choice.

<sup>229</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 9:23; *CO* 49:188.

<sup>230</sup> This corresponds with Calvin's teaching that God's mercy is at the center of his nature. Cf. Chapter 2.

<sup>231</sup> For details, see Chapter 4.

<sup>232</sup> Muller, "Use and Abuse," 58. Muller helpfully points out that Beza's supralapsarian tendency is not speculative but focused on the "temporal execution of the divine purpose," p. 59.



Christ by faith. However, a reading of the text alongside the diagram shows that, as noted above, Beza does not believe Christian preaching should begin with God's incomprehensible decrees. He only allows for that type of reasoning for those whose eyes have become accustomed to God's light.<sup>233</sup> As Muller summarizes, Beza teaches that "believers *do not* learn of their election by following the arrangement of the chart from top [God's decree] to bottom [salvation]!"<sup>234</sup> Thus, upon closer examination, we find that this perceived discontinuity disappears; both Calvin and Beza teach that one can only learn anything about predestination *a posteriori*, after they have placed their faith in Christ. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to the proper understanding of Beza's teaching was his decision to try to encapsulate Scripture's complex and nuanced teaching on predestination in a simple diagram.

In conclusion, we have seen that Beza's teaching on predestination has general material continuity with Calvin's teaching but also includes discontinuities in emphasis, particularly regarding the relationship between God's glory and mercy and regarding God's creation of people for condemnation. Thus, Beza's teaching regarding God's disposition toward humanity as seen in predestination does differ from Calvin's. Calvin teaches that in predestination, God's one, righteous will is expressed in a two-fold, asymmetrical manner that highlights God's mercy, whereas Beza teaches that God's one, righteous will is expressed in a secret, double will toward humanity that results in God's glory. Beza does not manipulate or significantly change Calvin's teaching of God's wholly gratuitous election in Christ, but seeks to appropriate it into a doctrinal model. As Muller states, Beza's approach in the *Tabula* shows "a desire for terminological clarity and careful distinction between ideas that look past the style of Calvin's *Institutes* towards the scholastic approaches of Reformed orthodoxy."<sup>235</sup> Apparently, Calvin did not see those divergences as significant enough to ask Beza to change the document when he was given the opportunity in 1555. Perhaps Calvin saw room for his

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<sup>233</sup> *Tabula*, 7; 1.197. Cf. Muller, "Use and Abuse," 51-53.

<sup>234</sup> Muller, "Use and Abuse," 53.

<sup>235</sup> Muller, "Use and Abuse," 54. It is important to remember that humanism and scholasticism are not mutually exclusive. Calvin uses many scholastic methods while opposing the abuses of theological schools that utilize scholastic methods toward speculative and useless ends. Cf. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 39-61. Cf. David C. Steinmetz, "The Scholastic Calvin," in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 16-30.

interpretation and emphases within Beza's broader doctrinal framework. As another possibility, as Beeke suggests, maybe Beza's departure from Calvin was not as apparent in his preaching and pastoral work as it is in the bare facts of the occasional and polemic *Tabula*.<sup>236</sup>

Having examined Calvin's and Beza's teaching on predestination, we now consider a few methodological questions arising from Calvin's account.

### **Methodological Questions for Further Consideration**

Having seen that Calvin teaches that God's one, secret, and righteous will is accommodated to the elect in a two-fold but asymmetrical manner in God's disclosed, electing disposition toward humanity that is extended to all and effected in the elect and in God's veiled, reprobating disposition toward the reprobate, we shall here briefly point out five questions regarding Calvin's methodology and doctrine that have arisen in the course of this study:

1. Does Calvin let experience play a disproportionately large role in his theology? Although Scripture forms the foundation of his teaching on predestination, we have also observed how experience informs his teaching on God's reprobating will, e.g. providing confirmation that God does indeed choose people to reprobate and in whom to instill temporary faith. However, when Calvin goes beyond the simple confirmation of Scripture's teaching by attributing relative numbers to the elect (1% or 20% depending on the day) because of his experience in preaching the gospel, he violates his non-speculative methodology. Although his purpose in providing those numbers is clearly to prevent preachers from being discouraged, in this case, he should have kept silent and left the quantity of the elect or reprobate rightly in God's secret counsel.
2. Secondly, in his detailed teaching on reprobation as part of God's plan, does Calvin violate his non-speculative, scriptural methodology? As noted above, Jacobs thinks that, because of his polemic debates with opponents of his

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<sup>236</sup> Beeke notes that "supralapsarian tendencies are wholly absent in his eighty-seven extant sermons," Beeke, "Beza's Predestination," 77.

doctrine of predestination, Calvin provides positive teaching on what should have remained simply a boundary marker. Was Calvin scripturally justified in laying out specifics of *how* and *why* God brings about reprobation? Should it have been left as the unknown, skeletal shadow of God's election by grace instead of Calvin's explication of the details of God's creating some who would ever remain in their sin?

3. Does Calvin use an improper definition of freedom in his teaching on predestination? For Calvin, God demonstrates his freedom in predestination by choosing to elect some and not choosing to elect others. However, from a human perspective, true human freedom comes as believers come to obey God's law, not out of necessity but because they "willingly obey God's will."<sup>237</sup> Humanity finds its true freedom in obedience to God, not in the ability to make one of two opposite choices. Would it not be more consistent to agree with Barth in saying that God's freedom is to act according to his nature alone?<sup>238</sup>
4. Why does Calvin overlook the missional nature of election? Scripture is clear that Israel is meant to be "a light to the nations" (Isaiah 49:6). The disciples are chosen to be sent (John 20:21). The Spirit fills the faithful for the explicit purpose of witnessing to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Could it be that if Calvin had recognized the missional nature of election that he would have never faced accusations that his teaching presented a tyrant God or a *Deus nudus absconditus* because God's love for all people would have been intrinsically present in any teaching on election? Recent work in Biblical scholarship has found this theme as central to a proper understanding of election.<sup>239</sup>
5. Finally, where is the empathy for the reprobate? Would it not be more consistent with Calvin's doctrine of God that God would be grieved over the state of the reprobate instead of coldly condemning them as his enemies?

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<sup>237</sup> *Inst.* 3.19.4, p. 836; *CO* 2:615. Cf. *Inst.* 2.11.9-10, p. 458-460; *CO* 2:335-337.

<sup>238</sup> Cf. *CD* II/1, p. 301; *KD*, p. 339.

<sup>239</sup> Cf. Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003). Cf. Christopher R. Seitz, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001). Cf. N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

Particularly, if the law is summarized in love of God and love for neighbor, how can it be that God (who is the embodiment of the law) seemingly does not love the reprobate “neighbor” (even in the midst of their just condemnation)? Similarly, in his descriptions of reprobation, does Calvin show adequate empathy for the human beings who remain forever alienated from God?

Although other questions could be raised, these five touch on key concerns that, if addressed, could significantly strengthen the consistency and scriptural faithfulness of Calvin’s account of predestination.

***CONCLUSION: ONE SECRET WILL: DISCLOSED AS MERCY, VEILED AS CONDEMNATION***

In conclusion, for Calvin, God’s one, righteous, and secret will is accommodated to the elect in a two-fold but asymmetrical manner in the doctrine of predestination, namely as God’s disclosed electing disposition extended to all humanity and effected in the faithful and as God’s veiled reprobating disposition toward the reprobate. For Calvin, God’s disclosed disposition takes dogmatic and practical priority over the skeletal fact of God’s reprobating disposition. Thus, election corresponds with God’s revealed nature while reprobation remains a bare fact for which God is responsible but, from the human perspective, largely does not correspond with God’s nature or provide significant knowledge of God.

Finally, as we have seen, when understood rightly, Calvin’s teaching on predestination need not undermine God’s trustworthiness; Calvin’s teaching reveals primarily continuity along with small but significant discontinuity with Beza’s doctrine of predestination; and Calvin’s approach leaves a number of questions that, if addressed, could improve his teaching.

From the perspective of faith, Calvin joyfully and confidently ascribes to the doctrine of predestination as an expression of grace offered to all from the merciful, righteous, and judging Father who, from before time in his powerful governance of the universe, enables some to receive the offered grace while

mysteriously leaving others to the just deserts of their sin. Having seen Calvin's teaching on the doctrine of God and predestination, we now turn to examine Calvin's teaching on Christ's reconciling work to continue discerning God's disposition toward humanity in Calvin's theology.

## **Chapter 4—GOD'S DISPOSITION TOWARD HUMANITY IN THE ATONEMENT**

For if we seek salvation, that is, life with God, righteousness must be first sought, by which being reconciled to him, we may, by that propitiation, obtain that life which consists only in his favor; for, in order to be loved by God, we must first become righteous, since he regards unrighteousness with hatred.<sup>1</sup>

Let us therefore bear in mind, that this is the main design [*praecipuum...finem*] of the gospel—that whereas we are ‘by nature children of wrath’ (Eph. 2:3), we may, by the breaking up of the quarrel between God and us, be received by him into favor.<sup>2</sup>

The end [*finis*] of the gospel is that we might hold communion [*communicemus*] with God.<sup>3</sup>

As we have seen, Calvin distinguishes between God’s disclosed loving disposition that is extended to all and effected in the elect and God’s veiled reprobating disposition toward the reprobate. God’s disclosed electing will corresponds directly with God’s revealed nature known by those with faith, but God’s veiled reprobating will only corresponds in part with God’s revealed nature. In short, the only God that can be positively known and proclaimed is the electing God revealed in creation, Scripture, and most of all, Christ.

Thus we arrive at the questions of this chapter, how does Calvin’s teaching on the reconciling work of Christ further illuminate God’s disclosed will, and in what manner does it relate to God’s veiled reprobating will? In short, what do we learn about God’s disposition toward humanity through the atonement?<sup>4</sup>

Following the biblical witness, Calvin expositis Christ’s reconciling work using a broad range of metaphors and concepts. To hear Calvin aright, we must not select one theme to the neglect of all others. This has long been a temptation for Reformed theologians, from Osiander’s attempt to explain salvation solely through

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<sup>1</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 1:17; *CO* 49:20. My translation.

<sup>2</sup> *Comm. 2 Cor.* 5:18; *CO* 50:70

<sup>3</sup> *Comm. 1 John* 2:5; *CO* 55:312. My translation.

<sup>4</sup> Although the English word “atonement” was obviously not a word that Calvin used, we shall utilize it as a general term to refer to the reconciling work of Christ.

union with Christ apart from Christ's forensic work on the cross<sup>5</sup> to Owen's designation of God's punishment as the "chief end" of all of Christ's works.<sup>6</sup> Thus, as we examine Christ's reconciling work, we shall attempt to survey the full breadth of Calvin's teaching in order to understand aright the Reformer's rich and variegated account. To apprehend Calvin's teaching on Christ's reconciling person and work, we must first explore God's creative intent for humanity and the varied results of the fall. Only then shall we be able to appreciate the many interrelated aspects of Calvin's multifaceted account of Christ's reconciling work that enables communion with God.

In the course of this study, we shall find that Calvin's teaching on the atonement further confirms what we have discovered thus far, namely that in accordance with his nature, God has revealed to those with faith his disclosed electing disposition of love. We shall also see again that in the midst of God's revelation of his loving disposition toward all people, God inscrutably acts according to his veiled disposition toward the reprobate in ways that, from the human perspective, correspond to God's nature only in part. In short, Calvin's teaching on the atonement directly illuminates and expresses God's disclosed disposition of love extended to all while providing veiled and partial insight into God's veiled reprobating disposition toward the reprobate, further confirming the marked asymmetry in Calvin's description of God's two dispositions toward humanity.

### ***GOD'S CREATIONAL INTENT FOR HUMANITY***

Scripture attributed nothing else to him than that he had been created in the image of God, thus suggesting that man was blessed [*beatum*], not because of his own good actions, but by participation in God [*Dei participatione*].<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Inst.* 3.11.5, p. 729-731; *CO* 2:536.

<sup>6</sup> John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 10, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 547.

<sup>7</sup> *Inst.* 2.2.1, p. 256; *CO* 2:186.

To begin, we examine Calvin's exposition of creation to ascertain God's initial intent for humanity.<sup>8</sup>

According to Calvin, God created humanity in God's image for a dynamic, happy life in communion with God and in obedience to God. I shall unpack each of these statements to explain Calvin's understanding of God's creational intent for humanity.

First, God made humanity in the image of God as the pinnacle of creation and mirror of God's glory.<sup>9</sup> Being made in the image of God for Calvin is "the perfection of our whole nature...as it appeared when Adam was endued with a right judgment, had affections in harmony with reason, had all his senses sound and well-regulated, and truly excelled in everything good."<sup>10</sup> This bearing of God's image meant being "joined to God [*coniunctus erat*] (which is the true and highest perfection of dignity)."<sup>11</sup> As we shall soon see, Calvin perceived the image of God as so shattered and damaged by the fall that almost nothing of the divine image remained.<sup>12</sup> Still, even after the fall, "man is, among other creatures, a certain pre-eminent specimen of Divine wisdom, justice, and goodness."<sup>13</sup>

Second, according to Calvin, humanity was created to live the happy life in obedient communion with God. As Calvin says in his Hebrews commentary, the "chief good [*summum bonum*] of man is to be united [*coniunctos*] to his God, with whom is the fountain of life and of all blessings [*omnium bonorum*]."<sup>14</sup> The most vibrant illustration of this is Calvin's description of the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, which Calvin considers to be the first sacrament and a preview of the Lord's Supper. The Tree of Life was meant to teach Adam and Eve that their life did not come from themselves but from God. Thus, Calvin says, "[God] intended, therefore, that man, as often as he tasted the fruit of that tree should remember whence he received his life [*vitam*], in order that he might acknowledge [*agnosceret*] that he lives not by his own power, but by the kindness [*beneficio*] of God alone; and that

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<sup>8</sup> As we shall see, God's intent for humanity does not change after the fall, but the scope of the reception of God's intent becomes limited to the elect according to God's veiled will.

<sup>9</sup> *Inst.* 2.12.6, p. 471; *CO* 2:345.

<sup>10</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 1:26; *CO* 23:26.

<sup>11</sup> *Inst.* 2.12.6, p. 471; *CO* 2:345.

<sup>12</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 5:5; *CO* 23:106.

<sup>13</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 1:26; *CO* 23:25.

<sup>14</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 7:25; *CO* 55:94.



life is not (as they commonly speak) an intrinsic good, but proceeds [*provenire*] from God.”<sup>15</sup> What is crucial to notice is that, for Calvin, humanity continually receives its life and happiness only from God who provides humanity with intelligence, life, and countless privileges.<sup>16</sup>

Regarding the happy life, Calvin says that for Adam, “nothing is better than to practice righteousness by obeying God’s commandments; then, the ultimate goal of the happy life [*felicis vitae*] is to be loved by him.”<sup>17</sup> Calvin also describes this happy life as a rightly ordered existence within Adam, in which his soul rightly governed the affections of the body. In his whole person “life reigned; in his body there was no defect, wherefore he was wholly free from death.”<sup>18</sup> Obedience to God was a real possibility because in this pre-fall state humanity possessed a genuine freedom of the will. With Augustine, Calvin thus affirms the initial freedom of the will while lamenting its corrupted final state, “O wretched free-will, which, while yet uninjured [*incolume*], had so little stability!”<sup>19</sup>

Third, for Calvin, God’s creation of Adam and Eve included a dynamic aspect. Adam was not complete and perfect in the Garden but was meant to grow into further communion with God. Calvin explains that Adam and Eve’s obedience was intended to lead them to true wisdom by abiding in God who is the source of all wisdom.<sup>20</sup> Also, originally created humanity was intended to grow from an earthly to a spiritual existence.<sup>21</sup> Humanity could thus move from the earthly to spiritual existence without the rending of the body and soul, as the case became after the fall. In sum, for Calvin, humanity in its original state was meant to grow up into the

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<sup>15</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 2:9; *CO* 23:38. Calvin’s account of God’s creational intent for humanity is very similar to Augustine’s. This is the most notable area of divergence. Whereas Augustine suggests that human nature as made and given being by God is an intrinsic good, Calvin teaches that humanity receives its goodness directly from God, Augustine, *City of God*, 12.3, p. 501.

<sup>16</sup> *Comm. Gen. Arg*; *CO* 23:11-12. “We are ever dependent on [God],” *Inst.* 2.1.1, p. 242; *CO* 2:177.

<sup>17</sup> *Inst.* 2.1.4, p. 246; *CO* 2:179. Cf. *Comm. Gen.* 3:6; *CO* 23:61. For Augustine, the happy life comes through Christ when one is no longer mortal and one’s will is perfectly conformed to God’s will, Augustine, *On the Trinity: Books 8-15*, trans. Stephen McKenna (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 13.8, 13.10.

<sup>18</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 2:16; *CO* 23:45.

<sup>19</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 3:6; *CO* 23:63. My translation. Calvin attributes these words to Augustine, but the Augustine reference is unknown.

<sup>20</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 2:9; *CO* 23:38.

<sup>21</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 2:7; *CO* 23:36. Cf. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, trans. F. R. M. Hitchcock (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1916), 4.38.1-3.

fullness of communion with God by obedient abiding, thus receiving life and wisdom from God in increasing measure.

For Calvin, God's creational intent for humanity was full of abundance and goodness as God graciously created Adam and Eve in God's image to be the capstone of his creation as rulers over creation and to enjoy the abundant riches of creation.<sup>22</sup> God made humanity to live the happy life by participation in God who is the fountain of life, and humanity was meant to grow into that communion with God through obedience and daily abiding in the Source of all life, wisdom, and goodness.<sup>23</sup> Calvin makes no mention of any intent in creation of sin, evil, God's wrath, or reprobation. Those only come into the picture after human sin destroys God's good creation.<sup>24</sup> We turn to examine that tragedy now.

### **THE PROBLEMS WITHIN HUMANITY: THE FALL, SINFUL NATURE, SINS, AND THE LAW**

In this chapter, Moses explains, that man, after he had been deceived by Satan, revolted from his Maker, became entirely changed, and so degenerate, that the image of God, in which he had been formed was obliterated [*deleta sit*]. He then declares, that the whole world [*totum mundum*], which had been created for the sake of man, fell [*descivisse*] together with him from its primary original; and that, in this way, much [*multum*] of its native excellence was destroyed.<sup>25</sup>

Thus Calvin begins his commentary on the biblical account of the fall of Adam and Eve. In our quest to discover God's disposition toward humanity in the atonement, we continue by ascertaining what problem the atonement is solving in Calvin's theology.<sup>26</sup> In other words, after God created humanity for the happy life

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<sup>22</sup> Regarding the abundant fruitfulness of the Garden, see *Comm. Gen.* 2:8; *CO* 23:37. Calvin also teaches that humanity was created to rule over and steward creation, *Comm. Gen.* 2:8; *CO* 23:37. Cf. *Comm. Gen.* 1:28; *CO* 23:28. Cf. *Comm. Gen.* 2:15; *CO* 23:44.

<sup>23</sup> "While Calvin does not indulge in detailed speculation about this final, eschatological end, his language concerning a Trinitarian incorporation of humanity into union with God is clear and emphatic," Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 53.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Inst.* 1.14.3, p. 163; *CO* 2:119.

<sup>25</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 3:1; *CO* 23:52.

<sup>26</sup> To ask the question this way does not imply that the problem came logically prior to the solution for Calvin in the development of his doctrine of the atonement. Instead, we simply recognize the link between the fall and Christ's reconciling work.

in communion with him, what happened to derail that initial course, and what were the unfortunate results that precluded communion with God? Here we begin with Calvin's account of the fall itself before examining its effects within humanity in Calvin's multifaceted description of the resultant sinful nature and ensuing fruit of that sinful nature.

### **The Fall Itself**

In the fall, Adam and Eve rejected God. Although Calvin acknowledges Augustine's stance that pride was at the root of the fall, Calvin locates the cause of Adam and Eve's rebellion in their infidelity to God's word that resulted in disobedience to God.<sup>27</sup> This rejection of God's word entailed a spurning of God himself and quickly became entangled with ambition and pride, coupled with their ingratitude toward God's generous creation of them in his image. Calvin says, "Unbelief [*infidelitas*] has opened the door to ambition, but ambition has proved the mother of rebellion, to the end that men, having cast aside [*abiecto*] the fear of God, might shake off his yoke."<sup>28</sup> In the end, they proudly revolted against God and rejected his authority over their lives.<sup>29</sup>

Calvin provides a complex answer to the question of why Adam and Eve sinned; the fall is in a manner inexplicable, while being both caused by humanity and willed by God in different ways. Calvin is clear that there was nothing in the nature of humans or creation in general that necessitated sin.<sup>30</sup> In God's abundant provision, a *lack* did not lead to the desire for the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Instead, in light of such generous provision, eating the fruit of the forbidden tree is inexplicable.<sup>31</sup> For no reason, humans sinned voluntarily and freely, by their own will.<sup>32</sup> However, since Calvin believes that "the will of God is the necessity of things,"<sup>33</sup> he also teaches that God somehow willed

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<sup>27</sup> "Unfaithfulness [*infidelitas*], then was the root of the Fall," *Inst.* 2.1.4, p. 245; *CO* 2:179. Cf. *Comm. Gen.* 3:6; *CO* 23:60.

<sup>28</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 3:6; *CO* 23:61.

<sup>29</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 3:7; *CO* 23:64. Cf. *Inst.* 2.1.4, p. 245-246; *CO* 2:179.

<sup>30</sup> *Inst.* 2.1.10, p. 254; *CO* 2:184.

<sup>31</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 2:9; *CO* 23:38.

<sup>32</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 3:7; *CO* 23:64.

<sup>33</sup> *Inst.* 3.23.8, p. 956; *CO* 2:705.

the fall.<sup>34</sup> God did not intend the evil fruit of the fall, but Calvin clearly asserts that God, in his *decretum horribile*, willed the fall of humanity according to his secret counsel,<sup>35</sup> by making humanity flexible, by giving the serpent the ability to speak, and by not providing the full protection for humanity that would have prevented their fall. In Calvin's words, "Therefore, whatever sin and fault there is in the fall of our first parents remains with themselves; but there is sufficient reason why the eternal counsel of God preceded it."<sup>36</sup> Saying that God only permitted the fall is an illogical and impermissible option for Calvin; to say that God gave permission alone when he could have prevented it is the same as saying that God willed it.<sup>37</sup> The inexplicable fall is both caused by humanity and inscrutably willed by God.

The fall also obliterated the image of God in humanity, making the soul and its faculties enslaved to the body.<sup>38</sup> Calvin's teaching varies regarding how much of the image of God remains after the fall. At times, as in the quote at the head of this subsection, Calvin says that the image of God has been annihilated (*deletum*), but elsewhere he describes a remnant, saying "that the image of God being destroyed [*deleta*], or, at least, obliterated [*obliterata*] in us, we scarcely retain the faint shadow of a life, from which we are hastening to death."<sup>39</sup> Similarly, he says in the *Institutes* that in the fall, all supernatural gifts, such as "faith, love of God, charity toward neighbor, zeal for holiness and for righteousness," have been lost; however, the natural gifts, such as the reason and will, have been corrupted (*corrupta*) but

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<sup>34</sup> For Calvin, surrendering this account of God's providence would not only be unbiblical (particularly in its diminution of God's power and wisdom) but would also be problematic pastorally in his unpredictable and chaotic world in need of a God who is lovingly working out his righteous will in all that comes to pass, *Inst.* 1.17, p. 210-228; *CO* 2:153-167. Cf. 3.23.7, p. 955-956; *CO* 2:704. Cf. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms*, 89.

Without ever advocating evil, Calvin also teaches that "like a craftsman who can use even bad tools well," God finds a way to use sin toward a good end, *BLW*, 40; *CO* 6:258.

<sup>35</sup> Thus Calvin's "horrible/awesome decree" is actually God's decree of the fall, not God's decree of reprobation, *Inst.* 3.23.7, p. 955; *CO* 2:704. Cf. Augustine, *On Rebuke and Grace*, 26-28. Interestingly, in the passage to which Calvin refers here, Augustine only argues that God *permits* the fall, but Calvin directly asserts that even though we cannot understand it and God is not the cause of evil, still God *wills* the fall.

<sup>36</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 3:7; *CO* 23:64.

<sup>37</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 3:1; *CO* 23:55.

<sup>38</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 6:12; *CO* 49:110.

<sup>39</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 5:5; *CO* 23:106. Cf. *Comm. Gen.* 1:26; *CO* 23:27.

remain in part.<sup>40</sup> Regardless of the parsing of the remaining image of God, Calvin is emphatic that created human nature has been ruined (*exitium*) and destroyed (*clades*) and is now “utterly lost [*perditam*].”<sup>41</sup>

Humans are not the only ones corrupted by the fall; all of creation is corrupted and condemned along with them.<sup>42</sup> All evil and suffering experienced in and through the created realm was not intended by God but is also a result of sin. Calvin says, “The inclemency of the air, frost, thunders, unseasonable rains, drought, hail, and whatever is disorderly [*inordinatum*] in the world, are fruits of sin. Nor is there any other primary cause of diseases.”<sup>43</sup> Still, by God’s sustaining power, creation has also been implanted with the “hope of renovation” (*spem renovationis*) that has prevented it from falling into total disarray.<sup>44</sup>

In sum, the fall was an act of human unfaithfulness to God according to God’s secret counsel that resulted in the virtual destruction of the image of God in humanity and the corruption of the world.

### The Sinful Nature

Although human nature was created good, the fall resulted in a corrupt sinful human nature. Calvin says,

In short, that we are despoiled of the exceptional gifts [*eximiis donis*] of the Holy Spirit, of reason’s light, of righteousness, and of rectitude, and are prone to every evil [*ad omne malum*]; that we are also lost and condemned [*perditi et damnati*], and subjected to death, is both our hereditary condition, and at the same time, a just punishment [*iusta poena*], which God, in the person of Adam has inflicted on the human race.<sup>45</sup>

In sum, human alienation from God, privation of the gifts of God, the hereditary stain of sin, and the bondage of the will are different ways to talk about the one unhappy reality of the human condition after the fall. We shall describe each of these in turn.

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<sup>40</sup> *Inst.* 2.2.12, p. 270-271; *CO* 2:195-196. Other gifts, like understanding in the arts or sciences, are corrupted but still enabled by the Spirit in humanity in general, *Inst.* 2.2.12-17, p. 270-277; *CO* 2:195-200.

<sup>41</sup> *Inst.* 2.3.2, p. 291; *CO* 2:212.

<sup>42</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 6:7; *CO* 23:119.

<sup>43</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 3:19; *CO* 23:75. Cf. *Comm. Gen.* 3:17; *CO* 23:73.

<sup>44</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 8:19-21; *CO* 49:152-153.

<sup>45</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 3:6; *CO* 23:62. My translation.

For Calvin, one way to understand the sinful human nature is alienation from God. As we observed above, God originally created humanity to rely upon him to receive life, goodness, wisdom, love, and righteousness directly from God their source. Thus, Calvin says that the condition of humanity as a result of their rejection of God “is not improperly called both the privation [*privatio*] of life, and death.”<sup>46</sup> He elaborates, “We must also see what is the cause of death, namely, alienation [*alienatio*] from God.”<sup>47</sup> In short, “As it was the spiritual life of Adam to remain united and bound to his Maker, so estrangement from him was the death of his soul.”<sup>48</sup> For Calvin, death begins now, in this “accursed life of man” (*maledicta hominis vita*) and continues until our bodies and souls are unnaturally ripped apart in physical death.<sup>49</sup> In this sense, death is not an arbitrary punishment for sin or even a just penalty for rebellion against God according to his law. When considering the sinful nature as privation, at its core death is merely the direct result of rejecting the God who is and provides life.

Since God is the “fountain...of all blessings [*fons...omium bonorum*],”<sup>50</sup> being estranged from God also results in the privation of all of God’s good gifts, such as goodness, righteousness, wisdom, and love, “for God is not only the end [*supremum*] of all good things [*bonorum omnium*], but also holds together [*continet*] in himself the sum and individual parts of them all.”<sup>51</sup> The sinner’s depravation of these gifts manifests itself in every type of evil. In the fall, Adam lost God’s gifts of “wisdom, virtue, holiness, truth, and justice,” and as a result brought forth “the most filthy plagues, blindness, impotence, impurity, vanity and injustice.”<sup>52</sup> Human nature in privation of God’s intended gifts became a totally depraved human nature.<sup>53</sup> From this perspective, fallen human nature is best described as a *lack* of all that God is and all of God’s gifts to humanity.<sup>54</sup> Calvin even

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<sup>46</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 2:16; *CO* 23:45.

<sup>47</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 2:16; *CO* 23:45. Cf. *Comm. Gen.* “Argument”; 23:11-12. Cf. *Comm. Col.* 2:13; *CO* 52:107.

<sup>48</sup> *Inst.* 2.1.5, p. 246; *CO* 2:179. Cf. *Comm. Gen.* 3:22; *CO* 23:79. Cf. *Inst.* 2:6.1, p. 342; *CO* 2:248. Cf. *Comm. Col.* 2:13; *CO* 52:107.

<sup>49</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 3:19; *CO* 23:76.

<sup>50</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 7:25; *CO* 55:94.

<sup>51</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 5:11; *CO* 49:94. My translation.

<sup>52</sup> *Inst.* 2.1.5, p. 246; *CO* 2:179. Cf. *Comm. Gen.* “Argument”; 23:11-12.

<sup>53</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 7:14; *CO* 49:128.

<sup>54</sup> As we shall see, the sinful human nature also actively produces evil, *Inst.* 2.1.8, p. 252; *CO* 2:183.

describes the devil in terms of privation; “But the devil by his fall was so cut off [*alienatus est*] from participation in good [*a boni communione*] that he can do nothing but evil.”<sup>55</sup>

Calvin also describes the sinful nature as “original sin” (*prima pravitas*), a stain that saturates the whole human person, both body and soul, resulting in disorder.<sup>56</sup> Calvin relates human nature as “interweaved with the defect of sin [*peccati labe esse implicitos*].”<sup>57</sup> He says, “For besides the deformity which everywhere appears unsightly, this evil is also added, that no part is free from the stain of sin [*est peccati labe non infecta*].”<sup>58</sup> Or, “to put it more briefly, the whole man is of himself nothing but concupiscence [*concupiscentiam*].”<sup>59</sup>

This sinful nature has been passed on to all humanity since the fall; “For as Adam at his creation had received for us as well as for himself the gifts of God’s favour [*divinae gratiae dotes*], so by falling away from the Lord, he in himself corrupted, vitiated, depraved [*depravavit*], and ruined [*perdidit*] our nature; for having been divested of God’s likeness [*similitudine*], he could not have generated seed but what was like himself.”<sup>60</sup> All humans have a “natural depravity” (*naturalis pravitas*) from birth that is a sign of their corrupt nature inherited from Adam.<sup>61</sup>

The fall also results in a human nature that can only choose evil, a human will in bondage.<sup>62</sup> By the misuse of free choice, Adam “has lost both [free choice] and himself.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, in describing human nature after the fall, Calvin says it is inaccurate to speak of a “free will” because the human nature and will are so corrupted that humanity is only able to choose evil.<sup>64</sup> This bondage of the will also

<sup>55</sup> *Inst.* 2.3.5, p. 295; *CO* 2:214. Cf. *Comm. Gen.* 3:1; *CO* 23:54.

<sup>56</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 6:12; *CO* 49:110-111. Cf. *Inst.* 2.3.1, p. 290; *CO* 2:209-210. Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, 19.4, p. 921.

<sup>57</sup> *Inst.* 2.1.6, p. 248; *CO* 2:181. My translation. Battles liberally translates this as “infected with the disease of sin.”

<sup>58</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 1:26; *CO* 23:27. My translation. “Everything we attempt to do before we believe is unrighteous and hateful to God,” *Comm. Tit.* 3:5; 52:430.

<sup>59</sup> *Inst.* 2.1.8, p. 252; *CO* 2:183. Cf. *Inst.* 2.3.2, p. 291-292; *CO* 2:211. Cf. *Comm. Gen.* 6:3; *CO* 23:114.

<sup>60</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 5:12; *CO* 49:95.

<sup>61</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 5:12; *CO* 49:95.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. *BLW*; *CO* 6:229-404. Cf. *Inst.* 2.2, p. 255-289; *CO* 2:189-209.

<sup>63</sup> *BLW*, p. 92; *CO* 6:295.

<sup>64</sup> *BLW*, 68-69; *CO* 6:279-280. Cf. *Inst.* 2.2.7-8, p. 264-266; *CO* 2:191-193. This corruption affects the whole human person and every human action, but Calvin divides between God’s common grace that enables human existence and the grace of the children of God that enables supernatural gifts (e.g. faith in Christ, love for neighbor) only in the elect, *BLW*, p. 167; *CO* 6:347. Even “good” human

makes it impossible for humans to grasp spiritual truths or turn to God unless God replaces their hearts of stone with new hearts.<sup>65</sup> For Calvin, even the desire to do good or turn to God must be a gift of grace.<sup>66</sup>

In summary, the fall results in a sinful human nature that must be described in a variety of ways to grasp its character. Calvin describes it as alienation from God that results in the privation of all of God's gifts and the hereditary stain of original sin that puts the whole person and his or her will in bondage. These overlapping and complimentary descriptions summarize Calvin's depiction of the sinful nature that Christ's redeeming work must address.

### **The Fruit of the Sinful Nature — "Sins"**

Calvin delineates between the sinful nature itself and the sinful acts of humanity as the fruit of the sinful nature. Calvin writes,

Original Sin [*peccatum originale*], therefore, seems to be a hereditary depravity [*pravitas*] and corruption of our nature, diffused [*diffusa*] into all parts of the soul, which first makes us liable to God's wrath, then also brings forth [*profert*] in us those works which Scripture calls 'works of the flesh.' And that is properly what Paul often calls sin [*peccatum*]. The works that come forth from it—such as adulteries, fornications, thefts, hatreds, murders, carousings—he accordingly calls 'fruits of sin', although they are commonly called 'sins' in Scripture.<sup>67</sup>

For Calvin, sinful acts are evil acts that emerge from the deeper problem of the sinful human nature.<sup>68</sup> Thus, Calvin is clear that the sinful nature is not only an inert "lack" of righteousness but instead an active producer of sin, "for our nature is not only destitute and empty of good [*boni*], but so fertile and fruitful [*fertilis et ferax*] of every evil that it cannot be idle [*otiosa*]."<sup>69</sup> Just as the depraved nature is a result of the rejection of and withdrawal of God's presence, so Calvin sees an increase in sinful deeds as evidence of God's wrath; as humanity rejects God's

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actions remain tainted by the stain of sin, e.g. the love for a spouse tends toward excess and is thus defiled, *BLW*, p. 187; *CO* 6:362.

<sup>65</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 8:10; *CO* 55:102. Cf. *Inst.* 2.2.18-20, p. 277-280; *CO* 2:200-202.

<sup>66</sup> *Inst.* 2.2.27, p. 287-288; *CO* 2:207-209.

<sup>67</sup> *Inst.* 2.1.8, p. 251; *CO* 2:182. Cf. *Inst.* 2.16.3, p. 505; *CO* 2:369. Cf. *Comm. Col.* 2:13; *CO* 52:107. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 6:12; *CO* 49:111.

<sup>68</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 9:14; *CO* 55:111. Cf. *Comm. Heb.* 12:1-2; *CO* 55:171.

<sup>69</sup> *Inst.* 2.1.8, p. 252; *CO* 2:183.



goodness, God acquiesces by removing his goodness, which leads to an increase in sinful acts.<sup>70</sup>

### Conscience and Calvin

Another ill effect of the fall is humanity's disturbed conscience before God. Instead of recognizing God as a loving Father through God's work in creation as was intended, after the fall "conscience [*conscientia*] presses us within and shows in our sin just cause for his disowning us and not regarding or recognizing us as his sons."<sup>71</sup> This account reveals three important elements of Calvin's teaching about the conscience. First, the troubled state of the conscience is inseparable from the rest of the effects of the fall. For example, "Sin in this life brings the torments of an accusing conscience [*malae conscientiae*], and in the next eternal death."<sup>72</sup> Second, humanity is confronted with God's judgment of their sin through the conscience.<sup>73</sup> Thus Calvin describes a "spirit of bondage under the law, which oppresses the conscience with fear."<sup>74</sup> Third, the conscience witnesses to the assurance of God's love, as "consciences [*conscientiae*] assured of pardon for sin may have peace with God."<sup>75</sup> Selderhuis summarizes that for Calvin, "One's conscience is tormented by an awareness of being a sinner and having to appear before a righteous and wrathful God, and one's conscience finds heavenly rest when it knows forgiveness and renewal."<sup>76</sup> It is therefore in one's conscience that the believer experiences the shift from absolute fear to the reception of God's fatherly mercy before God's majesty.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 1:24; *CO* 49:27. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* "Argument"; *CO* 49:2.

<sup>71</sup> *Inst.* 2.6.1; *CO* 2:247.

<sup>72</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 6:22; *CO* 49:118.

<sup>73</sup> Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 73-74.

<sup>74</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 8:15; *CO* 49:149. The passage continues, "so under the gospel there is the spirit of adoption, which exhilarates our souls by bearing a testimony as to our salvation."

<sup>75</sup> *Inst.* 3.4.27, p. 653; *CO* 2:478.

<sup>76</sup> Selderhuis, *John Calvin*, 20. Cf. *Inst.* 3.13.3, p. 765; *CO* 2:561. Cf. *Comm. 1 John* 4:10; *CO* 55:354.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. *Comm. Heb.* 4:16; *CO* 55:56. It is an open question whether conscience still plays such a role in Christian theology, particularly in the post-Christendom West. Whereas Calvin assumes that all people would have an inherent fear of God, much experience in today's culture seems to belie the opposite. A contemporary alternative could be the transition from the loneliness of autonomous existence to the belonging as adopted children in God's family.

In summary, as Calvin interprets the varied biblical witness, he teaches that the fall results in many problems within humanity, including the lost image of God, the corruption of creation, and the multifaceted problem of the sinful nature that actively produces deeds of unrighteous concupiscence and results in a disturbed conscience before God.<sup>78</sup> For the atonement to restore humanity back to its original state, or to a state of even greater communion with God, it must rescue humanity from this entire varied dilemma.

### ***THE PROBLEMS EXTERNAL TO HUMANITY: GOD'S MERCIFUL WRATH AND RIGHTEOUS LAW***

Having examined the problems that arise within humanity as a result of the fall, we now shift to the external effects, namely God's wrath on humanity and the blessings and punishments of God's law. Once again we see here a single problem that can be described from a variety of angles. Here we take a closer look at Calvin's understanding of God's wrath on sinful humanity before examining Calvin's teaching on the law.

#### **God's Wrath on Humanity**

Calvin teaches that as a result of the rebellion of the fall and ensuing sinful nature, humanity rightly stands under God's wrath. We shall first address two possible misinterpretations of Calvin's teaching on God's wrath before describing Calvin's account of God's wrath on sinful humans and providing two brief reflections on Calvin's teaching.

First, we must briefly address two potential misunderstandings, namely wrath as God's emotional anger and the contrast between the Old Testament God of wrath and the New Testament God of love.

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<sup>78</sup> Interestingly, Calvin rarely teaches about the social fruit of the sinful nature that results in alienation from one another. For one example, see *Harmony of the Gospels*, Matt. 22:39; CO 45:612. The extent of, reasons for, and ramifications of Calvin's individual focus in his teaching of creation, the fall, and redemption would be a superb topic for future Calvin scholarship.

For Calvin, God's wrath is not like the human emotion of rage but an accommodated expression of God's judgment on sin and evil. Calvin puts it plainly, "By wrath [*iram*], understand God's judgment [*iudicio*], which meaning is had everywhere [*passim*]."79 Defining what it means to be "children of wrath," Calvin similarly points out, "Wrath [*ira*] means the judgment of God [*iudicium Dei*]; so that the children of wrath are those who are condemned [*damnati*] before God."80

In a more extended description, Calvin teaches,

The word wrath [*ira*], according to the usage of Scripture, speaking after the manner of men [*ανθρωποπαθως*], means the vengeance of God [*pro ultione Dei*]; for God in punishing, has, according to our notion, the appearance [*faciem*] of one in wrath. It imports, therefore, no such emotion [*motum*] in God, but only has a reference to the perception and feeling [*ad sensum*] of the sinner who is punished.<sup>81</sup>

In parallel with his teaching on accommodation in the *Institutes* in which he describes the anthropomorphisms in the Bible as God's accommodation of himself to human capacity,<sup>82</sup> God's wrath is an accommodation to describe humanity's experience of God's judgment. In sum, God's wrath expressed toward humanity is not a bottled-up emotion within God that must be somehow exhausted; it is simply the righteous God's judgment upon evil.

Calvin is also quite clear that God's wrath is present in both the Old and New Testaments.<sup>83</sup> He is not a neo-Marcionite (or Manichee) who could speak of the God of the Old Testament as the God of wrath and the New Testament God as the God of love.<sup>84</sup> Instead, Calvin teaches continuity between the Old and New Covenants, noting that there are some differences in the "manner of administration" (*modum administrationis*) without any distinction in substance

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<sup>79</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 4:15; *CO* 49:78.

<sup>80</sup> *Comm. Eph.* 2:3; *CO* 51:162.

<sup>81</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 1:18; *CO* 49:23. Calvin's commitment to God's immutability and foreknowledge undergirds this definition of wrath. Since God already knows everything and does not change based on our actions, he is not surprised by our sin and thus forced into an emotional state of anger. It is a valid question whether Calvin's specific doctrine of immutability is exegetically defensible today. Cf. Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 275-278. Cf. van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 144-148.

<sup>82</sup> *Inst.* 1.13.1, p. 121; *CO* 2:89.

<sup>83</sup> Since *testamentum* can mean "testament" or "covenant," it is often unclear which English word is most appropriate. In *Inst.* 2.11, context indicates that "covenant" is a better option, contra Battles' translation.

<sup>84</sup> *Inst.* 2.11.3, p. 452; *CO* 2:331.

because both Covenants are founded on the same promises of Christ.<sup>85</sup> Again calling on God's accommodation to human capacity and needs, Calvin likens God's self-presentation in different times to the way in which a "head of household" (*paterfamilias*) parents differently as his children grow older. God has not changed, "rather, he has accommodated himself to men's capacity, which is varied and changeable."<sup>86</sup> Therefore, for Calvin, there is one God of the Old and New Testaments, the covenant-making God known in Christ; God's wrath is not to be ignored or forgotten after God graciously takes on human flesh in the incarnation.

Having cleared up those two potential misunderstandings of Calvin's teaching on God's wrath, we now turn to Calvin's positive teaching. Here we see that God's wrath emerges from the conflict between evil and God's perfect righteousness and goodness; we see how God's wrath as judgment is enacted; and we see how God's wrath has a merciful character.

First, for Calvin, God's wrath is the inevitable result of unrighteousness in the presence of God's inherent righteousness (as witnessed to in the law, as we shall see next). In the same way that light cannot mix with darkness, God, who is the fount of all goodness, righteousness, and love, necessarily condemns that which is diametrically opposed to him, namely evil and unrighteousness.<sup>87</sup> Thus, "God, who is the highest righteousness [*summa iustitia*], cannot love the unrighteousness that he sees in us all."<sup>88</sup> Simply, God's wrath is God's opposition to that which is contradictory to him. To *not* condemn unrighteousness, God would have to cease to be God. Remembering that Calvin teaches that the stain of sin infiltrates the whole fallen human person, there is no part of a human that God cannot hate. Thus, "As God hates sin, we are also hated by him as far as we are sinners."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> *Inst.* 2.11.1, p. 449-450; *CO* 2:329. One of the differences that Calvin notes is that in the Old Testament, "God manifested himself more fully as a Father and Judge by temporal blessings and punishments than since the promulgation of the gospel," *Harmony of Moses*, Lev. 26:3; *CO* 25:14. Cf. Willem Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, trans. William Heynen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 309-313.

<sup>86</sup> *Inst.* 2.11.13, p. 462-463; *CO* 2:339.

<sup>87</sup> *Inst.* 2.17.2, p. 530; *CO* 2:387.

<sup>88</sup> *Inst.* 2.16.13, p. 505; *CO* 2:369.

<sup>89</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 5:10; *CO* 49:94. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 1:17; *CO* 49:20. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 5:6; *CO* 49:92. Cf. *Comm. 2 Cor.* 5:11; *CO* 50:70.

Second, God actively condemns all human unrighteousness in his wrath. Calvin says, “We are so vitiated and perverted in every part of our nature that by this great corruption we stand justly condemned [*damnati*] and convicted [*convicti*] before God.”<sup>90</sup> Similarly, “The one who is a just Judge [*iustus iudex*] does not allow his law to be broken without punishment [*impune*], but has been equipped for vengeance [*ad vindictam*].”<sup>91</sup> God’s condemnation takes various forms, including temporal suffering,<sup>92</sup> death,<sup>93</sup> the loss of the happy life for which God created us,<sup>94</sup> and the abandonment of humanity into further sin as they continue to reject him.<sup>95</sup> Thus, as an expression of God’s judgment on evil and according to God’s veiled will, God condemns any who remain in their unrighteousness.

Third, for Calvin, even God’s wrath on sinful humanity includes echoes of God’s mercy according to his nature. For example, death itself reminds us of God’s punishment of the fall, admonishing us to seek life in God alone.<sup>96</sup> Similarly, earthly sufferings are “tokens of God’s wrath” that are meant not only to punish but are primarily to lead to Christ and dependence upon God’s fatherly love.<sup>97</sup> The corruption of and condemnation of the earth that proceeds from the fall is meant to incite us to “groan” (*ingemiscamus*) over our sin<sup>98</sup> and lead us to the mercy of God.<sup>99</sup> In God’s discussion with Adam and Eve immediately after their decision to eat of the fruit, Calvin comments that God acted more “as a physician than as a judge,” giving them a chance to confess their sin (which they unfortunately rejected).<sup>100</sup> God’s mercy is even on display in the curse of Adam, first in the fact

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<sup>90</sup> *Inst.* 2.1.8, p. 251; *CO* 2:182. This condemnation increases with one’s awareness of the law because rejection of the law is a sign of even greater unrighteousness, *Comm. Rom.* 4:15; *CO* 49:79.

<sup>91</sup> *Inst.* 2.16.1, p. 504; *CO* 2:368. My translation.

<sup>92</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 8:31; *CO* 49:162.

<sup>93</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 5:5; *CO* 23:106.

<sup>94</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 3:19; *CO* 23:74.

<sup>95</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 4:15; *CO* 49:79.

<sup>96</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 5:5; *CO* 23:106. Of course this does not make death itself merciful. Death and alienation from God are opposed to God’s intent for humanity, but God works mercifully by using the prospect of death to call people to him.

<sup>97</sup> Believer and unbeliever experience suffering which is meant to lead to Christ, but believers who know God’s fatherly mercy can receive the suffering as discipline, while unbelievers only know it as wrath, *Comm. Rom.* 8:31; *CO* 49:162. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 8:36; *CO* 49:166. Cf. *Comm. Gen.* 3:19; *CO* 23:77. Cf. *Comm. Gen.* 3:23; *CO* 23:80.

<sup>98</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 3:18; *CO* 23:73.

<sup>99</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 3:17; *CO* 23:73. Fallen creation continues to contain “tokens of his goodness,” not nearly as abundant as before the fall, but still witnessing to God’s mercy.

<sup>100</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 3:14; *CO* 23:68.

that God subjects humanity “only to temporal punishment, that, from the moderation of divine anger, they might entertain hope of pardon” and in refuting Adam’s excuses in order to “more easily lead him to repentance.”<sup>101</sup> God expresses merciful judgment upon humanity as God by using his judgment to invite people to him. Even God’s judgment is informed by mercy.

This leads us to two reflections regarding Calvin’s teaching on God’s wrath. First, God’s wrath on sin is not a measurable entity that must be exhausted prior to God’s being able to look upon people with favor again. In light of God’s righteousness and human unrighteousness, God’s wrath will never end until humanity is made righteous before God by the removal of their sinful nature and the condemnation of their sin. God’s wrath is the righteous God’s inherent judgment upon anything or anyone unrighteous.<sup>102</sup>

Second, God’s wrath is an expression of his nature. Here, Jeremy Wynne’s work on the wrath of God as a divine perfection provides insight into Calvin. Wynne, drawing significantly on Barth’s account, argues that in Scripture, wrath is “proper to God’s character, not in the same manner as the righteousness that overflows from eternity in the triune life of God, but nonetheless as the righteous God who is present in opposition to all human opposition.”<sup>103</sup> Similarly, for Barth, God’s wrath is subservient to God’s love as a redemptive opposition to all human opposition of God. This is particularly displayed in Barth’s doctrine of election. Because all humanity is elect in Christ, God declares that every individual person is his child. When people resist that declaration by rejecting God’s grace in Christ, God, in an expression of his love, rejects their rejection by affirming that they are his children. In their resistance, they experience the wrathful fire of God’s love.<sup>104</sup> Thus God’s wrath is teleologically driven: God’s loving opposition to all human rejection of God and God’s loving purposes.

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<sup>101</sup> *Comm. Gen.* 3:17; *CO* 23:72. Cf. Noah in *Comm. Gen.* 6:3; *CO* 23:114 and *Comm. Gen.* 6:5; *CO* 23:117. In Calvin’s account of the fall, in which one might expect significant exposition on the condemnation merited by Adam and Eve, Calvin speaks very little of God’s wrath.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. *Inst.* 3.11.11, p. 740; *CO* 2:543.

<sup>103</sup> Jeremy J. Wynne, *Wrath Among the Perfections of God’s Life* (London: Continuum, 2010), 13.

<sup>104</sup> *CD* IV/1, p. 173; *KD*, p. 189. Cf. “Placing the Mystery in Predestination” in Chapter 5.

For Calvin, God's wrath is also not in conflict with his other powers, but it is an expression of his loving, righteous, and judging nature<sup>105</sup> as God judges wickedness in a manner that invites people to repentance. Calvin's account differs from Barth's and Wynne's in that for Calvin, God's wrath is less about the creature's *telos* and attitude toward God and more about God's inherent condemnation of evil. God who is the source of all righteousness and goodness is inherently opposed to all that is unrighteous and evil, as expressed in his judgment (or wrath). Since all humanity is saturated with hateful sin, God can only look on humanity with wrath. When people come to trust in Christ, they are considered according to Christ's righteousness, but those who remain outside of Christ stand condemned in their sin, objects of God's wrath.

In both accounts, reconciliation is driven by God's love for people. In both accounts, God hates and condemns evil. To summarize the difference, for Barth God's wrath falls upon anything that stands in the way of God's loving purposes for humanity; God's wrath is an expression of his love. For Calvin God's wrath is God's direct condemnation of all that is evil and unrighteous, including humans who remain clothed in their own unrighteousness; God's wrath is an expression of his inherent goodness (and righteousness) that cannot tolerate evil. The difference is that Barth's primary reference point is God's purposes for humanity whereas Calvin's primary reference point is God's inherent opposition to evil. Although not mutually exclusive, these accounts of God's wrath are notably different.

To recapitulate, for Calvin, God's wrath is not a human-like emotion of anger but an expression of God's judgment upon evil that is a demonstration of God's nature and is thus observed in both the Old and New Covenants. Wrath is God's innate and active opposition to all that is evil and includes echoes of God's mercy in its execution. In wrath, God, who is the source and definition of all goodness, condemns evil.

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<sup>105</sup> Per Chapter 2, we could include a more extended list here, such as wise, powerful, good, true, etc.

### The Law: God's Righteousness, Blessings, and Curses

But that they may learn surely to embrace the promises and to fear the threatenings, he repeats what we have met with before, that God, who is both a faithful rewarder, and a severe judge, is the author of the Law.<sup>106</sup>

For Calvin, God's law is an embodiment of his righteousness intended to direct humans in righteousness. Because of the fall, the law takes the form of a collection of blessings and curses intended respectively to woo and spur humans toward righteousness. As a result of the sinfulness of humanity, the law finally implicates all under the curse of death. Yet, throughout God's mediation of the law to humanity, he acts according to his nature and his disclosed disposition toward humanity. We shall briefly explain these points.

First, God's law shows forth God's righteousness and invites humans into that righteousness. Calvin says, "The righteousness of God [*iustitia Dei*], as an indivisible body, is contained [*continetur*] in the law."<sup>107</sup> Not only does the law reveal to us God's unchanging righteousness, it is also intended to lead humans into perfect righteousness, which, as we saw above, is inseparable from communion with God and the happy life. Thus Calvin says, "So far as respects the rules of a happy [*bene*] life, the law conducts men to the goal of righteousness [*metam iustitiae*]."<sup>108</sup> Just as Adam and Eve would have grown up into life and union with God had they obeyed God's words in the garden, so the law could have given life.<sup>109</sup>

In the light of human sinfulness, the law is expressed as a combination of blessings and punishments (curses) that are meant to lead humanity to God. Calvin says "Moses exhorts the people to be assured that God sits in heaven as the judge of men, so that they may be both alarmed by the fear of his vengeance, and also be attracted by the hope of reward."<sup>110</sup> Calvin sets aside a section of his *Harmony of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy* solely to explicate the blessings and

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<sup>106</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Deut. 11:26; CO 25:10.

<sup>107</sup> *Comm. Js.* 2:10; CO 55:401. My translation. Cf. *Harmony of the Gospels*, Matt. 5:17; CO 45:171.

<sup>108</sup> *Harmony of the Gospels*, Matt. 5:22; CO 45:174. My translation.

<sup>109</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Deut. 18:5; CO 25:7.

<sup>110</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Deut. 7:9; CO 25:19.



curses expressed in the law,<sup>111</sup> which includes not only the Ten Commandments but also the entire form of religion handed down by Moses and the “freely given covenant” given to Abraham.<sup>112</sup> The blessings and the curses in the law are both intended to lead people to obedience. The blessings are gracious promises to reward attempts at obedience in light of God’s fatherly favor.<sup>113</sup> The curses are also meant to compel people to obedience and repentance.<sup>114</sup> Instead of being declarations of inevitable judgment, Calvin describes the punishments as God’s merciful call to all people to repent. He says,

Let us be assured, then, that God’s mercy is offered to the worst of men, who have been plunged by their guilt in the depths of despair, as though it reached even to hell itself. Whence, too, it follows that all punishments [*poenis omnibus*] are like spurs to rouse the inert and hesitating to repentance, whilst the sorer plagues are intended to break their hardness [*duritiem*].<sup>115</sup>

Third, although God mercifully invites humanity to life via the law, it ultimately results in the curse of death. As a result of the sinful nature, humans only violate and hate God’s law.<sup>116</sup> God’s perfect moral purity is confronted by human impurity, thus resulting in God’s condemnation of human sin. Calvin summarizes, “All are here condemned [*damnatur*] without exception who have not confirmed the Law of God so as to fulfill to the uttermost whatever it contains. Whence it is clear that, in whatever respect the deficiency betrays itself, it brings the curse [*trahere maledictionem*].”<sup>117</sup> Just as alienation from God who is the source of life results in death, so the curse of the law ultimately results in the punishment of death.<sup>118</sup> We shall see below that this understanding of the curse is important for Calvin’s account of Christ’s reconciling work.

In short, according to Calvin, consistent with God’s disclosed disposition toward humanity, God reveals his righteousness, his faithful rewarding of good and

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<sup>111</sup> *CO* 25:5-56.

<sup>112</sup> *Inst.* 2.7.1, p. 348; *CO* 2:253.

<sup>113</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Lev. 26:3; *CO* 25:13. We see here an OT precursor to the Christ’s ongoing priestly intercession, which we shall examine below.

<sup>114</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Deut. 28:15; *CO* 25:31.

<sup>115</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Lev. 26:40; *CO* 25:28.

<sup>116</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Deut. 5:9; *CO* 24:380.

<sup>117</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Deut. 27:26; *CO* 25:9. My translation.

<sup>118</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Deut. 30:19; *CO* 25:56.

his judgment of evil through the law. Although the law was meant to lead humanity to God, because of sin, it results only in the cursing of all humanity, ultimately with the curse of death.<sup>119</sup>

To summarize our observations regarding God's wrath and law, we turn again to Calvin's words: God had heaped blessings on his people, but because of their depravity,

God, though voluntarily disposed to be bountiful [*ad largitatem*], was forced to lay aside [*exuere*] His affection...These two things are quite consistent, that He is pleased [*oblectari*] by His just judgment [*iusto suo iudicio*], and at the same time is mindful of His clemency and indulgence, so that He would rather [*malit*] pardon, if the wickedness [*malitia*] of men would allow him.<sup>120</sup>

In his righteousness, as expressed in the law, God can do nothing but oppose evil, including the evil in the people he has made in love. However, this does not lead to multiple personalities within God. God always judges evil; God always maintains his righteousness; and God always extends his love. In other words, even in his wrath and in relation to the law, God acts according to his nature and according to his disclosed disposition toward humanity, condemning evil while extending mercy to those whom he has created in love.

As we come to the end of our account of creation and the fall, in summary, we have seen here the multifaceted problem caused by the fall of Adam and Eve. The ramifications of their infidelity and disobedience are far reaching but also interconnected, ranging from the loss of the image of God to the sinful human nature deprived of God's gifts and saturated with the stain of sin to the sinful acts and disturbed conscience that emerge from that sinful nature. The ramifications also include the human experience of God's wrath and the curse of the law as God condemns evil and calls people to repentance. In short, this multifaceted problem arises from and witnesses to humanity's alienation from its Creator. For Calvin, this is the multifaceted problem of the fall that is somehow remedied in Christ's work of atonement.

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<sup>119</sup> After faith in Christ and the gift of regeneration by the Spirit, the law once again becomes the believer's guide to God's will of righteousness according to Calvin's so-called third use of the law. Cf. *Inst.* 2.7.12, p. 360-361; *CO* 2:261-262.

<sup>120</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Deut. 28:63; *CO* 25:42.

Also, in Calvin's account of creation and the fall, we have seen again God's intent in creation and God's interactions with humanity after the fall occur according to God's disclosed disposition of love toward humanity. God's veiled disposition toward humanity is only hinted at in God's inherent condemnation of evil, but even that judgment has merciful characteristics as God uses it to invite people to him.

### ***THE SOLUTION: COMPLETE RECONCILIATION WITH GOD THROUGH THE UNIFIED PERSON AND WORK OF CHRIST***

Having examined Calvin's multifarious description of the problems caused by the fall of humanity, we now turn to his description of the redemptive work of Christ itself. According to Calvin, what is it that Christ accomplishes in his work as Redeemer? We shall see that for Calvin, the solution to the multifaceted problem that resulted from the fall of Adam and Eve is the reconciliation of humans with God through the complete person and work of Christ as described in the unified and diverse biblical witness. In other words, Christ's life, death, resurrection, ascension, and ongoing intercession earn *for us* reconciliation with God that frees believers from the stain of sin and the condemnation they deserve for their sin, provides Christ's righteousness for them, and enables an ongoing regenerated life by the power of the Spirit. Through this analysis of Christ's redeeming work we shall find that God's gracious and abundant disclosed will of human reconciliation with God through Christ's all-sufficient work comes alongside God's veiled will which indicates the limited efficacy of Christ's reconciling work.

#### **Multifaceted Solution: Groundwork, Misconceptions, and Definitions**

Just as the fall of humanity resulted in a multifaceted problem, Calvin describes a multifaceted solution that brings about complete reconciliation with God according to the diverse witness of Scripture. Here we lay the groundwork for examining Calvin's teaching of Christ's reconciling work by observing that his solution is caused by God's love that is not in tension with God's wrath, can be

summarized very simply, and is an expression of Calvin's understanding of the breadth of the biblical teaching. We conclude by defining some important terms.

### **No Tension Between Love and Justice: God's Love as the Cause of Reconciliation**

First, for Calvin, God's love is the ultimate cause of reconciliation. Accordingly, Paul teaches that salvation is not from ourselves, "but derives it altogether from the fountain of God's free [*gratuitae*] and paternal [*paternae*] love towards us; for he makes this the first thing [*principium*] - God loves us: and what is the cause of his love, except his own goodness [*bonitas*] alone?"<sup>121</sup> In light of our exposition of God's judgment upon sinful humanity, this brings up a dilemma that Calvin recognizes; how can God's love be the cause of our salvation if God hates us in our sin? Calvin answers that even in the midst of God's inherent hatred of our unrighteousness, "he still finds something to love...thus he is moved by pure and freely given love [*dilectione*] of us to receive us into grace."<sup>122</sup> He explains this in two ways: God loves sinful humans because they are God's handiwork and because he anticipates them in Christ. Regarding the first, he quotes Augustine, "Thus in a marvelous and divine way he loved us even when he hated us. For he hated us for what we were that he had not made; yet because our wickedness had not entirely consumed his handiwork [*opus*], he knew how, at the same time [*simul*], to hate in each one of us what we had made [*feceramus*], and to love what he had made [*fecerat*]."<sup>123</sup> Regarding the second, he says, "As God hates sin [*peccatum odio habet*], we are also hated by him as far as we are sinners; but as in his secret counsel he chooses us into the body of Christ [*Christi corpus*], he ceases to hate us."<sup>124</sup> To summarize, for Calvin, God's love is the cause of our salvation because God finds a way to love us in the midst of his hatred for the sin and unrighteousness that permeates us.

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<sup>121</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 1:7; *CO* 49:12.

<sup>122</sup> *Inst.* 2.16.3, p. 505-506; *CO* 2:370.

<sup>123</sup> *Inst.* 2.16.4, p. 506; *CO* 2:370. Quote from Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, trans. John W. Rettig (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 110.6. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 3:25; *CO* 49:62.

<sup>124</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 5:10; *CO* 49:94. Cf. *Comm. 1 John* 4:10; *CO* 55:354. Cf. *Comm. John* 3:16; *CO* 47:64.

Calvin sees in this description of God's love and wrath toward humans a "type of contradiction" (*aliqua repugnantiae species*) because he recognizes that it is paradoxical to say that God loved us while we were his enemies. Peterson misinterprets Calvin here, saying that Calvin speaks of "'some sort of contradiction' or 'inconsistency' between the love and wrath of God."<sup>125</sup> Peterson is wrong to place the love and wrath of God in conflict. Instead, the contradiction lies in our *understanding* of God's love and wrath toward us. We do not *understand* how God could love us and hate us at the same time, and thus Calvin explains that the accommodated language is for our edification that we would cling more fully to God's mercy.<sup>126</sup> As we saw above, the love and wrath of God are not in conflict regarding humanity. In love and righteousness, God judges our unrighteousness with merciful wrath.

Jeremy Treat makes a similar mistake in interpreting Calvin's words here, but he expands his comments to God's mercy and justice in general. He says, "Calvin detects an apparent conflict ('some sort of contradiction') between the mercy and justice of God. God is just and must punish sin, and yet he is loving and seeks to reconcile his people."<sup>127</sup> Treat goes on to describe the penal substitution solution to the contradiction, "Christ takes the punishment of the sinner so that God's wrath is satisfied and the sinner is forgiven, that God might be just and the justifier."<sup>128</sup> Besides what we mentioned regarding Peterson's similar misstep, this is a misreading of Calvin because Treat misunderstands Calvin's definition of "justice" (*iustitia*) as the antithesis of God's mercy.

We have already observed Calvin's use of God's *iustitia* ("justice" or "righteousness") as describing God's moral purity embodied in the law. Thus, just

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<sup>125</sup> Robert A. Peterson, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Atonement* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1983), 7.

<sup>126</sup> *Inst.* 2.16.2, p. 504; *CO* 2:368. Cf. Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism*, 122.

<sup>127</sup> Jeremy Treat, "Expansive Particularity: Calvin's Way of Avoiding 'Either/or' Reductionism and 'Both/and' Homogeneity," *Trinity Journal* 34, (2013): 54.

<sup>128</sup> Treat, "Expansive Particularity," 54. Here, Treat is drawing upon biblical language (Rom. 3:21-26), but he misunderstands justice/righteousness as the antithesis of mercy. Letham makes a similar error, grounding the work of Christ in God's love as the solution to the antithesis of God's justice and God's love, Robert Letham, "The Triune God, Incarnation, and Definite Atonement," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2013), 445-446, 451. See below for Calvin's commentary on Rom 3:21-26.

as the law is summed up in the double command of love, for Calvin, God's righteousness includes his faithfulness to his people. God's *iustitia* is demonstrated in the way that God "preserves" and "tenderly nourishes" believers.<sup>129</sup> Calvin elucidates further in his Jeremiah lectures in which he particularly asserts that God's *iustitia* is *not* the opposite of mercy; "The justice [*iustitia*] of God is not to be taken according to what is commonly understood by it; and they speak incorrectly who represent God's justice as in opposition to his mercy [*miser cordia*]."<sup>130</sup> Similar statements abound in his Psalms Commentary.<sup>131</sup> According to Calvin, God's righteousness/justice as a descriptive term of his nature is not to be understood as the opposite of mercy but as a broader expression of God's ultimate purity, holiness, and goodness that is conveyed in his faithfulness to his people.<sup>132</sup>

Calvin brings together his understanding of God's righteousness and human righteousness in his exposition of Romans 3:26, where he first says that "God is just" (*Deum esse iustum*) and as such contains the fullness of righteousness in himself, making him deserving of all praise and illuminating all human unrighteousness. Second, instead of God's condemning sinners because of his righteousness, as Treat's account conveys, God communicates his righteousness to us in Christ as we receive it by faith. Thus Calvin says, "Then the righteousness of God shines in us, whenever he justifies us by faith in Christ."<sup>133</sup> In sum, God's righteousness is the opposite of human unrighteousness, but instead of God's righteousness leading him to condemn humanity (as they deserve), God provides his righteousness to those who would receive it by faith. God's righteousness is expressed in his mercy. Therefore, when Calvin describes God as a "righteous Judge" (*iustus iudex*) who does not allow his law to be broken without

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<sup>129</sup> *Inst.* 1.10.2, p. 98; *CO* 2:73. Cf. Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 131.

<sup>130</sup> *Comm. Jer.* 9:23-24; *CO* 38:52. These lectures were published in 1563, just one year before Calvin's death.

<sup>131</sup> "The righteousness [*iustitia*] of God, therefore, in this passage, as in many others, is to be understood of his faithfulness and mercy which he shows in defending and preserving his people," *Comm. Ps.* 5:8; *CO* 31:69. Cf. *Comm. Ps.* 40:10; *CO* 31:414. Cf. *Comm. Ps.* 71:15; *CO* 31:658. Cf. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms*, 157.

<sup>132</sup> Although Calvin holds to a version of divine simplicity, in continuity with his non-speculative methodology, he does not typically appeal to simplicity as an authority for making doctrinal decisions. E.g. re. the triune being, *Inst.* 1.13.2, p. 122; *CO* 2:90. E.g. re. God's will, *Comm. Ezek.* 18:23; *CO* 40:445-446.

<sup>133</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 3:26; *CO* 49:64.

punishment,<sup>134</sup> Calvin is not suggesting that God's justice somehow opposes his mercy by placing a requirement upon him to punish sin. Instead, Calvin is pointing out the contrast between human unrighteousness and God's perfect righteousness. All sin is inherently hostile to God and inevitably results in his opposition to it, but because of his love, God "wipes out all evil in us by the expiation set forth in the death of Christ," thus making us "righteous and holy in his sight."<sup>135</sup> For Calvin, God's *iustitia* and mercy are not at odds within God, but in his love, righteousness, and judgment, God acts in accordance with his nature by loving humanity, being faithful to his (fallen) people, and rightly condemning sin and evil in the world.

### **No Tension Between Father and Son: The One Work of the Triune God**

To clear up another possible misconception, for Calvin, atonement is the unified work of the triune God. Hesselink summarizes that because Calvin uses the biblical (and Anselmian) language of satisfaction and God's wrath, it is possible to assume that in Calvin's teaching, there is "a tension within the Godhead concerning the mode of redemption" in which the holy and wrathful and judging God punishes the compassionate and meek Son who somehow thus convinces the Father to save sinners; "Calvin clearly does not hold such a crude view of atonement. In all of his writings he emphasizes that the origin of our salvation is in the love and mercy of God."<sup>136</sup> As Calvin says, "God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God's mercy."<sup>137</sup> Similarly, "Christ brought life because the heavenly Father loves the human race [*genus humanum*], and wishes that they should not perish."<sup>138</sup> For Calvin, the one triune God's love is the ultimate cause of salvation.

### **Simple Summary: Jesus Christ is Lord**

Having seen that God's love is the beginning of salvation, we secondly turn to Calvin's description of the core of the gospel, namely Jesus is Lord. "The whole gospel [*totum evangelium*] is included in Christ, so that if any removes one step

<sup>134</sup> *Inst.* 2.16.1, p. 504; *CO* 2:368.

<sup>135</sup> *Inst.* 2.16.3, p. 506; *CO* 2:370.

<sup>136</sup> Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism*, 121-122.

<sup>137</sup> *Inst.* 4.1.12, p. 1026; *CO* 2:756. Cf. *Comm. Gal.* 3:13; *CO* 50:210.

<sup>138</sup> *Comm. John* 3:16; *CO* 47:63-64.

from Christ, he withdraws himself from the gospel. For since he is the living and express image [*viva...et expressa imago*] of the Father, it is no wonder, that he alone is set before us as one to whom our whole faith is to be directed and in whom it is to center [*consistat*]." Calvin goes on to say that the summary of the gospel appears in the words, "Jesus Christ is Lord."<sup>139</sup> For Calvin, the heart of the gospel is God's reconciling work in Christ through which God brings sinful humanity back into union with God through Christ, restoring the flow of the abundant gifts of God and the truly happy life.<sup>140</sup>

### Calvin's Complex Account of Reconciliation

Third, to reiterate, instead of trying to identify a system or "theory of atonement," Calvin, the biblical scholar and pastor follows the biblical witness in affirming a broad and overlapping range of metaphors and themes to describe Christ's salvific work. As Muller says, "Calvin, after all, did not think of himself as a dogmatician in the modern sense of the term: rather, like most of the other theologians of his time, he understood himself as a preacher and exegete, and he understood the primary work of his life as the exposition of Scripture."<sup>141</sup> As noted in chapter 2, it is thus vital to recognize Calvin's work in the *Institutes* in its proper place as a summary of Christian doctrine to be used as the theological lens through which to read the Bible, and as a response to relevant doctrinal questions.<sup>142</sup> This is particularly important when examining Calvin's doctrine of the atonement because it is easy to perceive Calvin's summary in the *Institutes* 2.15-17 as Calvin's final and definitive understanding of Christ's redeeming work. Instead, the corresponding chapters in the *Institutes* must be read alongside Calvin's biblical exegesis to get a holistic understanding of Calvin's teaching on Christ's reconciling work. Packer points out that although many scholarly attempts have sought to oversimplify the diverse biblical witness into one theory of the atonement, Calvin

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<sup>139</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 1:3; *CO* 49:9.

<sup>140</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 5:11; *CO* 49:94.

<sup>141</sup> Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 5. Cf. *Inst.* 2.15.2, p. 496; *CO* 2:362.

<sup>142</sup> *Inst.* "John Calvin to the Reader," p. 4-5; *CO* 2:1-2. Cf. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 101-117.



sought to weave “into a single texture all the strands of thought and imagery on the subject that he found in Scripture.”<sup>143</sup>

### Definitions of Terms

Finally, before we begin the analysis, we must make two notes about language. First, the English word “atonement” (at-one-ment) came into Christian parlance after Calvin’s death as a general way to describe Christ’s saving work of making humanity “at one” with God again.<sup>144</sup> “Atonement” does not have a direct equivalent in Latin (or Greek).<sup>145</sup> Therefore, to inquire regarding Calvin’s understanding of the atonement is to speak anachronistically and attempt to discern Calvin’s answer to a question that did not exist in his day. Simply, Calvin did not teach any “theory of the atonement.” Since “atonement” is the contemporary term describing how God has reconciled humanity to himself, we use it at times, but our preferred terminology will be reconciliation or redemption.

Calvin uses *placatio* and *propitio* to describe how God’s disposition toward people is changed when their sin is removed and rightly condemned.<sup>146</sup> Calvin often uses the terms interchangeably to describe God’s favor toward people. For example, “God, to whom we were hateful because of sin, was appeased [*placatum*] by the death of his Son to become favorable [*propitius*] toward us...As by the sin of Adam we were estranged from God and destined to perish, so by Christ’s obedience we are received into favor as righteous.”<sup>147</sup> Since God hates sin and thus hates sinful humans, when the sin is removed and condemned, God is no longer hateful toward humanity but becomes pleased with them. “It is...the meaning of almost the whole gospel, that we are to depart from sin; and yet, though we are always exposed to God’s judgment [*judicio*], we are certain that Christ intercedes [*intercedere*] by the sacrifice of his death, that the Father is propitious [*propitiet*] to

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<sup>143</sup> J. I. Packer, “Foreward,” in *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Atonement*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1983), vii.

<sup>144</sup> Cf. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 74-76.

<sup>145</sup> Some English translations occasionally render *expiatio* as “atonement.” Cf. *Comm. John* 3:16; *CO* 47:64.

<sup>146</sup> *Inst.* 2.15.6, p. 501-502; *CO* 2:366.

<sup>147</sup> 2.17.3, p. 531; *CO* 2:388.

us.”<sup>148</sup> Therefore, in receiving Christ’s grace, we find God placated or propitiated because we are no longer mired in sin and standing opposed to God’s righteousness; as a result, we can now receive God’s love for us.<sup>149</sup> For Calvin, *placatio* and *propitio* do not indicate a need to placate an angry deity but the need for the removal of all unrighteousness in humans in order that God could be again pleased with them and that they could be reunited with God.<sup>150</sup>

Having seen that for Calvin reconciliation is caused by God’s love, is summarized in the person of Christ, and is a multifaceted description in accord with the biblical account, and having defined some key terms, we now turn to Calvin’s teaching proper.

### **Christ in Our Place: God's Multifarious Means of Redemption**

Here again is to be seen how he in every respect took our place to pay the price [*pretium*] of our redemption.<sup>151</sup>

For Calvin, the reconciliation exacted by Christ in his person and work is multifaceted, much like the multifaceted problem of the sinful nature. Acknowledging Calvin’s complex description of Christ’s reconciling work, Hesselink affirms van Buren’s conclusion, “If there is any one overarching theme, it is that of Christ as our substitute.”<sup>152</sup> Van Buren’s description of Christ as our substitute in his incarnation, obedience, death, and resurrection provides a broad enough framework to include a whole spectrum of biblical atonement themes, but van Buren himself specifically elevates the forensic substitutionary nature of Christ’s work, asserting that Calvin’s sacrificial language is subordinate to and equivalent to the substitutionary language.<sup>153</sup> Peterson believes that Calvin’s biblical doctrine of the atonement can only be appreciated when seen within the breadth of Calvin’s teaching on the threefold office of Christ and what Peterson

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<sup>148</sup> *Comm. 1 John* 2:1; *CO* 55:308. Cf. 2.17.2, p. 530; *CO* 2:387. Cf. *Comm. 1 John* 4:10; *CO* 55:354.

<sup>149</sup> *Inst.* 2.17.2, p. 530; *CO* 2:387.

<sup>150</sup> This brings up the question of whether this language was an appropriate choice for Calvin. As we shall see below and in Chapter 5, his misunderstanding of Mosaic sacrifice as placating God may have influenced his selection of these misleading terms.

<sup>151</sup> *Inst.* 2.16.7; *CO* 2:374.

<sup>152</sup> Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism*, 124-125.

<sup>153</sup> Paul van Buren, *Christ in Our Place* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957), 55.

calls “the six biblical themes of the work of Christ,” namely Christ as second Adam, victor, legal substitute, sacrifice, merit, and example.<sup>154</sup> Others, like Henri Blocher, have acknowledged the diversity of Calvin’s teaching on Christ’s reconciling work while asserting the supremacy of penal-sacrificial atonement as central.<sup>155</sup> Despite their differences, all four scholars clearly convey the biblical and multifaceted nature of Calvin’s teaching on Christ’s reconciling work.

We shall see in this exposition that Calvin teaches that believers receive complete reconciliation with God through the unified person and work of Christ. By *complete* reconciliation, I mean a reconciliation that goes beyond the imputation of righteousness. Instead, for Calvin, reconciliation includes the imputation of Christ’s righteousness along with being freed from the punishment due to sin, obtaining victory over evil, and receiving the grace of regeneration by the Spirit. Believers find this life and reconciliation in Christ himself, who is the fountain of all that is good.<sup>156</sup> More technically, reconciliation with God comes through union with Christ by the effective bond of the Spirit<sup>157</sup> as believers are adopted as God’s children and come to know God as a loving Father.<sup>158</sup> This is the result of Christ’s reconciling person and work. We now turn to look specifically at *how* God has accomplished this reconciliation.

We shall examine Calvin’s teaching on the unified person and work of Christ, the incarnation, Christ’s life of obedience, and the crucifixion as the central work of reconciliation before exploring Calvin’s teaching about the resurrection, ascension, intercession, and the double grace of justification and sanctification.

### **The One Person and Work of Christ**

As we have seen, for Calvin, Christ is the center of our reconciliation, but Calvin does not see reconciliation occurring in the person of Christ alone or through his

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<sup>154</sup> Peterson, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, x. In a surprising omission, Peterson never justifies his selection of these six themes as *the* biblical themes of Christ’s work. As we shall see below, example is not a proper atonement theme in Calvin, and “Christ our merit” is a duplication of other themes.

<sup>155</sup> Henri Blocher, “The Atonement in John Calvin’s Theology,” in *The Glory of the Atonement*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

<sup>156</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 5:15; *CO* 49:99.

<sup>157</sup> *Inst.* 3.1.1, p. 538; *CO* 2:394.

<sup>158</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 8:16-17; *CO* 49:150.

work alone. To use Calvin's terminology, we cannot separate Christ and his benefits (*fructus*).<sup>159</sup> Calvin sees in Christ a unity in diversity that we shall examine in four parts: (1) Christ's person and works cannot be pulled apart; (2) Christ is only known in the unity of the divine and human natures in the one person of Christ; (3) the one Messiah holds the threefold office of prophet, king, and priest; and (4) Christ's unified work is a series of events that as a whole secures salvation for God's people.

First, Calvin teaches that Christ's work and person are inseparable. This is visible in the order of Book 2 of the *Institutes*. After discussing the bigger picture of God's redemptive work as seen the narrative of sin, the law, and the relationship of the Old and New Covenants, Calvin does not proceed directly to Christ's work on our behalf. Instead, he takes four chapters (12-15) to discuss the person and offices of the Mediator.<sup>160</sup> In relation to his people, Christ and his works are also inseparable as displayed in Calvin's doctrine of union with Christ.<sup>161</sup> Calvin says, "For we await salvation from him not because he appears to us afar off, but because he makes us, ingrafted into his body, participants [*participes*] not only in all his benefits [*bonorum*] but also in himself."<sup>162</sup> Salvation is not a transaction in which grace, forgiveness, or righteousness is somehow given to the faithful; on the contrary, Christ only provides the profits of his work in himself, so those who want to gain from Christ's work need Christ.<sup>163</sup>

Second, Christ is one person with a divine and a human nature.<sup>164</sup> Calvin's teaching regarding the two natures of Christ united in the one person directly aligns with the descriptions of the Ecumenical Creeds, particularly the Chalcedonian Definition.<sup>165</sup> For example, he says, "He who was the Son of God became the Son of man—not by confusion of substance [*substantiae*], but by unity

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<sup>159</sup> *Inst.* 3 title, p. 537; *CO* 2:393. *Fructus* could also be appropriately rendered "fruits" or "profits." Battles also translates *bonum* as "benefits" in similar contexts.

<sup>160</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 1:3; *CO* 49:9-10.

<sup>161</sup> For an excellent introduction to Calvin's teaching on union with Christ, see Billings, *Union With Christ*. For a more comprehensive account, see Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*.

<sup>162</sup> *Inst.* 3.2.24, p. 570; *CO* 2:418.

<sup>163</sup> Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 5:15; *CO* 49:99.

<sup>164</sup> Cf. Peterson, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 11-26. Cf. Van Buren, *Christ in Our Place*, 11-26.

<sup>165</sup> "The Definition of Chalcedon," <http://www.reformed.org/documents/>. Chapters 12-14 of the *Institutes* generally follow the order of content of the Definition and could be seen as a type of commentary on the Definition.

of person. For we affirm his divinity so joined and united [*coniunctam unitamque*] with his humanity that each retains its distinctive nature [*naturae*] unimpaired, and yet these two natures constitute one Christ.”<sup>166</sup> It is this particular Mediator who is both God and human through whom God chose to bring salvation,<sup>167</sup> and Calvin thus argues that it was only through a mediator who was both God and human that salvation could be secured for humanity.<sup>168</sup> Although Calvin discusses the communication of properties (*ιδιωματων κοιινωνιαν*),<sup>169</sup> he asserts that the general rule is to consider both natures at once in the one person of the Mediator.<sup>170</sup> Therefore, Calvin teaches that Christ’s redemptive work occurs in and through the one Mediator who is both God and man.

Third, Calvin teaches that Christ holds the threefold office of prophet, king, and priest.<sup>171</sup> For Calvin, the offices of Christ reveal “the purpose for which Christ was sent by the Father, and what he conferred upon us.”<sup>172</sup> The offices of the “anointed One,” or Messiah, all derive from the Old Testament practice of anointing and show Christ’s “power and dignity,” providing the proper content to the name of the Son of God.<sup>173</sup> In other words, the offices of Christ provide for Calvin a bridge between Christ’s person and work. Each office has a unique significance. Christ’s prophetic office is to proclaim the gospel of salvation.<sup>174</sup> In his kingly office, Christ governs, protects, leads, and sustains his people.<sup>175</sup> In Christ’s unique priestly office, he is both priest and sacrifice who provides both reconciliation and eternal intercession for God’s people.<sup>176</sup> Once again, for Calvin the person and work of Christ are inseparable as his threefold office corresponds with his mission of bringing

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<sup>166</sup> *Inst.* 2.14.1, p. 482; *CO* 2:353. Cf. *Comm. John* 1:14; *CO* 47:14. Cf. *Inst.* 2.14.4, p. 486; *CO* 2:356.

<sup>167</sup> *Inst.* 2.12.1, p. 464; *CO* 2:340.

<sup>168</sup> *Inst.* 2.12.2-3, p. 465-467; *CO* 2:341-342.

<sup>169</sup> *Inst.* 2.14.1-2, p. 482-483; *CO* 2:353-354.

<sup>170</sup> *Inst.* 2.14.3, p. 484-485; *CO* 2:354-355.

<sup>171</sup> Cf. Peterson, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 27-39.

<sup>172</sup> *Inst.* 2.15, Title, p. 494; *CO* 2:361.

<sup>173</sup> *Inst.* 2.15, p. 494; *CO* 2:361.

<sup>174</sup> *Inst.* 2.15.2, p. 494-5; *CO* 2:362.

<sup>175</sup> *Inst.* 2.15.5, p. 500; *CO* 2:365.

<sup>176</sup> *Inst.* 2.15.6, p. 501-502; *CO* 2:366-367.

humanity back into union with God through his mediation, in accordance with God's original intent.<sup>177</sup>

Finally, Calvin depicts Christ's unified reconciling work according to its various stages. For Calvin, the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and ongoing intercession of Christ are all distinct parts of Christ's one reconciling work.<sup>178</sup> This shall become more clear in regards to Calvin's entire system below, but here we note the way Calvin concludes his extended discussion in *Institutes* 2.16 of Christ's redemptive work:

Our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended [*comprehensas*] in Christ. We should therefore take care not to derive the least portion of it from anywhere else. If we seek salvation, we are taught by the very name of Jesus that it is 'of him' (1 Cor. 1:30). If we seek any other gifts of the Spirit, they will be found in his anointing. If we seek strength it lies in his dominion; if purity, in his conception; if gentleness, it appears in his birth. For by his birth he was made like us in all respects (Heb. 2:17) that he might learn to feel our pain. If we seek redemption, it lies in his passion; if acquittal, in his condemnation; if remission of the curse, in his cross (Gal. 3:13); if satisfaction, in his sacrifice; if purification, in his blood; if reconciliation, in his descent into hell; if mortification of the flesh, in his tomb; if newness of life, in his resurrection; if immortality, in the same; if inheritance of the Heavenly Kingdom, in his entrance into heaven; if protection, if security, if abundant supply of all blessings, in his Kingdom; if untroubled expectation of judgment, in the power given him to judge. In short, since rich store of every kind of good [*omne genus bonorum*] abounds in him, let us drink our fill from this fountain, and from no other.<sup>179</sup>

Calvin's teaching on the one person and work of Christ is important for our study because it prevents us from isolating any one part of Christ or his work as indicating God's disposition toward humanity. Instead, we must keep the whole in mind while recognizing God's disposition toward humanity expressed in the parts, which we turn to examine now.

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<sup>177</sup> In a letter to the Polish Reformed churches regarding Francis Stancaro's claim that Christ only mediated according to his human nature, Calvin says, "from the beginning of creation [Christ] already truly was mediator, for he always was the head of the Church, had primacy over the angels and was the firstborn of every creature," *CO* 9:338; Joseph Tylenda, "Christ the Mediator: Calvin Versus Stancaro," *Calvin Theological Journal* 8, no. 1 (April, 1973):12. Cf. *Inst.* 2.12.1, p. 465; *CO* 2:341. For the text of Calvin's two letters, see *CO* 9:333-358. Tylenda provides English translations and the historical background: Tylenda, "Christ the Mediator," 5-16; Joseph Tylenda, "Controversy on Christ the Mediator: Calvin's Second Reply to Stancaro," *Calvin Theological Journal* 8, no. 2 (Nov. 1973): 131-157.

<sup>178</sup> Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 4:25; *CO* 49:87.

<sup>179</sup> *Inst.* 2.16.19, p. 527-528; *CO* 2:385-386.

### The Incarnation

The first moment in Christ's redemptive work in human history is the incarnation of the eternal Son of God. Into the hopeless state of humanity estranged from the Kingdom of Heaven and in terror before God, God "descended to us, since it was not in our power to ascend to him." God assured us of his nearness and his desire to dwell with us by becoming "for us 'Immanuel, that is, God with us,' and in such a way that his divinity and our human nature might by mutual connection grow together [*inter se coalescerent*]." <sup>180</sup> The incarnation did not remove our need for Christ's cleansing work, but in the incarnation, the Mediator came near to humanity and made himself accessible to us as the "path" (*via*) upon which we come to God. <sup>181</sup>

Besides depicting how the incarnation reveals God's gracious desire to reconcile humanity with God, Calvin also describes the incarnation in terms reminiscent of Irenaeus' doctrine of recapitulation. <sup>182</sup> Echoing the patristic saying, <sup>183</sup> Calvin states, "He who is [God's] only Son by nature, makes many sons by grace and adoption, even all who by faith are united to his body." <sup>184</sup> In this way, by his incarnation, Christ witnesses to our adoption as God's children in our common humanity with him.

However, it is important to recognize that Calvin does not teach that humanity could be reconciled to God *solely* through God's assumption of humanity. Again echoing the patristic language, he writes, "And thus what was ours Christ took as his own, that he might transfer [*transfunderet*] his own to us; for he took our curse [*maledictione*], and has freely granted us his blessing [*benedictione*]." <sup>185</sup> In

<sup>180</sup> *Inst.* 2.12.1, p. 464-465; *CO* 2:340.

<sup>181</sup> *Inst.* 2.12.1, p. 465; *CO* 2:341.

<sup>182</sup> Cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.16.6.

<sup>183</sup> E.g. Augustine says, "For if the Son of God by nature became the Son of man out of compassion for the sons of men...how much more credible it is that the sons of man by nature become sons of God by grace?" Augustine, *City of God*, 13.9. Cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.19.2.

<sup>184</sup> *Comm. 1 John* 4:9; *CO* 55:353. Cf. *Inst.* 2.12.2, p. 465; *CO* 2:341. Cf. *Inst.* 2.14.6, p. 489; *CO* 2:358. Cf. *Inst.* 4.17.2, p. 1362; *CO* 2:1003. Cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.18.7. Cf. 2.22.4.

<sup>185</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 8:3; *CO* 49:140. Cf. *Inst.* 2.12.3, p. 466; *CO* 2:341.

continuity with the fathers,<sup>186</sup> Calvin is clear that Christ's assumption of human flesh was not simply to provide a union but also to take humanity's curse on himself so believers could receive his life and blessings. Calvin makes the same point abundantly clear in his refutation of Osiander's teaching of infused or "essential" (*essentialis*) righteousness that implies that Christ's righteousness could somehow be transferred to believers by participation in the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4) apart from the forensic imputation of Christ's righteousness.<sup>187</sup> Calvin is clear that both the imputation of righteousness and the regeneration of the Spirit are necessary for salvation through the believer's union with Christ.<sup>188</sup> For Calvin, although God's nearness in the incarnation is vital, the incarnation alone does not provide reconciliation with God.

Therefore, for Calvin, God comes near in the incarnation, revealing his desire to be reconciled with humanity and making reconciliation a possibility through his assumption of human flesh. We now turn to examine the various ways Christ obtains righteousness for humanity through his work.

### The Life of Obedience

In Christ's life of obedience, Christ perfectly obeyed the law in order to provide for his people the righteousness that they could not obtain on their own efforts.<sup>189</sup> Regarding Romans 8:4, Calvin says, "when the obedience [*obedientia*] of Christ is accepted for us, the law has been satisfied [*legi satisfactum est*], so that we are counted just. For the perfection which the law demands was exhibited in our flesh [*in carne*]."<sup>190</sup> Similarly, Christ frees us from the law by subjecting himself to it and obeying it in our place.<sup>191</sup> Thus, Christ also obtains for us our sanctification through his sanctification of himself to the Father; "It is because he consecrated

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<sup>186</sup> E.g. Although Athanasius emphasized the salvific importance of the incarnation, he still regarded the cross of Christ as central to God's redemptive activity and self-revelation in the Son, Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), s. 19.

<sup>187</sup> *Inst.* 3.11.5-12, p. 729-743; *CO* 2:536-545. Cf. J. Todd Billings, "Union With Christ and the Double Grace: Calvin's Theology and Its Early Reception," in *Calvin's Theology and Its Reception: Disputes, Developments, and New Possibilities*, ed. J. Todd Billings and I. John Hesselink, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 60-61.

<sup>188</sup> *Inst.* 3.11.11, p. 739; *CO* 2:542.

<sup>189</sup> Cf. Peterson, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 40-45.

<sup>190</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 8:4; *CO* 49:140. Cf. *Comm. 2 Cor.* 5:16; *CO* 50:68.

<sup>191</sup> *Comm. Gal.* 4:4; *CO* 50:227.



[*consecravit*] himself to the Father, that his holiness [*sanctitas*] might come to us.”<sup>192</sup>

As van Buren points out, Christ’s obedience included not only his incarnation and righteous life but also his death in conformity to the Father’s will.<sup>193</sup> Regarding Christ’s suffering, Calvin says of Christ, “his wonderful goodness shines forth especially in this respect, that he for our good subjected himself to our infirmities [*infirmatibus*].”<sup>194</sup> He proceeds to say that Christ’s sufferings are not simply to be seen as an example, “but he ascends higher, even that he by his obedience [*obedientia*] has blotted out our transgressions. He became then the cause of salvation, because he obtained righteousness [*iustitiam*] for us before God, having removed the disobedience of Adam by an act of an opposite kind, even obedience.”<sup>195</sup>

Christ’s obedience in his life provided humanity with vicarious righteousness according to the law and supplied humanity with the ability to live a righteous life by the Spirit, again displaying God’s will to reconcile humanity with him. In his suffering and death, Christ enacted the ultimate act of obedience to the Father to reconcile us to God.<sup>196</sup> It is to this center of Christ’s redemptive work that we now turn.

### **The Cross: One Central Work Seen from Varied Perspectives**

It is, because by [the cross] he glorifies God the Father; for in the cross of Christ, as in a magnificent [*splendidissimo*] theater, the inestimable [*incomparabilis*] goodness of God is displayed before the whole world [*toti mundo*]. In all the creatures, indeed, both high and low, the glory of God shines, but nowhere has it shone more brightly than in the cross, in which there has been an astonishing [*admirabilis*] change of things [*rerum*]: the condemnation of all men has been manifested, sin has been blotted out, salvation has been restored to men; and, in short, the whole world has been renewed [*reparato*], and every thing [*omnia*] restored to good order.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> *Comm. John* 17:19; *CO* 47:385.

<sup>193</sup> Van Buren, *Christ in Our Place*, 27-37.

<sup>194</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 5:7; *CO* 55:61.

<sup>195</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 5:9; *CO* 55:64.

<sup>196</sup> *Inst.* 2.16.5, p. 507; *CO* 2:370-371. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 5:10; *CO* 49:94.

<sup>197</sup> *Comm. John* 13:31; *CO* 47:316-317.

Although the cross and resurrection are inseparable for Calvin,<sup>198</sup> he also distinguishes them, particularly in dogmatic descriptions and expositions of specific passages of Scripture. For the sake of order here, we shall discuss first the cross and then the resurrection, ascension, and ongoing mediation that complete Calvin's account of Christ's reconciling work. Regarding the cross, we shall first describe Calvin's central theme of reconciliation, namely forensic and sacrificial substitution, before looking at the subordinate themes of *Christus victor* and the (rehabilitated) patristic ransom theory and finally noting the non-reconciling metaphors of Christ's example and Christ's merit.

#### The Center: Forensic and Sacrificial Substitution

As we observed above, the multifaceted problem caused by the fall of Adam and Eve can be summarized as the alienation from God resulting in human unrighteousness that is inherently opposed to and hateful to God. The solution is reconciliation with God through the provision of Christ's righteousness for us. Calvin says, "For if we seek salvation, that is, life with God, righteousness must be first sought, by which being reconciled to him, we may, by that propitiation [*eo propitio*], obtain that life which consists only in his favour [*benevolentia*]; for, in order to be loved by God, we must first become righteous, since he regards unrighteousness [*iniustitiam*] with hatred."<sup>199</sup> Since God can only hate and condemn our wickedness, we must be freed from our sin and the accompanying condemnation if we are to be reconciled to God and know him as a loving Father again. This only happens through Christ's death (and resurrection) in our place.

In his essay regarding Calvin's doctrine of the atonement, Blocher persuasively establishes the synthetic nature of Calvin's statements on the atonement which interlace "the religious, cultic language of *sacrifice*" with "the forensic or judicial language of *condemnation*."<sup>200</sup> Similarly, we contend that the center of Christ's atoning work is best described synthetically as forensic-sacrificial substitution in which Christ takes our place by assuming our guilt and by dying as a sacrifice to

<sup>198</sup> Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 4:25; *CO* 49:87.

<sup>199</sup> *Comm. Rom* 1:17; *CO* 49:20. My translation.

<sup>200</sup> Blocher, "Atonement," 283. Emphasis orig.

redeem us from the curse merited by sin.<sup>201</sup> We shall provide a glimpse into Calvin's primarily forensic teaching, his primarily sacrificial exposition, and his combined account before describing Calvin's key distinction from Anselmian satisfaction and before showing Blocher's error in his description of Calvin's penal substitution.

First, according to Calvin's forensic angle, Christ takes human sin and guilt upon himself, receives God's condemnation of sin on himself in his death, and provides his righteousness to those who believe. Calvin says, "For [Christ] assumed in a manner our place, that he might be made a defendant [*reus*] in our name, and might be judged as a sinner [*peccator*], not for his own offenses, but for those of others, inasmuch as he was pure and exempt from every fault, and might endure the punishment [*poenam*] that was due us—not to himself." In the same place, Calvin goes on to say that we are thus not judged based on our own righteousness, but we receive Christ's righteousness on our behalf when we put it on by faith (*fide induimus*).<sup>202</sup> This forensic substitution can be surveyed via three overlapping concepts: expiation, satisfaction, and the imputation of Christ's righteousness.<sup>203</sup> In the comprehensive act of expiation (*expiatio*), Christ takes our sin and guilt upon himself and reconciles us to God by his death; "Our sins are a heavy load; but they are laid on Christ, by whom we are freed from the load. Thus, when we were ruined, and, being estranged from God [*alienati a Deo*], were hastening to hell, Christ took upon him the filthiness of our iniquities [*iniquitatem*], in order to rescue us from everlasting destruction."<sup>204</sup> For Calvin, *expiatio* is shorthand for the entire work of redemption.<sup>205</sup> Second, in the more specific act of satisfaction (*satisfactio*), Christ receives God's condemnation of sin upon himself.<sup>206</sup> For Calvin, this satisfaction did not pit the Son against the Father but occurred according to "the eternal goodwill [*aeterno beneplacito*] of God, who purposed [*voluit*] to be in

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<sup>201</sup> The integrated nature of Calvin's teaching of reconciliation extends beyond the central sacrificial and forensic themes to *Christus victor*, incarnation, Christ's life of obedience, and more, which are all united in the one person and work of Christ.

<sup>202</sup> *Comm. 2 Cor.* 5:21; *CO* 50:74. Cf. *Inst.* 2.16.1, p. 504; *CO* 2:368.

<sup>203</sup> Cf. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 34.

<sup>204</sup> *Comm. Is.* 53:6; *CO* 37:259-260. Cf. *Inst.* 2.12.3, p. 466-467; *CO* 2:342. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 5:10; *CO* 49:94. Cf. *Comm. Heb.* 9:22; *CO* 55:116.

<sup>205</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 3:25; *CO* 49:62.

<sup>206</sup> *Inst.* 2.17.4, p. 531; 2:389.

this way pacified [*placari*].”<sup>207</sup> This satisfaction did not simply entail physical death but spiritual death as well. In this way, Calvin uniquely<sup>208</sup> interprets the descent into hell not as a venture to the netherworld but as Christ’s experience of the full extent of God’s judgment of sin in our place.<sup>209</sup> In one statement that unites the removal of sin and the condemnation of sin that Christ accomplished, Calvin says, “This is the material of our righteousness—Christ by his obedience satisfied [*satisfecit*] the Father’s judgment [*patris iudicio*] and by undertaking our cause he liberated us from the tyranny of death, by which we were held captive; on account of the sacrifice which he offered by expiation [*expitatione*], our guilt [*reatus*] is removed.”<sup>210</sup> The third overlapping component is the way that those with faith are provided Christ’s righteousness in order that they can stand before God as beloved children.<sup>211</sup> In the end, because of these three overlapping movements of God’s gracious work in Christ, God is propitiated (*propitio*) toward those who receive it by faith; they are thus reconciled with God, no longer standing under God’s judgment.<sup>212</sup>

Second, from the sacrificial perspective, Calvin teaches that as the fulfillment of the shadows of the Old Testament sacrifices,<sup>213</sup> “[Christ] offered as a sacrifice [*sacrificium*] the flesh he received from us, that he might wipe out our guilt by his act of expiation [*facta expiatione*] and appease [*placaret*] the Father’s righteous wrath [*iustam iram*].”<sup>214</sup> For Calvin, the Old Covenant sacrifices revealed the way in which the sacrificial animal took the worshiper’s lawful punishment, thus making God pleased with the worshiper again. Calvin does not teach that the Old Testament sacrifices themselves were able to placate God but that they participated in and witnessed to the death of Christ that would ultimately appease

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<sup>207</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 4:25; *CO* 49:87.

<sup>208</sup> Van Buren, *Christ in Our Place*, 57.

<sup>209</sup> *Inst.* 2.16.10, p. 515; *CO* 2:376.

<sup>210</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 3:24; *CO* 49:61. My translation. Note the overlapping forensic and sacrificial language, upon which we shall comment below. Cf. *Comm. John* 19:28; *CO* 47:418, and note there the mistranslation of *iudicio* as “justice” instead of “judgment.”

<sup>211</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 4:3; *CO* 49:69. Cf. *Comm. 2 Cor.* 5:21; *CO* 50:73-74. For Calvin, this occurs through union with Christ. Cf. Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 188.

<sup>212</sup> Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 3:24; *CO* 49:62. Cf. *Inst.* 2.17.3, p. 531; *CO* 2:388.

<sup>213</sup> *Comm. Heb.* “Argument”; *CO* 55:7-8.

<sup>214</sup> *Inst.* 2.12.3, p. 466-467; *CO* 2:342.

God.<sup>215</sup> In the same way that the Aaronic priests placed the guilt of sinners onto the head the sin offering through the laying on of hands, Christ takes our sins upon himself and dies as a guilt-offering (*piaculum* or אָשָׁם - *asham*); “Our sins were thrown upon Christ in such a manner that he alone bore the curse...Here we have a description of the benefit of Christ’s death, that by his sacrifice, sins were expiated and God was reconciled towards men; for such is the import of [*asham*].”<sup>216</sup> Regarding Christ’s death, Calvin takes the words from Hebrews 9:22, “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins”<sup>217</sup> to mean that, “There is but one way of pacification [*placandi*], and that is by an expiation [*expiationem*] made by blood: hence no pardon of sins can be hoped for unless we bring blood, and this is done when we flee by faith to the death of Christ.”<sup>218</sup> According to Calvin’s understanding of sacrifice, the sacrificial victim dies in the place of the worshiper, taking their deserved curse and expiating their sins. Christ is the archetype of that substitutionary sacrifice as one who has taken the punishment of death upon himself in order to remove the guilt and curse of another.

Calvin’s descriptions of sacrificial death as appeasing God could be seen to portray God as angry and bloodthirsty, only able to be placated through the suffering and death of an innocent victim. For example, Calvin says, “whosoever obtains favor for us, must be furnished with a sacrifice; for when God has been offended [*offensus est*], in order to pacify him [*placandum*] a payment [*pretium*] of satisfaction is required.”<sup>219</sup> Culpepper recognizes this possibility, observing, “Perhaps the greatest error in Calvin’s view is the way the Reformer interprets sacrifice in terms of propitiation instead of expiation, and assumes that the essence of sacrifice is the punishment of sin in a substitute.”<sup>220</sup> As we shall see in chapter 5, recent Hebrew Bible scholarship suggests that Calvin misunderstands the logic of

<sup>215</sup> *Comm. Ex.* 12:21; *CO* 24:136. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 3:25; *CO* 49:63. Cf. *Inst.* 2.16.6, p. 510; *CO* 2:373.

<sup>216</sup> *Comm. Is.* 53:10; *CO* 37:263. Cf. *Comm. 1 Cor.* 5:21; *CO* 50:74.

<sup>217</sup> In light of the context of the manipulation of blood by the priest, a better rendering here would be, “without the pouring out of the blood.” Cf. David M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Boston: Brill, 2011), 291. See Chapter 5.

<sup>218</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 9:22; *CO* 55:116. Cf. *Inst.* 2.15.6, p. 502; *CO* 2:366. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 3:25; *CO* 49:63.

<sup>219</sup> *Comm. 1 John* 2:1; *CO* 55:309. My translation.

<sup>220</sup> Robert H. Culpepper, *Interpreting the Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 102. Culpepper similarly asserts that although Calvin says that God’s love for us is not conditioned by Christ’s death and that God was not angry with the Son at the cross, the tendencies toward those conclusions were in seed in Calvin’s account, Culpepper, *Interpreting the Atonement*, 103.

Levitical sacrifice. Instead of satisfying God's anger through the death of the sacrifice, it was primarily the *life* in the blood (along with the manipulation of the offerings by the priest in the temple) that covered over the sin and mortality of the worshipers, thus making God propitious toward them. As we shall see, Calvin's account would have been substantially more coherent if he had understood the logic of Mosaic sacrifice in this manner.

Even in light of Calvin's misunderstanding of the Hebrew cult, examining his complete account of Christ's reconciling work reveals that he is not teaching that God is somehow made happy solely through the punishment of an innocent victim. Most importantly, as demonstrated above, God's wrath and the punishments of the law have unrighteousness as their object. God's wrath and curse is on human wickedness, so it can only be satisfied when evil is condemned.<sup>221</sup> Therefore, although Calvin's language regarding sacrifice can imply the pacification of an angry God, Calvin's broader teaching indicates that even with his deficient understanding of the logic of Levitical sacrifice, the center of Calvin's teaching on sacrifice is not punishment as an end in itself but Christ's substitutionary death for the purpose of condemning evil.

As we have seen throughout this section, Calvin does not strictly divide the forensic and the sacrificial elements of his teaching on Christ's reconciling work but uses terminology from both metaphors interchangeably. For example, intermixing law, curse, expiation, guilt, sacrifice, and punishment, Calvin says,

For as under the law, the sinner, that he might be released from guilt, substituted a victim in his own place; so Christ took on himself the curse [*maledictionem*] due to our sins, that he might atone [*expiaret*] for them before God. And he expressly adds, on the tree, because it is not possible [*non potuit*] to offer such an expiation except on the cross. Peter, therefore, well expresses the truth, that Christ's death was a sacrifice for the expiation [*expiandis*] of our sins; for being fixed to the cross and offering himself a victim for us [*pro nobis*], he took on himself our guilt [*reatum*] and our punishment [*poenam*].<sup>222</sup>

Similarly, regarding Paul's statement that Christ died for our sins, Calvin says, "For what else was Christ's death, but a sacrifice for expiating [*expiandis*] our

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<sup>221</sup> Also, note again Calvin's use of *placatio* and *propitio* as terms that reveal God's pleasure because what is hateful to God has been removed.

<sup>222</sup> *Comm. 1 Pet. 2:24; CO 55:251-252. Cf. Comm. 2 Cor. 5:21; CO 50:74.*

sins—what but a satisfactory penalty [*poena satisfactoria*], by which we might be reconciled to God—what but the condemnation of one, for the purpose of obtaining forgiveness [*absolutionem*] for us?”<sup>223</sup> Christ’s death is both a penalty of satisfaction and an expiatory sacrifice to the end of our reconciliation with God. Calvin interweaves the metaphors as he describes Christ’s reconciling work from different biblical, anthropological, and theological perspectives.

This leads us to an important question for our study of God’s disposition toward humanity, namely, what specifically is the penalty that Christ’s death pays? We shall contrast Anselm’s and Blocher’s accounts, respectively, with Calvin’s.

First, Anselm assumes that the human offense to God that has robbed him of his proper honor must be recompensed, including an appropriate penalty.<sup>224</sup> Anselm’s account, though not truly substitutionary because he sets punishment and restoration as mutually exclusive options, is widely influential in its account of the satisfaction acquired by Christ’s death. Holmes summarizes that for Anselm a person who has disobeyed God owes God obedience *and* a satisfaction for the disobedience, which is “determined by the level of the offense of human sin, which, Anselm argues, is infinite.” It is infinite because God’s honor is infinitely more than creation so the requirement to honor him is “of infinite weight. Therefore, any failure to obey or honour God is an offence of infinite weight, and so, finally, an infinite satisfaction is needed.”<sup>225</sup> Anselm thus argues that only the God-man can provide the necessary infinite satisfaction by his death as an innocent and infinitely worthy victim, thus obtaining satisfaction for humanity and restoring creation to its original created purpose. For Anselm, the satisfaction required by God is the *recompense* for the offense of sin to the infinitely worthy God.

Contrary to Anselm’s account, for Calvin, Christ directly takes our *deserved* penalty [*poena*] upon himself in his death.<sup>226</sup> For example, “Unless Christ had made satisfaction for our sins, it would not have been said that he appeased [*placasse*] God by taking upon himself the penalty [*poena*] to which we were subject...the

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<sup>223</sup> *Comm. 1 Cor.* 15:3; *CO* 49:538.

<sup>224</sup> Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, trans. S. N. Deane (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1962), 1.13. Cf. Holmes, *Listening to the Past*, 44.

<sup>225</sup> Holmes, *Listening to the Past*, 45. Cf. Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, 1.20.

<sup>226</sup> Cf. Van Buren, *Christ in Our Place*, 76n2. Cf. Peterson, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 91.

burden of condemnation [*damnationis*], from which we were freed, was laid on Christ.”<sup>227</sup> Again, “[Christ] offered the sacrifice of his body, and shed his blood, that he might endure the punishment [*poenam*] which was due us.”<sup>228</sup> As we saw above, death was God’s punishment for transgression as well as the inevitable result of alienation from God who is the source of life. Therefore, “[Christ] delivered us [*liberavit*] from the evil [*calamitate*] of death by suffering death as a punishment [*poena*] for our sins.”<sup>229</sup>

The key concept that holds together Christ’s death and punishment for Calvin is the curse (*maledictio*) of the law by which humans are condemned to death as accursed ones. In his Galatians commentary, Calvin says, “The sentence of the law is, that all who have transgressed any part of the law are cursed [*maledictos esse*]...And so [Paul] concludes boldly that all are cursed, because all have been commanded to keep the law perfectly” but no one is able to do so.<sup>230</sup> The reason Christ died on a cross was to fully receive the curse upon himself,<sup>231</sup> “that we might be delivered from it.”<sup>232</sup> Thus, “The cross was accursed [*maledicta*], not only in human opinion but by decree of God’s law. Hence, when Christ is hanged upon the cross, he makes himself subject [*se obnoxium*] to the curse. It had to happen this way in order that the whole curse—which on account of our sins awaited us, or rather lay upon us—might be lifted from us, while it was transferred to him.”<sup>233</sup> Using sacrificial language, Calvin teaches that God determined beforehand a way to remove our curse (*maledictio*) by appointing “Christ as our Mediator [*mediator*], that he might appease [*placaret*] the Father by the sacrifice of his death.”<sup>234</sup> Therefore, for Calvin, Christ directly pays the penalty that humanity has earned through sin, namely the curse of death.

In sum, in contrast with Anselm’s account of an abstract, externally defined penalty for sin, Calvin teaches that Christ directly took our place, accepting our sins and resultant curse on himself in his accursed death on the cross.

<sup>227</sup> *Inst.* 2.17.4, p. 532; 2:389.

<sup>228</sup> *Comm. Is.* 53:12; *CO* 37:267. Cf. *Comm. 1 Pet.* 2:24; *CO* 55:252.

<sup>229</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 4:25; *CO* 49:88. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 8:7; *CO* 49:142.

<sup>230</sup> *Comm. Gal.* 3:10; *CO* 50:208.

<sup>231</sup> *Comm. Phil.* 2:8; *CO* 52:27.

<sup>232</sup> *Comm. Gal.* 3:13; *CO* 50:210.

<sup>233</sup> *Inst.* 2.16.6, p. 510; *CO* 2:373. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 8:3; *CO* 49:140.

<sup>234</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 3:25; *CO* 49:62.



Secondly, although Blocher's essay offers many valuable insights into Calvin's teaching on the atonement, he misconstrues Calvin's teaching on the penalty undertaken in Christ's reconciling work. Building upon Calvin's understanding of the sacrifice in the Mosaic Law,<sup>235</sup> Blocher concludes that "the satisfaction of justice lies near the heart of sacrificial atonement." He goes on to define penal substitution as "substitution under the curse we had deserved, so that divine justice is satisfied" through the death of the perfect substitute. Responding to those who contend that Calvin does not teach penal substitution, Blocher affirms the nuances sought, namely that Christ's work in penal substitution was founded upon God's love, that the substitute was necessarily perfectly obedient to the Father, and that Christ's death only merits satisfaction because God has mercifully made the payment and accepted such payment to settle the human debt.<sup>236</sup> With those nuances established, Blocher concludes with Roger Nicole's words, "Calvin functions clearly with the concept of penal substitution."<sup>237</sup>

Of course, how one defines penal substitution will significantly influence whether such a title can be rightly given to Calvin's account. For example, Nicole's definition (that Blocher does not cite), that "Christ on the cross underwent the divine penalty which God would otherwise inflict on the sinner,"<sup>238</sup> is consistent with Calvin's teaching, as long as one understands the "penalty" as the curse of the law that condemns sinful humanity to death (what we have called "forensic substitution" for clarity), not an arbitrary or externally determined penalty for sin.

However, Blocher's fatal move is his inclusion of the "satisfaction of justice" in his description of penal substitution. For support, Blocher cites a passage from the *Institutes* in which Calvin defines a sacrifice of expiation as one "which is to appease God's wrath, to satisfy his judgment [*ipsius iudicio satisfacere*], and thus to wash and wipe away sins."<sup>239</sup> He thus transfers Calvin's use of *iudicio* [judgment] into *iustitia* [justice or righteousness]. As we have seen above, Calvin explicitly rejects using the language of justice [*iustitia*] as if it were opposed to God's mercy.

<sup>235</sup> Cf. *Inst.* 4.18.13, p. 1441-1442; *CO* 2:1060.

<sup>236</sup> Blocher, "Atonement," 285, 286, 286-288.

<sup>237</sup> Roger R. Nicole, "John Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement," *Westminster Theological Journal* 47, no. 2 (Fall 1985): 224.

<sup>238</sup> Nicole, "Calvin's View," 224.

<sup>239</sup> *Inst.* 4.18.13, p. 1441-1442; *CO* 2:1060.

Instead, here, Calvin is clearly pointing out that in the sacrifice, God judges and condemns unrighteousness in the vicarious death of the sacrificial victim. God's righteousness is not satisfied by the *payment of the penalty itself* but by the *condemnation of the evil* that opposes God's inherent righteousness. To claim that this citation shows that Calvin teaches the "satisfaction of justice" is clearly a misrepresentation of Calvin's teaching.

As a more stark example from the Reformed tradition, John Owen determines that God must bring about vindictory punishment in response to sin in order to preserve his "supreme right and dominion" in the world.<sup>240</sup> For Owen, this punishment is necessary for God to be God. Thus, "Vindictory justice is so *natural* to God, that, sin being supposed, he cannot, according to the rule of his right, wisdom, and truth, but punish it."<sup>241</sup> More extensively, Owen says, "In the whole matter of salvation by the Mediator, God-man, there is no excellence of God, no essential property, no attribute of his nature, the glory of which is the chief end of all his works, that he hath more clearly and eminently displayed than this punitory justice."<sup>242</sup> Although more explicitly, Owen makes the same error that Blocher makes in contrast with Calvin, namely making *punishment* in itself the end of God's judgment.

To summarize Calvin's contrasting position, in God's righteous faithfulness to his people, God would not let them be completely destroyed by their sin, but he rescued them from the curse of the law through his judgment (*iudicium*) of all unrighteousness in Christ's sacrificial work that provides Christ's legal righteousness for his people. The penalty Christ paid is the curse of the law which humanity deserves because of their sin. Christ took death in their place, thus satisfying God's judgment of evil *according* to his righteousness. This is a profoundly different understanding of the satisfaction of God's justice than that for which Blocher contends.

In summary, Calvin's central metaphor for Christ's reconciling work is forensic-sacrificial substitution in which Christ took the curse and guilt of human sin upon

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<sup>240</sup> Owen, "Works," vol. 10, 511.

<sup>241</sup> Owen, "Works," vol. 10, 500. Emphasis orig.

<sup>242</sup> Owen, "Works," vol. 10, 547.

himself and by receiving God's condemnation of sin in death, paid the penalty of sin and provided satisfaction for sin. Thus, Christ acted in our place in gracious redemption as an expression of God's nature and in accord with God's disclosed disposition toward humanity, thereby condemning evil and providing his righteousness in love to all who would receive it by faith.

#### Subordinate Themes: Christus Victor and Ransom Theory

Even though forensic-sacrificial substitution is the center of Calvin's teaching on Christ's reconciling work, he also integrates teaching about Christ's victory over sin, death, and evil into his account.<sup>243</sup> In his attempt to reclaim what he sees as the primary atonement theme of the church for its first millennium, Gustaf Aulén has made Christ's victory over sin, death, and evil well-known as an understanding of Christ's atoning work.<sup>244</sup> However, a recent book by Nicholas Lombardo clarifies Aulén's conclusions through a recovery of the devil's ransom theory as another common understanding Christ's reconciling work prior to Anselm. Through a careful reading of many patristic sources, Lombardo refutes the caricatures of the ransom theory and reconstructs the theory in this way:

Through sin, humanity becomes subject to evil, suffering, and death. In order to restore humanity, God becomes man, so that he can draw out the power of evil in all its various manifestations and take it upon himself. Then, after absorbing the full force of evil in his crucifixion, Christ overcomes death by his resurrection and makes it possible for us to share in his victory by being joined to his Person through the sacraments.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> *Comm. Is.* 53:12; *CO* 37:266. Cf. Peterson, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 44. Blocher sees Christ's victory as an important theme that emerges from Christ's penal-sacrificial atonement work, Blocher, "Atonement," 290. Van Buren asserts that for Calvin, death is not a cosmic power but simply the result of sin, van Buren, *Christ in Our Place*, 55. A survey of Calvin's teaching reveals that he does not hesitate to identify death as a cosmic power, even though death only stems from human sin.

<sup>244</sup> Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A.G. Hebert (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1931).

<sup>245</sup> Nicholas E. Lombardo, *The Father's Will: Christ's Crucifixion and the Goodness of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 229. Lombardo recognizes that the devil's ransom, devil's right's, and *Christus Victor* theories are overlapping ways to describe the central patristic understanding of Christ's redemptive work (p. 12). However, Lombardo asserts that a major weakness of Aulén's work is that he does not correctly recover the patristic understanding of the devil's ransom, thus leaving it to be understood in the conventional manner as if the devil had true legal rights to humanity or that God actually needed to pay a ransom to the devil (p. 192n44). According to Lombardo, the patristic authors portray the devil's "rights" only as a metaphor, not an ontological or legal reality (p. 193).

Calvin, likely drawing upon many of the same patristic sources as Lombardo, often speaks of Christ's victory over sin, death, and evil in ransom terms. For example, he says that when Christ "gave himself up to death for us, he in a manner surrendered and subjected himself to its power [*potestati*]; it was however in such a way that it was impossible that he should be kept bound by its pangs [*doloribus*], so as to succumb to or be swallowed up by them. He, therefore, by submitting [*subeundo*] to its dominion, as it were, for a moment, destroyed [*deglutivit*] it forever."<sup>246</sup> Similarly, Calvin says that Christ destroyed the devil and freed us from the fear of death by letting "himself be swallowed up by death, as it were, not to be engulfed in its abyss, but rather to engulf it that must soon have engulfed us."<sup>247</sup>

This element of Calvin's teaching on Christ's reconciling work further reveals God's disposition toward humanity: Christ has conquered sin, death, and the devil on behalf of all people who would receive that victory through faith in Christ.

#### Rejected Themes: Exemplar and Merit

In his account of Calvin's doctrine of the atonement, Peterson includes two themes that should not be considered atonement themes, namely Christ as example<sup>248</sup> and Christ as merit.<sup>249</sup>

Regarding Christ as example, Calvin does teach that Christ is an example to follow, particularly in his suffering, but Calvin does not teach that following Christ's example merits salvation in any way. Instead, ones who have already been made righteous through Christ's gracious reconciling work are meant to follow Christ's example in how to live the sanctified life. For instance, Calvin says that Christ learned obedience for "our benefit, that he might exhibit to us an instance and an example of subjection even to death itself."<sup>250</sup> Therefore, Christ as example relates to our sanctification but not to our justification<sup>251</sup> and thus should not be considered as an element of Calvin's teaching on Christ's reconciling work. This is

<sup>246</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 6:9-10; 49:109. Cf. *Inst.* 2.12.2, p. 466; *CO* 2:341.

<sup>247</sup> *Inst.* 2.16.7, p. 511-512; *CO* 2:374. Cf. *Comm. Heb.* 2:14; *CO* 55:32-33. Cf. *Inst.* 2.12.3, p. 466; *CO* 2:342.

<sup>248</sup> Peterson, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 77-82.

<sup>249</sup> Peterson, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 72-76.

<sup>250</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 5:8; *CO* 55:63. Cf. *Comm. 1 Pet.* 2:24; *CO* 55:252.

<sup>251</sup> We shall see below that these two are inseparable but distinct. The distinction is important here.

important for our study because the exemplar theme of atonement can undermine a correct understanding of God's gracious disclosed disposition toward humanity described in Calvin's account of reconciliation. God's love for humanity is not conditioned by human obedience.

The second theme in Peterson's book that is not a proper atonement theme for Calvin is that of Christ our merit. Calvin clearly teaches that Christ is our merit, and he even adds a whole chapter to the 1559 *Institutes*, (2.17) in order to discuss the question of Christ's merit in light of Socinus' and Lombard's contrary teachings.<sup>252</sup> Calvin's argument, in brief, is that Christ acquired merit *for us* in his reconciling work as a result of God's grace. In other words, Christ's merit is shorthand for the many facets of Christ's redeeming work, including his removing human sin,<sup>253</sup> his paying the penalty of God's judgment upon sin,<sup>254</sup> and his provision of righteousness.<sup>255</sup> A proper understanding of Christ's merits obtained for us is important for our study for two reasons. First, it displays the way Christ's multifaceted work is unified in Christ. Second, it prevents thinking in quantitative terms regarding merit, as in some particular atonement accounts in which Christ only took upon himself the specific "amount" of God's judgment that the elect deserved in order to prevent God from exacting a double punishment.<sup>256</sup> For Calvin, Christ's merit is a broad way to describe the immeasurable, comprehensive, and gracious work of God for us in Christ.

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<sup>252</sup> Socinus taught that there should be no regard at all for Christ's merit. Lombard asserted that Christ acquired merit for himself, *Inst.* 2.17, p. 528-534; *CO* 2:386-390. Cf. T. Robert Baylor, "'With Him in the Heavenly Realms': Lombard and Calvin on Merit and the Exaltation of Christ," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17, no. 2 (April 2015): 152-175.

<sup>253</sup> *Inst.* 2.17.4, p. 531; *CO* 2:388.

<sup>254</sup> *Inst.* 2.17.4, p. 531; *CO* 2:389. Cf. *Inst.* 2.17.4, p. 532; *CO* 2:389.

<sup>255</sup> *Inst.* 2.17.2, p. 530; *CO* 2:387. Once again, all of these merits are applied to us through union with Christ, *Inst.* 3.15.6, p. 794; *CO* 2:584.

<sup>256</sup> Garry J. Williams, "The Definite Intent of Penal Substitutionary Atonement," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2013), 461-482. The obvious flaw in this logic if applied to Calvin's theology is that for Calvin, God is not bound to expend a certain amount of judgment (or wrath) upon sin or exact a penalty in return for the offense of sin. Instead, as we have demonstrated, God directly condemns human unrighteousness in the cross. Thus, in Calvin's account, those who trust in Christ and receive his righteousness are not condemned, but those who retain their own unrighteousness are condemned. For Calvin, there is no need to quantify the penalty, the merit, or the number of the elect in regard to Christ's atoning work.

For a refutation of the double payment objection, see Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism*, 213-233.

Having now examined the center of Calvin's teaching on Christ's salvific work at the cross, we now turn to the inseparable subsequent events of the resurrection, ascension, and ongoing intercession of Christ.

### **Beyond the Cross: Resurrection, Ascension, and Intercession**

Calvin's view is that Christ has accomplished the one multifaceted work of reconciling God to humanity through his comprehensive person and work. Although the crucifixion is the central element of the revelation of God's love and reconciling work, Calvin repeatedly teaches that the cross must not be separated from the resurrection. Less often, but still consistently, Calvin also links Christ's ascension and ongoing intercession to the work of grace displayed at the cross, as seen here:

As it would not have been enough for Christ to undergo the wrath [*ira*] and judgment [*iudicio*] of God, and to endure the curse due to our sins, without his coming forth a conqueror [*victor*], and without being received into celestial glory [*coelestem gloriam*], that by his intercession he might make God pleased [*placaret*] toward us, the efficacy of justification [*iustificandi*] is ascribed to his resurrection, by which death was overcome [*absorbta est*].<sup>257</sup>

For Calvin, Christ's death, resurrection, ascension, and ongoing intercession are distinct but inseparable elements of Christ's redemptive work. Having looked at Calvin's teaching regarding Christ's death, we shall examine the latter three here.

#### The Resurrection as the Resolution of the Cross

Express mention is made only of Christ's resurrection; which must not be so taken, as though his death was of no moment, but because Christ, by rising again, completed the whole work of our salvation: for though redemption and satisfaction were effected by his death, through which we are reconciled to God; yet the victory [*victoria*] over sin, death, and Satan was attained by his resurrection; and hence also came righteousness, newness of life, and the hope of a blessed immortality [*iustitia et vitae novitas et spes beatae immortalitatis*]. And thus is resurrection [*resurrectio*] alone often set before us as the assurance of our salvation, not to draw away our attention from his death, but because it bears witness to the efficacy and fruit

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<sup>257</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 4:25; *CO* 49:87. My translation.

[*effectum et fructum*] of his death: in short, his resurrection includes his death.<sup>258</sup>

As this passage from Calvin's Romans Commentary displays, for Calvin, the resurrection is the distinct but inseparable sequel to Christ's crucifixion<sup>259</sup> that displays Christ's victory over sin, death, and evil,<sup>260</sup> assures the faithful of eternal life, and witnesses to the regenerated life that accompanies justification in Calvin's doctrine of the double grace of God. Regarding the double grace, he teaches that our sins are wiped away through Christ's death and our righteousness is obtained through Christ's resurrection as the consummation of our salvation.<sup>261</sup> Calvin says further,

As his purpose was more explicitly to set forth the cause of our salvation, he mentions its two parts; and says, first, that our sins were expiated [*expiata*] by the death of Christ, and secondly, that by his resurrection righteousness was brought forth [*partam*]...But as Christ, by rising from the dead, made known how much he had effected by his death, this distinction is calculated to teach us that our salvation was begun by the sacrifice [*sacrificio*], by which our sins were expiated [*expiata*], and was at length completed by his resurrection: for the beginning of righteousness is to be reconciled to God [*reconciliari Deo*], and its completion is to attain life by having death abolished [*abolita*].<sup>262</sup>

The resurrection provides righteousness within us (and thus reconciliation with God) and assurance of eternal life.

In short, Christ's resurrection witnesses to the complete reconciliation with God that Christ's work achieves. Christ not only removes human sin and receives the punishment due to sin, but he also conquers death, provides assurance of eternal life, and enables the regenerate life, all as witnessed to in his resurrection. However, the reconciling work of Christ also includes the ascension and ongoing mediation of Christ, to which we now turn.

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<sup>258</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 10:9; *CO* 49:201.

<sup>259</sup> Cf. *Inst.* 2.16.13, p. 521; *CO* 2:380.

<sup>260</sup> Cf. *Comm. Is.* 53:12; *CO* 37:266.

<sup>261</sup> *Comm. 1 Cor.* 15:3; *CO* 49:538. Cf. *Inst.* 2.16.13, p. 521; *CO* 2:380.

<sup>262</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 4:25; *CO* 49:87. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 5:10; *CO* 49:94. Cf. *Inst.* 2.16.13, p. 522; *CO* 2:381.

### The Ascension and Ongoing Mediation of Christ

Besides Christ's final act of future judgment,<sup>263</sup> the penultimate element in Calvin's account of Christ's one reconciling work is his ascension and ongoing intercession as high priest. In another example of Calvin's view of the unified nature of Christ's salvific work, Calvin says, "[Christ] came forth adorned with all the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the highest perfection; he propitiated [*propitiat*] God by his own blood and reconciled him to men; he ascended [*conscendit*] up above all the heavens to appear before God as our Mediator [*mediator*]."<sup>264</sup> As this passage shows, for Calvin, the ascension and ongoing mediation of Christ are interdependent. Christ ascended to be Mediator, and our Mediator can only be the ascended Christ. Although the doctrines are unified, we shall first highlight the ascension before looking more closely at the ongoing mediation of Christ.

For Calvin, the ascension has many benefits for the faithful as it further reveals Christ's glory and authority by inaugurating his kingdom and providing his powerful presence to the ends of the earth through the Spirit.<sup>265</sup> In Calvin's account of the ascension in the *Institutes*, he describes a few of the many benefits of Christ's ascension for our faith, namely access to God, Christ's intercession on our behalf, and Christ's heavenly rule over all things. He first points out that "the Lord by his ascent [*ascensu*] to heaven opened the way into the Heavenly Kingdom," so that in a sense we are already seated with him in heaven (Eph. 2:6).<sup>266</sup> Second, he mentions that Christ "appears before the Father's face as our constant advocate and intercessor [*advocatus et intercessor*]," turning "the Father's eyes to his own righteousness [*iustitiam*] to avert his gaze from our sins" and thus making the throne room a place of grace and kindness (*gratiam et clementia*) instead of dread for us who are sinners.<sup>267</sup> Finally, he points out that Christ's ascension reveals "our strength, power, wealth, and glorying against hell" as Christ fills us "with his power, that he may quicken us to spiritual life, sanctify us by his

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<sup>263</sup> *Inst.* 2.16.17, p. 525-526; *CO* 2:383-384. Calvin teaches that all will be judged before the seat of the Redeemer.

<sup>264</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 10:22; *CO* 55:129.

<sup>265</sup> *Inst.* 2.16.14, p. 522-523; *CO* 2:381-382. Cf. *Inst.* 2.16.15, p. 524; *CO* 2:382. Cf. *Comm. 1 Pet.* 3:22; *CO* 55:269.

<sup>266</sup> *Inst.* 2.16.16, p. 524; *CO* 2:383. Cf. *Comm. Heb.* 9:11; *CO* 55:110.

<sup>267</sup> *Inst.* 2.16.16, p. 524-525; *CO* 2:383. Cf. *Comm. Heb.* 4:16; *CO* 55:55-56.



Spirit, adorn his church with diverse gifts of grace, keep it safe from all harm by his protection, restrain the raging enemies of his cross and of our salvation by the strength of his hand, and finally hold all power [*potestam*] in heaven and on earth.”<sup>268</sup>

Christ’s high priestly intercession is also an important gift of the ascension, in which he acts as a compassionate advocate for us and continually provides his righteousness in place of our unrighteousness.<sup>269</sup> Regarding Christ’s coming as a high priest in Hebrews 9:11, Calvin says, “For as there was formerly an access for the Levitical high priest to the holy of holies through the sanctuary, so Christ through his own body entered into the glory of heaven; for as he had put on our flesh and in it suffered, he obtained for himself this privilege, that he should first appear before God as a Mediator for us.”<sup>270</sup> As a mediator who has experienced the fullness of what it means to be human, he has compassion upon us and intercedes on our behalf; his experiencing our “sorrows and miseries so inclines Christ to compassion, that he is constant in imploring God’s aid for us.”<sup>271</sup>

Not only does he have compassion toward the faithful but he also continually provides them with his righteousness in place of their impurities in God’s presence so that they can live in union with God. Thus Calvin says that the “chief good” (*summum bonum*) of humanity that Christ opens for them as eternal priest and mediator is “to be united [*coniunctus*] to [their] God, with whom is the fountain of life and of all blessings [*fons vitae est ac omnium bonorum*].”<sup>272</sup> The reason that they can be united with God and stand in God’s presence without dread is because Christ provides his “eternal righteousness” (*aeternam iustitiam*) in place of their impurities.<sup>273</sup> In this way, the ongoing sins that arise from the relics of the sinful nature are forgiven and covered over by the righteousness of Christ the high priest. We shall further explore the ramifications of Christ’s ongoing high priestly ministry below, but here it is paramount to recognize that the incarnate Christ continually provides his righteousness in place of past and present impurities so

<sup>268</sup> *Inst.* 2.16.17, p. 525; *CO* 2:383.

<sup>269</sup> Cf. *Comm. Heb.* 9:24; *CO* 55:118; 216. Cf. Hesselink, *Calvin’s First Catechism*, 126-127.

<sup>270</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 9:11; *CO* 55:109-110.

<sup>271</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 2:17; *CO* 55:34-35. Cf. *Comm. Heb.* 4:15; *CO* 55:55.

<sup>272</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 7:25; *CO* 55:94.

<sup>273</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 9:11; *CO* 55:110.

that believers may know that God loves them and that they may be united with God.

In summary, for Calvin, Christ's one reconciling work includes the resurrection, ascension, and ongoing intercession as distinguishable but inseparable elements of God's saving activity. This has three important implications for our study. First, it means that any depiction of Christ's reconciling work must take into account the whole breadth of Christ's saving acts. To look solely at Christ's death in determining God's disposition toward humanity in the atonement would be inadequate. Second, Christ's justifying and mortifying work in his death is inseparable from his righteousness-giving and vivifying resurrection. Third, Calvin's doctrine of Christ's ongoing high priestly ministry acknowledges the continuing (though hopefully decreasing) sin that stains all human action, even after justification, and provides God's gracious answer to our human infirmities, namely an advocate in heaven who provides his righteousness in place of our unrighteousness. In short, God's disclosed electing disposition of mercy toward humanity is exhibited in Christ's one multifaceted work of reconciliation.

Having seen the ground for it in Calvin's account of reconciliation with God, we now turn to examine more closely Calvin's doctrine of the "double grace" of God that provides the last data in our analysis of God's disposition toward humanity in Calvin's doctrine of reconciliation.

### **Complete Righteousness: The Double Grace of Christ**

Just as Calvin teaches the distinguishable but inseparable unity of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, so Calvin describes God's twofold grace of justification and sanctification provided in and through Christ to those who are united with him by faith. Calvin details this *duplex gratia* in his Romans commentary in this way, "By the word grace [*gratiae*], we are to understand both [*utramque*] parts of redemption—the remission [*remissionem*] of sins, by which God imputes [*imputat*] righteousness to us—and the sanctification [*sanctificationem*] of the Spirit, by whom he forms us [*nos refingit*] anew unto good

works.”<sup>274</sup> In short, the believer exists in a state of complete righteousness, having received Christ’s imputed righteousness and sanctification and thereby growing into the righteousness of regeneration, all by grace. We shall first examine briefly Calvin’s doctrine of the double grace of God before specifically highlighting an often-missed area of Calvin’s doctrine, namely the relation of the heavenly intercession of Christ to the grace of sanctification.

### **Regeneration as Inseparable from Justification**

Where there is a coming to Christ, there is first found in him the perfect righteousness of the law, which becomes ours by imputation [*per imputationem*], and then there is sanctification, by which our hearts are prepared to keep the law; it is indeed imperfectly done, but there is a general aiming at the goal [*ad scopum*].<sup>275</sup>

In his important book, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, Billings ably develops and describes Calvin’s doctrine of participation with Christ as it relates to human action and agency. In the book, Billings shows that contrary to the “Gift Theologians” depiction, participation is a central theological category for Calvin that protects the Creator-creature distinction while providing for real union, that enables human agency through a proper theology of Trinitarian participation, and that inevitably results in loving human relationships through the double grace of God’s free justifying grace followed by God’s free empowering grace to live in gratitude. Billings asserts that for Calvin, it is impossible for one to be justified without being sanctified because both are included in our salvation as received through faith by participation in Christ. Billings also asserts that for Calvin believers are to actively engage in the work of faith through the love of God and neighbor.<sup>276</sup>

Building upon Billings’ work, we shall briefly clarify the objective and subjective elements of Calvin’s description of the double grace before (in the next subsection) pointing out a component of Calvin’s teaching that Billings has overlooked.

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<sup>274</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 6:14; *CO* 49:113. Cf. *Harmony of Moses*, Deut. 30:19; *CO* 25:56.

<sup>275</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 3:31; *CO* 49:67. My translation.

<sup>276</sup> Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*.

Calvin summarizes this double grace that is received by faith, saying, “[first], being reconciled to God through Christ’s blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that having been sanctified [*sanctificati*]<sup>277</sup> by Christ’s Spirit we may cultivate innocence [*innocentiam*] and purity of life.”<sup>278</sup> In short, as seen in this passage, Calvin teaches that our justification and sanctification are objective realities given to us in Christ and that sanctification is also the subjective, lifelong process of regeneration by the power of the Spirit.

First, for Calvin, justification and sanctification are inseparable and objective gifts of grace received by faith in Christ through union with Christ. In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 1:30, Calvin describes the great “treasures [*thesauris*] with which Christ is furnished” by giving him four titles that “embrace his entire excellence [*virtutem*], and every benefit [*bonorum*] that we receive from him.”<sup>279</sup> After noting God’s wisdom given in Christ, Calvin points out the objective reality of our justification, saying that “the righteousness of faith consists in remission of sins and a gracious acceptance,” both of which we obtain both through Christ.<sup>280</sup> Then Calvin addresses our sanctification, explaining that that Paul calls Christ “our sanctification [*sanctificationem*], by which he means, that we who are otherwise unholy by nature, are by his Spirit renewed [*regenerari*] unto holiness, that we may serve God.” We cannot be justified without also receiving Christ’s sanctification in our lives, “For these graces [*gratiae*] are connected together, as it were, by an indissoluble tie, so that he who attempts to sever them does in a manner tear [*discerpat*] Christ in pieces.”<sup>281</sup> Again highlighting the inseparable and objective reality of justification and sanctification, Calvin says that they both must be sought in Christ alone, “not the half, or merely a part, but the entire completion [*complementum*].”<sup>282</sup> For Calvin, Paul teaches that our

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<sup>277</sup> Battles’ translation says, “secondly, sanctified by...” His translation does not clearly convey the passive sense of *sanctificati*, thus slightly obscuring Calvin’s teaching that sanctification has an objective ground in Christ that leads to the subjective life of regeneration.

<sup>278</sup> *Inst.* 3.11.1, p. 725; *CO* 2:533. My translation.

<sup>279</sup> *Comm. 1 Cor.* 1:30; *CO* 49:331.

<sup>280</sup> *Comm. 1 Cor.* 1:30; *CO* 49:331. In accordance with the *sola gratia* teaching of the Reformation, objective nature of justification is regularly demonstrated in Calvin’s teaching (and this chapter).

<sup>281</sup> *Comm. 1 Cor.* 1:30; *CO* 49:331. My translation.

<sup>282</sup> *Comm. 1 Cor.* 1:30; *CO* 49:331.

regeneration only occurs “in Christ Jesus...that he might call us away from every conceit respecting our own worthiness.”<sup>283</sup> Therefore, both justification and sanctification are objective gifts of God’s grace given to us in and through Christ. As a result, any account of the double grace of God that ascribes justification to Christ and sanctification (even in part) to human effort is not in agreement with Calvin’s teaching.<sup>284</sup>

Second, the objective reality of our sanctification in Christ leads us toward subjective growth in holiness, in which we participate by the power of the Spirit. For example, Calvin says that Christ is our sanctification “because he has, so to speak, presented us to his Father in his own person, that [*ut*] we may be renewed [*renovemur*] to true holiness by his Spirit.”<sup>285</sup> Elsewhere, when commenting on the right motivation for the Christian life, Calvin says that we have been filled (*perfusi*) with holiness and united to God; therefore, since God can “have no fellowship with wickedness and uncleanness, Scripture accordingly teaches that [holiness] is the goal of our calling...For to what purpose are we rescued from the wickedness and pollution of the world in which we are submerged if we allow ourselves throughout life to wallow in these?”<sup>286</sup> Sanctification is both an objective reality established by Christ and a subjective process.

This subjective element of sanctification is a lifelong process empowered by the Spirit. For example, Calvin teaches that Spirit “has been given to us for sanctification in order that he may bring us...into obedience to God’s righteousness.” Thus, we do not become perfect, but instead, “we must steadily move forward, and though entangled in vices, daily fight [*luctari*] against them.”<sup>287</sup> Similarly, combatting spiritual laziness, God commands the faithful to work out their salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12-13) according to God’s provision; thus they are to “act passively [*passive...agere*], so to speak, trusting

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<sup>283</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 6:23; *CO* 49:118-119.

<sup>284</sup> Examples of this abound in both the *Institutes* and the commentaries. I list only a few here: *Inst.* 2.3.6-7, p. 296-299; *CO* 2:15-217. *Inst.* 2.3.9, p. 301; *CO* 2:218. *Inst.* 2.3.11, p. 306; *CO* 2:222. *Inst.* 2.5.15, p. 335; *CO* 2:243. *Comm. Rom.* 6:2; *CO* 49:104. *Comm. 1 John* 2:1; *CO* 55:308.

<sup>285</sup> *Comm. John* 17:19; *CO* 47:385.

<sup>286</sup> *Inst.* 3.6.2, p. 686; *CO* 2:502-503.

<sup>287</sup> *Inst.* 3.3.14, p. 607; *CO* 2:444.

[*fideles*] that the capacity is supplied from heaven.”<sup>288</sup> Finally, returning to 1 Corinthians 1:30, the fourth gift Christ gives us is our redemption, namely the lifelong process of living into the freedom from the bondage of sin and death that Christ has given us.<sup>289</sup>

Billings summarizes the relationship between justification, participation, and sanctification, saying, “Being ‘engrafted into Christ through faith’ makes one ‘a son of God, an heir of heaven, a partaker in righteousness’; yet this engrafting and sharing in Christ is ‘not *without* works’ even though it is ‘not *through* works, since in our sharing in Christ, which justifies us, sanctification is just as much included as righteousness’.”<sup>290</sup> Thus, the Christian life is seen as a “sacrifice of praise” or Spirit-empowered response of gratitude to God’s free grace extended in Christ’s sacrificial work.<sup>291</sup>

Therefore, for Calvin, justification and sanctification are two inseparable parts of a person’s reconciliation with God in which they are united with Christ. They receive Christ’s imputed righteousness and receive the gift of regeneration from the Spirit. The gift of regeneration provides the believer with Christ’s objective sanctification in their place and the power of the Spirit to strive for and be transformed toward righteousness. For Calvin, it is absolutely appropriate to ascribe both justification and sanctification to grace because both are the free gifts of God as received by faith and enacted through union with Christ by the Spirit.

### **Keeping Grace in the Duplex Gratia: The Sheer Grace of Sanctification**

Beyond Billings’ work, one question remains regarding the relationship between human works and the grace of sanctification.<sup>292</sup> If good works are essential for believers as they grow into their regeneration by the power of the Spirit, what is the specific relationship between God’s grace and human obedience? Although we know that Calvin teaches that sanctification is both a gift of grace and

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<sup>288</sup> *Inst.* 2.5.11, p. 330; *CO* 2:239.

<sup>289</sup> *Comm. 1 Cor.* 1:30; *CO* 49:331.

<sup>290</sup> Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 107. Emphasis orig. Cf. *Inst.* 3.15.6, p. 794; *CO* 2:584. Cf. *Inst.* 3.16.1, p. 798; *CO* 2:586.

<sup>291</sup> Billings, “Union With Christ and the Double Grace,” 59.

<sup>292</sup> Billings does not specifically address Christ’s ongoing intercession and its relation to the *duplex gratia*.

something to be worked at, does that result in a new form of works righteousness in order to confirm one's regeneration or justification? The keystone of the answer for Calvin is Christ's eternal mediation. In light of Christ's ongoing intercessory work at God's right hand, the grace of sanctification remains wholly gratuitous and not a reclaimed burden of works righteousness. Although mentioned above, we shall expand here upon Calvin's teaching regarding the works of believers and the ongoing forgiveness offered to the faithful.

First, Calvin teaches that by Christ's ongoing high priestly intercession, the good works of the faithful are perfected in Christ's righteousness and rewarded by grace. Calvin says,

They who are already clothed in the righteousness of Christ, have God not only propitious to them, but also to their works [*operibus*], the spots and blemishes [*malculae et naevi*] of which are covered [*obteguntur*] by the purity of Christ, lest they should come to judgment [*rationem*]. As works, infected with no defilements, are alone counted just, it is quite evident that no human work whatever can please God.<sup>293</sup>

Every faithful attempt at obedience is clothed with his righteousness.

Similarly, regarding prayer, Calvin says, "All prayers, which are not supported by Christ's intercession, are rejected."<sup>294</sup> Worship must also be perfected by Christ; "All kinds of worship [*cultus*] are then faulty and impure until Christ cleanses [*mundet*] them by the sprinkling of his blood."<sup>295</sup> Calvin also teaches that any rewards that God gives to the faithful for their obedience are not because their compliance merits a reward but only because of "God's beneficence and liberality."<sup>296</sup> In the Christian life, every good work remains stained by sin in some manner, but we have a Mediator who stands in the presence of God, clothing our attempts at obedience with his righteousness and providing grace, even in the midst of one's growth in sanctification.

Second, Calvin teaches that ongoing forgiveness is offered to the faithful who stumble on their journey of sanctification. Unlike some Anabaptists of his time,

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<sup>293</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 4:6-8; *CO* 49:72. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 3:22; *CO* 49:60. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 7:19; *CO* 49:132.

<sup>294</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 7:26; *CO* 55:95. Cf. *Comm. 1 John* 2:1; *CO* 55:310.

<sup>295</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 9:18; *CO* 55:115.

<sup>296</sup> *Inst.* 2.5.2, p. 319; *CO* 2:231.

Calvin does not teach that believers are able to obtain perfection in this life.<sup>297</sup> Thus, the Christian life is marked by a struggle with sin. Accordingly, sanctification is a lifelong battle of gradually dying to sin in the “relics of the flesh” (*reliquias carnis*) that remain with us even after our justification.<sup>298</sup> As a result, for Calvin justification and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness are not a limited to a one-time event. On the contrary, he says, “In order to show how we return into favor with God, [John] says that Christ is our advocate; for he appears before God for this end, that he may exercise towards us the power and efficacy of his sacrifice. That this may be better understood, I will speak more homely [*crassius*]: The intercession of Christ is a continual [*continua*] application of his death for our salvation.”<sup>299</sup> In sum, in the lifelong process of responding to God’s immeasurable grace with grateful love and obedience, God not only empowers us by his Spirit but also Christ the high priest continually intercedes for us by providing his righteousness in place of our unrighteousness.

Therefore, the double grace of justification is gratuitous from first to last. As we have seen, this does not undermine the importance of human obedience or the imperative of loving God and loving neighbor according to the guidance of the law. It also does not remove real human agency in the life of faith. However it does provide an account of communion with the loving Father through the mediation of Christ by the power of the Spirit that begins and ends with the grace of God in Christ. Good works can help one find assurance of salvation but only as an indicator of Christ’s gift of regeneration provided for his children. Good works do not in themselves keep a person in union with God, nor do good works prove one’s union with God. Attempted obedience flows from the gift of God’s gracious justification and sanctification and is perfected with Christ’s righteousness. In the end, for Calvin there is no renewed “covenant of works” but salvation is wholly provided by and sustained by Christ.

This final observation is important for our consideration of God’s will toward humanity because it again depicts God’s disposition toward humanity. According

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<sup>297</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 7:15; *CO* 49:130-131.

<sup>298</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 6:7-8; *CO* 49:108-109.

<sup>299</sup> *Comm. 1 John* 2:1; 55:309.



to Calvin, even in God's reconciliation of humans with him, God does not set up a conditional system of merit to maintain communion with him. Instead, God demands total obedience while providing total grace for redeemed humans who remain burdened by the relics of the flesh.

***GOD'S DISCLOSED AND VEILED DISPOSITIONS: SUFFICIENT FOR ALL,  
EFFICIENT FOR SOME***

Throughout this chapter, we have been seeking to ascertain God's disposition toward humanity in Calvin's teaching on Christ's atoning work. In short, Calvin's account of the atonement further confirms his teaching of two radically asymmetrical dispositions toward humanity. One way to summarize these dispositions is the medieval distinction (accepted by Calvin) that Christ's death was sufficient for all, but efficient for some.<sup>300</sup> God's gracious work in the grand story of creation and redemption further illuminates God's disclosed, electing, loving disposition toward all people (sufficient for the redemption of all) that is mysteriously only brought to bear in the elect (efficient for the elect).<sup>301</sup> We shall review each of these in turn.

***God's Disclosed Disposition: Sufficient for the Redemption of All***

Many elements of Calvin's exposition of creation, the fall, and Christ's reconciling work openly display God's disclosed electing will of love toward humanity that corresponds with God's revealed nature, aligning with the statement that Christ's death was sufficient for (the redemption of) all.<sup>302</sup> Here we shall note the ways God's nature and disclosed disposition toward humanity are displayed in Calvin's account before pointing out a few examples of the "all" language Calvin uses regarding God's orientation toward humanity.

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<sup>300</sup> *Comm. 1 John 2:2; CO 55:310.*

<sup>301</sup> Calvin holds together God's love for humanity with the fact that God allows some people to retain their sin and thus be condemned as God's enemies. Even in light of the asymmetry of God's two dispositions, the tenability of the apparent contradiction is open to question.

<sup>302</sup> Muller adds in "the sins of" to make clear that Calvin does not teach that all humanity is saved in Christ, Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 60-61. We choose "redemption" because it better captures Calvin's holistic teaching.

God's loving, righteous, judging, wise, powerful, good, and faithful nature and God's disclosed disposition toward humanity are on display throughout Calvin's account of Christ's reconciling work, particularly in his account of God's creational intent, God's love for sinful (and hateful) humanity, the complete and gracious work of Christ, and God's condemnation of wickedness in Christ's work.

First, for Calvin, God created humanity for the happy life in obedient, dynamic communion with him. God provided life and sustenance for them, gave them dominion over God's creation, and invited them to grow in obedience and closeness with him. According to Calvin, this was God's loving, wise, powerful, and good intent for all humanity.

Second, Calvin teaches that after the fall of Adam and Eve and their subsequent alienation from God and saturation with the stain of sin, God was still loving toward humanity and faithful to his purposes for them. Throughout redemptive history, God displayed his righteous faithfulness in his long-suffering with humanity, inviting them to repentance and graciously caring for them through a variety of means. Even though sin made all people inherently hateful to God and necessarily deserving of his condemnation, God still somehow loved them while he hated them and purposed to send his Son for their redemption.

Third, God's nature and disclosed disposition toward humanity is demonstrated most clearly and dramatically in the comprehensive and gracious salvific work of Christ. In his person and work, Christ remedies every problem that resulted from the fall of humanity and offers the benefits to all who would receive them by faith: The image of God is restored through union with the Second Adam; humanity's privation of God's gifts because of its alienation from God is remedied through Christ who is the renewed fount of all of God's gifts (by the Spirit); the sinful nature is removed as Christ takes it upon himself and thus expiates sin through his sacrificial death; sinful acts die along with the sinful flesh in human identification with Christ's death, and the faithful are given a new, regenerated life in accordance with Christ's resurrection;<sup>303</sup> fearful consciences are calmed because through Christ's work, God's hatred toward humanity is appeased and God can

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<sup>303</sup> Although Calvin does not expound on it extensively, he also teaches that the whole fallen created order will be restored along with humanity, *Comm. Rom.* 8:21; *CO* 49:153.

thus be known as loving Father again; God pours out his righteous wrath (judgment) on sin, thus condemning Christ to death to take the curse that was due to sinful humanity; God provides the gracious gift of Christ's sanctification and the ongoing regeneration of the Spirit to grow in righteousness; and through the intercession of the ascended Priest, God provides Christ's righteousness in place of human unrighteousness in the lifelong journey of faith. In this salvific work, we see God's love (mercy), wisdom, judgment on evil, and faithfulness to his people in staggering display.

Thus we see in multiple ways how Calvin's teaching on the atonement corresponds to God's revealed nature and disclosed loving disposition toward humanity.

God's disclosed disposition of love toward humanity is also on display in Calvin's frequent explanation of Scripture passages in a manner that point to the unlimited sufficiency of Christ's redeeming work. The examples abound,<sup>304</sup> but we shall examine only two here. First, using one of his favorite exegetical strategies, Calvin says "By the word, 'many' he means not a part of the world only, but the whole human race; for he contrasts many with one; as if he had said, that he will not be the Redeemer of one man only, but will die in order to deliver many from the condemnation of the curse."<sup>305</sup> Similarly, Calvin often speaks of Christ's death for the world, "The honor of reconciling the Father to the whole world [*toti mundo*] must be given to Christ."<sup>306</sup> Although we shall see below examples of Calvin's teaching that limit the efficiency of Christ's reconciling work to the elect, these passages testify to the way that for Calvin, Christ's salvific work is sufficient for and extended to all.

Therefore, in Christ's redemptive work, God's disclosed disposition of love for all people is openly displayed, as communicated in the phrase that Christ's death is sufficient for the redemption of all. Once again, the only God that can be known and proclaimed is the God who graciously creates humanity for communion with him

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<sup>304</sup> Cf. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, 13-15.

<sup>305</sup> *Comm. Mark* 16:24; *CO* 55:711. Cf. *Comm. Is.* 53:12; *CO* 37:267.

<sup>306</sup> *Comm. Eph.* 3:12; *CO* 51:183. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 5:10; *CO* 49:94. Cf. *Comm. John* 3:17; *CO* 47:66.

and graciously acts to re-enable that communion through Christ's reconciling work for us.

### **God's Veiled Disposition: Efficient for the Elect**

Just as we observed in Calvin's doctrine of predestination that God's disclosed electing will appears alongside God's veiled reprobating will as two asymmetrical parts of God's one righteous will, so here we see God's veiled disposition toward humanity partially indicated in Calvin's teaching on the atonement, particularly in God's providential causing of the fall of humanity and in his decision to redeem only part of the human race from their fallen state. We shall also note an example of Calvin's biblical exegesis that asserts that Christ's reconciling work is only efficient for the elect.

First, as we noted above regarding the fall, Calvin is very clear that even though Adam and Eve had freedom of choice and God did not want the evil effects of the fall, according to his secret plan God pronounced the "horrible/awesome decree" (*decretum horribile*) of the fall.<sup>307</sup> If Adam and Eve had remained upright according to God's creational intent, all humanity would have grown up into union with God and would never have needed to face physical or spiritual death. However, according to Calvin's commitment that God is the cause of all things, Adam and Eve's sin thus occurred according to God's sovereign will. Calvin's logic follows our description of God's disclosed and revealed wills in predestination: God is righteous; God wills the fall; thus, in a manner that we cannot understand, God's willing of the fall is righteous. Therefore, Calvin's teaching on God's causing the fall witnesses to God's powerful rule over all and partially illumines his veiled will that cannot be fully understood in relation to God's disclosed will and nature.

God's nature is also displayed in the way that God judges and condemns sin in people who do not receive Christ's righteousness. Although there are grounds in Calvin's teaching to think that Christ's redemptive work could be effected in all, as witnessed in God's disclosed disposition, if God's grace is rejected, he acts according to his nature in his judgment of the unrighteousness that permeates

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<sup>307</sup> *Inst.* 3.23.7, p. 955; *CO* 2:704.

those who do not cling to Christ. It is not disclosed why certain people do not believe the gospel or how it could be that anyone would choose to spurn their loving Father in order to only receive him as Judge. As we saw in Chapter 3, this inexplicably occurs according to God's veiled reprobating will, in which God creates some people to remain in their sinful state of alienation from God. Although the logic of reprobation is hidden in God's secret counsel, God's righteous judgment of evil openly reflects God's nature.

Finally, just as one can find passages in which Calvin teaches the sufficiency of Christ's death for all, so one can find passages that limit the efficacy of Christ's death to the elect. For example, regarding the words in 1 John 2:2 that Christ died for the sins of the world, Calvin explains that it is a statement that assures the faithful that Christ's work of expiation "extends to all who by faith embrace the gospel." Only the universal Church benefits from Christ's death.<sup>308</sup>

Therefore, Calvin's teaching on Christ's reconciling work as efficient only for the elect witnesses to God's veiled disposition toward humanity.

### **CONCLUSION: GOD'S ASYMMETRICAL DISPOSITION TOWARD HUMANITY**

Throughout this chapter, we have been seeking to ascertain God's disposition toward humanity in Calvin's teaching on Christ's atoning work. We have examined creation, the fall, and God's complete redemption achieved through the person and work of Christ. All through the analysis, but particularly in Christ's life, death, resurrection, ascension and ongoing intercession, God's disclosed disposition of gracious love toward humanity has been clearly manifest. God's veiled disposition toward the reprobate has been also displayed in small part. In sum, God's disposition toward humanity in the atonement is expressed in the teaching that

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<sup>308</sup> *Comm. 1 John* 2:2; *CO* 55:310. Cf. *Comm. Rom.* 5:10; *CO* 49:94. In his typical pastoral approach, Calvin is concerned that believers find assurance of faith. If Christ died for the whole world and yet from experience it is clear that the whole world is not saved, interpreting "the world" as all people could undermine believers' assurance of salvation. Instead, Calvin makes sure that the faithful are assured that Christ died for their sins. A question for further Calvin research is: How much do Calvin's pastoral concerns influence his teaching on reprobation and the limited efficiency of Christ's reconciling work?

Christ's complete and gracious work is sufficient for the redemption of all but only efficient in the elect. This once again demonstrates the asymmetrical nature of God's disposition toward humanity.

Although this could sound contradictory, Calvin teaches that God loves all in accordance with God's disclosed nature and Christ's redeeming work, but for unknown reasons according to God's sovereign rule, and in only partially understandable correspondence with God's nature, God does not bring all people to receive Christ's gracious work by faith.

In short, for Calvin, the church trusts and proclaims the only God they know, namely the God who has revealed his disposition of righteous love toward all humanity through creation and redemption. At the same time, the church acknowledges God's veiled disposition toward the reprobate, as God condemns all evil and sovereignly reigns over all that comes to pass. They trust that in the end these two asymmetrical dispositions toward humanity will find coherence in the righteous God who will be "all in all."<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Cf. *Comm. 1 Cor.* 15:28; *CO* 49:549-550.

## ***Chapter 5—THE TRINITY, PREDESTINATION, AND SACRIFICE: A CRITICAL DISCUSSION FOR TODAY***

Having carefully examined Calvin's teaching on God's disposition toward humanity in his doctrine of God and his descriptions of predestination and the atonement, in this chapter we shall engage in a constructive dialogue with Calvin's teaching in three areas of contemporary interest: (1) How much can we know about God's inner life? (2) Is there an account of predestination that solves the biblical conundrums better than Calvin's account? (3) How does recent scholarship on sacrifice impact Calvin's teaching of the atonement?

More directly, first we shall revisit Calvin's teaching on the intra-trinitarian life of God in order to gain direction from Calvin's account about what we can know of God's inner life. Second, we shall set Calvin's teaching on predestination alongside Arminius' and Barth's accounts to show that these diverse biblical theologians have a key commonality in their doctrines of predestination, namely a distinct locus of mystery. Finally, we shall examine recent Hebrew Bible scholarship on the logic of sacrifice that, when incorporated into Calvin's project, would make his teaching on the atonement more consistent and cohesive.

### ***CALVIN AND THE INTRA-TRINITARIAN LIFE OF GOD: CAN WE KNOW MORE?***

As we showed in Chapter 2, Calvin teaches that only those with faith have access to reliable knowledge of God. That knowledge is a skeletal knowledge of God's essential attributes alongside a fleshed out knowledge of God's nature as described by God's powers and understood through God's works. We demonstrated that, for Calvin, God reveals himself through his works of creation and providence, through Scripture, and most of all through the incarnate Christ, who is God's "lively image."<sup>1</sup> However, we also pointed out that for Calvin, Christ only displays God's nature, not God's essence. Similarly, even though Calvin affirms

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<sup>1</sup> *Harmony of the Gospels*, Matt. 11:27; CO 45:320.

the threeness and oneness of the Trinity, he interprets the instances in the New Testament that seem to describe love between the Father and the Son as references to the manner in which the Father loves Christ the Mediator for the sake of Christ's body, the Church. Thus, for Calvin, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you," is not about the love of the Father for the Son from eternity, but "must be understood as referring to us [*ad nos referendus est*], because Christ testifies that the Father loves him, as he is the Head of the Church."<sup>2</sup> Christ does not primarily provide knowledge of the love within the Trinity, but instead makes known to us that we are loved in and through Christ.

Conversely, many interpreters in the diverse Augustinian-Reformed tradition before and after Calvin have seen in Scripture the grounds for positive teaching regarding God's intra-trinitarian relations. We name only a few here. Augustine, one of Calvin's favorite sources,<sup>3</sup> explicitly describes God in terms of the love between the persons of the Trinity.<sup>4</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, another of Calvin's most commonly noted sources,<sup>5</sup> also describes the love between the persons of the Trinity.<sup>6</sup> Interpreters after Calvin do the same. John Owen describes the "eternal mutual love of the holy persons of the Trinity" as "no small part of the eternal blessedness of the holy God."<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Edwards teaches that the Holy Spirit arises as the Father and Son mutually love and delight in each other.<sup>8</sup> Karl Barth similarly affirms the immanent love of God as expressive of God's triune being.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Comm. John* 15:9; *CO* 47:342. Calvin also teaches that the assertions in the gospel of John that the Father and Son are one are not primarily about God's essence but "as regards his mediatorial office, and in so far as he is our Head," *Comm. John* 17:21; *CO* 47:387.

<sup>3</sup> Lane, *Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, 38-39.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., "According to the Sacred Scriptures, this Holy Spirit is neither of the Father alone, nor of the Son alone, but the Spirit of both, and therefore, He insinuates to us the common love by which the Father and the Son mutually love each another." Augustine, *On the Trinity: Books 8-15*, 15.17.Cf. 4.9, 8.10. Cf. Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 319.

<sup>5</sup> Lane, *Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, 87-114.

<sup>6</sup> In his sermons on the Song of Songs, Bernard depicts the "supreme kiss" as the "mutual love and knowledge between him who begets and him who is begotten." He goes on to say that "the Holy Spirit is the love and goodness of both [the Father and the Son]," Bernard of Clairvaux, "Sermons on the Song of Songs: Sermon 8," in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, ed. G. R. Evans, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 236, 238.

<sup>7</sup> John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 1, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 144-145.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *An Unpublished Essay on the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: CCEL, n.d.),

<sup>9</sup> "Being in Himself Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God is in Himself the One who lives and loves," *CD* II/1, p. 297; *KD*, p. 334. Barth is careful to point out that the "persons" within God are not three



With so many others in the tradition affirming the scripturally based teaching of love between the persons of the Trinity, why is Calvin so resistant to such language? Similarly, as we consider our context today, is there anything in Calvin's theology that precludes, or provides boundaries for, teaching about the intra-trinitarian life of God? These are the questions we explore here.

We shall begin by proposing a few reasons for Calvin's hermeneutical approach. Then we shall look at the bigger picture of Calvin's teaching to ascertain Calvin's explicit positive teaching on the intra-trinitarian life and the limits he prescribes regarding our knowledge of God's triune relations. Finally, we shall offer some constructive possibilities for appropriately incorporating Calvin's methodology into contemporary trinitarian teaching.

### **Why No Relations? Justification by Faith, No Speculation, and God's Majesty**

To begin, we shall propose three possible reasons for Calvin's reticence to speak of God's intra-trinitarian life, namely Calvin's emphasis on Pauline justification by faith, Calvin's opposition to speculation about God's essence, and Calvin's teaching on God's incomprehensible majesty.

First, in Calvin's context as a second generation Reformer, justification by faith was central to his teaching. He notably chose Romans as his first book of the Bible upon which to write a commentary, and in the introduction he explicitly makes two interesting claims: (1) an understanding of Romans provides "an entrance...to all the most hidden treasures of Scripture;" and (2) the "main subject of the whole epistle" is "justification by faith."<sup>10</sup> In a way, Calvin saw justification by faith as depicted in Romans to be the hermeneutical key to rightly understanding all Scripture. As R. Ward Holder comments, Calvin makes clear that Romans is his "canon of the canon."<sup>11</sup> Calvin went on to produce commentaries on all of Paul's

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personalities or subjects; as a result, Barth spoke of God's "modes of being" (*Seinsweise*). Cf. *CD* IV/1, p. 202-203; *KD*, p. 221-222. For a constructive analysis of Barth's use of this term, see Torrance, *Persons in Communion*,

<sup>10</sup> *Comm. Rom.*, "Argument," *CO* 49:1.

<sup>11</sup> R. Ward Holder, "Calvin as a Commentator on the Pauline Epistles," in *Calvin and the Bible*, ed. Donald McKim, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 224-225.

epistles before proceeding to the rest of the Bible. Gary Hansen similarly argues that Calvin began his exegetical work with all of Paul's works because he considered them the "clearest on the most important theological issues, especially justification by grace through faith. In significant ways Calvin then proceeded to interpret the rest of Scripture in a Pauline way."<sup>12</sup>

Barbara Pitkin observes another example of Calvin's interpretation of Scripture through the lens of justification by faith in Calvin's exegesis of the Gospel of John. Calvin's exegesis of John is the culmination of a 16<sup>th</sup> century trend in interpretation that came to understand the theme of John's Gospel as soteriology instead of the previously typical Christology (particularly Christ's divinity). For Calvin, the focus of the Gospel is "what Christ does for humans rather than who he is."<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, Calvin interprets Scripture passages that speak of Christ's relationship with the Father in a mediatorial light.<sup>14</sup> In sum, as a result of Calvin's pastoral focus on Pauline justification by faith, Calvin tends to interpret potentially trinitarian passages in terms of the direct benefit they provide for the faithful as they recognize God's gracious love for his people revealed in Christ the Mediator.

Second, Calvin's non-speculative theological methodology also prevents him from teaching that we can have significant knowledge of God's intra-trinitarian relations. To review briefly the argument in Chapter 2, Calvin believes that God has only revealed skeletal knowledge of his essence. Similarly, according to Calvin, doctrine should be useful for growth in faith and piety. For Calvin, knowledge of the relationship between the Father and Son is speculative, lacks use for Christian growth and results from unnecessarily seeking more than the skeletal knowledge of God that God has clearly accommodated to us.

Third, for Calvin, God's inner life is beyond human understanding because of God's majesty and ontological superiority.<sup>15</sup> Calvin sees in Scripture the clear

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<sup>12</sup> Gary N. Hansen, "Calvin as Commentator on Hebrews and the Catholic Epistles," in *Calvin and the Bible*, ed. Donald McKim, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 276-277.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Pitkin, "Calvin as Commentator on the Gospel of John," in *Calvin and the Bible*, ed. Donald McKim, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 188-192.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Stephen Edmondson, *Calvin's Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 36-37.

<sup>15</sup> See "The Majestic God" in Chapter 2.

grounds for respecting God's fearsome and impenetrable majesty.<sup>16</sup> Along with that, as Huijgen points out, Calvin at times works under a framework of an ontological hierarchy between the opposites of finite and infinite along with the material and immaterial.<sup>17</sup> Although it is difficult to differentiate between Calvin's underlying assumptions of ontological hierarchy and his immense respect for the biblical witness to the majesty of God, they are certainly both a factor in his reticence for providing fallen, limited, bodily humans with extensive knowledge of God's inner life.

In sum, among other possible factors, Calvin's focus on justification by faith, Calvin's non-speculative, pastoral theological methodology, and Calvin's respect for the God's majesty and ontological superiority all contribute to Calvin's reluctance to teach that believers can have significant insight into the relations between the persons of the Trinity.

### **Calvin's Positive Teaching on the Intra-Trinitarian Relations**

We now turn our attention to a slightly different question. Instead of seeing what Calvin does *not* teach regarding the relations within God, we now ask what Calvin *does* teach regarding God's inner life. We begin by highlighting hints in Calvin's teaching regarding the acceptability of dogmatic statements about God's intra-trinitarian life.

First, although Calvin typically avoids any exegetical conclusions regarding God's intra-trinitarian relations, he does not explicitly deny the possibility of human knowledge of the relations between the persons of the Trinity, even subtly referring to those relations at times. As we saw in Chapter 2, Calvin teaches about the Trinity in accord with the ecumenical creeds, that God is one God who is also three "persons" or "subsistences" or *hypostaseis*. In his account, he is careful to avoid the perception of three centers of consciousness or three egos in relation but instead depicts a differentiation based on who each *hypostasis* is relative to the others: God the Father is the Father of the Son; the Son is the Son of the Father; the

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. God's presence at the giving of the Ten Commandments, *Harmony of Moses*, Ex. 19:16; *CO* 24:201-202.

<sup>17</sup> Huijgen, *Accommodation*, 257-258.

Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. The persons are differentiated with reference to the other persons, not because any of the three are distinct in essence. This is the skeletal knowledge of the Trinity that Calvin teaches.

In the midst of this teaching on skeletal knowledge of the Trinity, a closer look at Calvin's specific exegesis shows that Calvin does not *prohibit* the possibility of knowing God's inner relations in part; he simply does not perceive the intra-trinitarian relations as the primary message of the relevant texts. For example, in Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17:24, when Jesus says that God "loved [him] from the foundation of the world," Calvin explains, "This also agrees better with the person of the Mediator than with Christ's divinity alone. It is a difficult thing to grasp [*durum est*] that the Father loved his Wisdom; and even though we hear that as the truth [*verum ut illud recipiamus*], the context [*contextus*] of the passage leads us to a different view."<sup>18</sup> Notably, although Calvin thinks the context of the passage steers elsewhere, Calvin does *not* rule out the fact that the Father loved the Son from eternity. In fact, he admits that we can know that the Father loves the Son eternally. This is similar to Calvin's approach elsewhere, never denying the possibility of the knowledge of God's imminent relations without making that the main thrust of his commentary.

The closest Calvin gets to forbidding knowledge of the intra-trinitarian relations is when he says, "For Christ, so far as His secret divinity [*arcanam...deitatem*] is concerned, is no better known to us than is the Father."<sup>19</sup> Instead of displaying God's essence or divinity, Christ displays God's nature (love, righteousness, judgment of evil, etc). This is consistent with Calvin's broader teaching on God, providing skeletal knowledge of God's essence and fleshed out, edifying knowledge of God's nature. God's self-revelation in Christ, and otherwise, primarily reveals his nature, but Calvin does not deny the possibility of knowing at least something of God's inner life.

One further example of Calvin's teaching indicates that Calvin is not directly opposed to speaking about the intra-trinitarian relations. In Isaiah's call narrative, regarding God's words "Who will go for us?" Calvin comments,

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<sup>18</sup> *Comm. John 17:24; CO 47:390.* My translation.

<sup>19</sup> *Comm. John 14:10; CO 47:326.*

I am rather favorable to the opinion that this passage points to three persons in the Godhead, just as we elsewhere read, 'Let us create man in our likeness.' For God talks with himself [*secum loquitur*], and in the plural number; and unquestionably [*nec dubium*] he now holds a consultation [*consultationem*] with his eternal Wisdom and his eternal Power, that is, with the Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, we are able to know that in some manner the persons of the Trinity dynamically interact with one another, not simply existing as impersonal representations of God's single essence.

In sum, although Calvin is reticent to interpret passages of Scripture as if they were providing significant insight into the triune relations, Calvin does not forbid such knowledge, even providing indications that he understands the persons of the Trinity as having a sort of personal interaction.

### **Calvin's Limits on the Knowledge of God's Inner Life**

In light of Calvin's teaching on the doctrine of God and his economic exegesis of specific passages that could provide insight into God's inner life, we here summarize his prescribed boundaries for dogmatic description of God's inner relations. Although we could extend a very detailed list, we name the three most important boundaries here, namely not merely importing a human concept of "relations" into our descriptions of God, not speculating beyond God's gracious accommodation in Scripture, and appropriately respecting the Bible's teaching on God's incomprehensible majesty.

First, Calvin is very clear that we must not consider God on human terms but in response to the way God has revealed himself. As we saw in Chapter 2, one of the ways Calvin describes God's accommodation to human understanding is through analogy and anagoge. God presents information to humans through an analogy that reveals similarity to something known. Then, from the analogy, humans must anagogically ascend from the earthly analogy to the spiritual reality represented in it.<sup>21</sup> As Torrance says, the concept must be "commandeered" by the Spirit.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Comm. Is.* 6:8; *CO* 36:134. Cf. *Comm. Gen.* 1:26; *CO* 23:25.

<sup>21</sup> See "Accommodation in and through Scripture Using Human Language" in Chapter 2.

<sup>22</sup> Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 355.

Similarly, Calvin's states, "People [*homines*] are altogether wrong when they form their estimate of God from their own temperament and customs [*ingenio et moribus*]. Still almost all men labour under this mistake."<sup>23</sup> Therefore, as Calvin makes clear in his description of the Trinity in the *Institutes*, we must not directly assume that the meaning of the words "persons" and "relations" as they are understood from human experience directly transfer to our description of God. The terms must be rethought according to God's self-revelation.

Second, Calvin teaches that any inquiries into God must not engage in useless (*inutilis*) speculation that ungratefully seeks to go beyond God's gracious accommodation. This point has been made sufficiently clear elsewhere, but the implication for us here is as follows: Any discussion of the triune relations must find its beginning, middle, and end in God's accommodated revelation of himself in Christ and in Scripture (and subordinately in creation). Unless one could find clear scriptural justification, to flesh out the intra-trinitarian relations with significant detail would be a violation of Calvin's approach by impiously and ungratefully ignoring the limits of God's self-accommodation to us.

Third, as already demonstrated, Calvin has a deep respect for God's incomprehensible majesty. Therefore, any account of the triune relations must maintain a solemn reverence for the brightness and incomprehensibility of God's majesty by not limiting God to any human descriptions of him. The eternal, spiritual, infinite God is greater than any portrayal of him.

With these boundaries in mind, we now turn to constructive ideas for a doctrine of intra-trinitarian relations in accordance with Calvin's approach.

### **Properly Chastened Knowledge of the Triune "Relations": A Constructive Proposal**

Even though Calvin provides very little insight into the intra-trinitarian life of God, we have seen that he also does not forbid such knowledge. Having distilled some appropriate boundaries for the task, we here seek to provide a constructive description of the intra-trinitarian relations in accordance with Calvin's

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<sup>23</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Num. 23:18-19; CO 25:283.

methodology and broader theological commitments.<sup>24</sup> I shall provide a summary of Calvin's explicit minimalist trinitarian teaching before considering the fittingness of one recent account of the intra-trinitarian life that draws upon Calvin's theology. I shall conclude by highlighting the significance of Calvin's teaching for the contemporary Trinitarian discourse, with an eye to its biblical warrant and significance for the Christian community.

First, drawing together some of Calvin's more subtle trinitarian teaching, Calvin explicitly teaches that those with faith can know that God is inseparably three in one and one in three, that the Father and Son (and presumably the Spirit) have mutually loved one another from eternity, that there is a dynamic interaction between the Father, Son, and Spirit in such a way that they communicate with one another, and that, as Butin has shown, all of God's economic interactions with humanity are trinitarian movements of the Father, Son and Spirit.<sup>25</sup> This is Calvin's explicit teaching about God's intra-trinitarian life. This analysis has shown that Calvin does interpret Scripture as offering some insight into God's inner life, although in smaller degree than Augustine, Bernard, Owen, Edwards, or Barth.

Second, Calvin's description also provides space for constructive theological work without violating his key boundaries. Without submitting the biblical witness and terminology to the Procrustean bed of prior human understandings or engaging in speculation that is not warranted by Scripture or that undermines God's majesty, there remains room in Calvinian theology for constructive work regarding the Trinity.<sup>26</sup>

One example of both recovery and constructive work is Butin's analysis of Calvin's teaching on the Trinity. As noted above, Butin rightly identifies the trinitarian nature of every divine-human relation as the Father works through the Son by the Spirit. Using a term that he acknowledges is foreign to Calvin, Butin also

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<sup>24</sup> Although contemporary theological reflection is not limited to the work of Calvin (or any other theologian), my aim here is to provide a tool for constructive reflection by showing what one could teach regarding God's intra-trinitarian relations according to Calvin's theological project.

<sup>25</sup> Philip Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response: Calvin's Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Butin asserts that for Calvin, the Trinity is the basis, pattern and empowering dynamic of the divine-human relationship (p. 51-53).

<sup>26</sup> Precisely interpreting these boundaries is a subjective endeavor, but identifying them provides a starting place for future constructive work.

declares that Calvin's understanding of the economic work of the Trinity could be described as *perichoretic* in the sense of the unity of the three persons of the Trinity in "their mutual indwelling or inexistence, their intimate interrelationship, and their constantly interacting cooperation."<sup>27</sup>

Butin also engages in constructive work beyond Calvin's explicit teaching by inferring that God's economic works provide a pattern and likeness of God's immanent life.<sup>28</sup> Butin writes,

In that it reflects, exemplifies, and instantiates what we can know of God's intratrinitarian relationships, Calvin regards the trinitarian economy of redemption to be the pattern of God's essential nature, to the extent that by accommodation that nature can be known at all. Thus, he holds together at every point the divine essence with God's saving work on behalf of human beings.<sup>29</sup>

He goes on to say that, by reflection, the immanent life of God can also be described as *perichoretic* (carefully defined).<sup>30</sup>

Although he overstates his case in attributing this explicit intra-trinitarian description to Calvin himself, Butin provides an excellent example of someone seeking to appropriate constructively Calvin's theology for today without violating Calvin's methodological boundaries. Notably, Butin does not describe the persons and relations of the Trinity as three centers of consciousness living in self-giving communion. That would be reading human definitions of terms into the trinitarian teaching. Neither does Butin attempt to describe exactly how God's *perichoresis* is expressed in God's immanent life, which could constitute speculation. Finally, he respects God's majestic otherness by gratefully seeking to base his account on God's accommodated revelation of himself to humanity.

In conclusion, besides the doctrinal and methodological boundaries already mentioned, constructive trinitarian theology undertaken in Calvin's footsteps also must be useful (*utilis*) for God's people. As noted above, for Calvin, all true

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<sup>27</sup> Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response*, 43n.34.

<sup>28</sup> He does carefully qualify that the knowledge of God's immanent life provided by God's economy is limited by God's accommodation.

<sup>29</sup> Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response*, 74-75.

<sup>30</sup> Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response*, 43. Even in light of these statements, Butin often reminds his readers that Calvin's emphasis is on the trinitarian nature of God's redemptive work for believers. E.g. p. 43, 130.



knowledge of God is pastorally edifying and useful in leading believers closer to God.<sup>31</sup> Calvin's interpretation of passages that speak of triune relations as texts that instead describe God's work *for us* in Christ the mediator seems to be directly linked to Calvin's understanding of the needs of the church in his day. The most useful teaching for the church at the time was a teaching that revealed the gracious love of God in Christ. This does not imply that Calvin eisegeses Scripture based on the perceived needs of the people, but it does mean that Calvin calls attention to the elements of a passage that he perceives as most useful for promoting faith and piety (in accordance with the whole teaching of Scripture).

Although it is not our task here to discuss the theological needs of the contemporary Church in all its local manifestations, I would suggest that in a post-Christendom Euro-American society (at least) that often regards God with distrust, a doctrine of God that affirms God's dynamic, loving nature within himself as well as in his acts toward us would be highly pertinent. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is one who loves within himself and loves us in and through Christ the Mediator by the Holy Spirit. God is not a motionless, deistic statue stuck in static, eternal perfection but a dynamic, communicating, loving God within Godself who extends his fatherly love to humanity in Christ by the Spirit. That is Calvin's teaching on the Trinity. It is up to constructive theologians and pastors today carefully to exegete Scripture and culture in order to determine how best to articulate this truth and the reality of the triune God in the contemporary context.

### ***PLACING THE MYSTERY IN PREDESTINATION***

As we continue to explore implications and possibilities of Calvin's teaching regarding God's disposition toward humanity, we now examine one of the key questions of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century church regarding the atonement, namely how the limited efficacy of Christ's redeeming work is to be understood.<sup>32</sup> Why is it that, despite the fact that Jesus died for the sins of the world, the biblical witness

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<sup>31</sup> See "Pastoral Knowledge" in Chapter 2.

<sup>32</sup> Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 60-61.

and human experience seem to indicate that all people are not saved? This question endures in contemporary theological discourse,<sup>33</sup> and Calvin's (infamous) doctrine of predestination provides one manner of addressing it. In order to provide further insight into this matter, we shall compare Calvin's account with the teaching of Jacob Arminius, whose explanation emphasizes human appropriation of God's grace, and Karl Barth, whose teaching on Jesus Christ as the elect and reprobate One displays a distinct approach within the Reformed tradition.

A closer look at Calvin's, Arminius', and Barth's teachings on predestination reveals that, in the midst of their doctrinal differences and similarities, all three accounts have one notable commonality, namely a locus of mystery. For Calvin, the mystery is *how* the righteous and loving God could choose to *leave the reprobate* in their sinful state. For Arminius, the mystery is *why* any person would *choose not to accept* the freely offered grace of God. For Barth, the mystery is *how* those who have been redeemed in Christ can somehow *reject the reality* of their redemption.

We shall first review briefly the location of the mystery in Calvin's depiction of predestination before locating the mystery in Arminius' and Barth's accounts.

### **Calvin: The Mystery of God's Secret Counsel**

The cause of eternal reprobation is so hidden [*abscondita*] from us, that we can do nothing else but wonder at the incomprehensible counsel [*consilium*] of God.<sup>34</sup>

The mystery in Calvin's teaching on predestination lies in God's secret counsel to elect some to salvation and to reprobate others to condemnation. Because we have already carefully examined Calvin's arguments in Chapter 3, we shall summarize briefly here. First, for Calvin God is good, righteous, loving, judging (of evil), wise, etc. in his unchanging nature. God always acts in accordance with his nature, so that whatever God does is good, righteous, loving, judging, wise, etc. For Calvin, there is no God of the *potentia absoluta* who could hypothetically work in ways that are contrary to his righteous nature. Therefore, anything that looks

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism*. Cf. *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 11:7; *CO* 49:216.

unrighteous to human eyes only appears as such because of the epistemic limits of human creatures.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, Calvin teaches that God's free, gracious acts in electing his people are directly consonant with God's character revealed in creation and providence, in Scripture, and most of all in Christ. In accordance with Calvin's commitment to God's sovereign compatibilist causing of every occurrence in the universe, God also brings about reprobation, but humans do not know how reprobation relates to God's nature outside of a few points of connection. The clear points of connection between God's known character and reprobation are his judgment of evil, his freedom, his powerful rule over all things, and his merciful faithfulness to his people.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, in Calvin's account of predestination, the mystery lies in God. For some reason, which is beyond the limits of human cognition, God chooses to redeem some people while leaving others in their sin and deserved condemnation.<sup>37</sup> When speaking of this, Calvin appeals to a spectrum of related phrases to emphasize that the explanation is only available to God, e.g. God's secret counsel (*arcanum consilium*) or God's secret good pleasure (*arcanum beneplacitum*). Thus, commenting on Paul's exclamation in Romans 11:33-36 ("O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments..."), Calvin says, "Whenever then we enter on a discourse respecting the eternal counsels [*consiliis*] of God, let a bridle be always set on our thoughts

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<sup>35</sup> It can appear that Calvin is a nominalist who is emptying words of all their meaning on the way to a modal collapse, but because of his understanding of the cognitive limits of humanity relative to God, Calvin does not perceive it that way. The contemporary practitioner must evaluate the validity of Calvin's argument for today's church and society.

<sup>36</sup> Calvin does not perceive election as only revealing God's love and reprobation as its necessary complement showing forth God's judgment. For Calvin, election perfectly reveals both God's love and God's judgment of evil in Christ's reconciling work. Calvin does see one of the benefits of reprobation as the way it magnifies the splendor of God's love for the elect by means of contrast, but this benefit (or others) should not be confused with a cause.

<sup>37</sup> Although one can find supralapsarian texts in Calvin (particularly when he is speaking of God's sovereign causing of all things), the clear thrust of his teaching is infralapsarian. For Calvin, as we saw in Chapter 4, God does not create people for reprobation from eternity; reprobation is a side effect of the tragedy of the fall that derailed God's intended purpose for humanity, namely union with him.

and tongue, so that after having spoken soberly and within the limits of God's word, our reasoning may at last end in admiration [*stuporem*]."<sup>38</sup>

Placing the mystery in God aligns well with Calvin's teaching about God's dwelling in unapproachable light. For Calvin, humans cannot know all of God or all of God's ways, but they can trust in God's revealed nature. Thus, the cause of why God would elect some and not others is left to God, and we are instructed to dwell upon and trust in God's revealed character and electing love, humbly submitting to the teaching of Scripture by not seeking to solve a mystery that is not therein solved.<sup>39</sup>

For Calvin, the mystery of predestination and the extent of salvation are hidden in God's secret counsel. Because many have believed that Calvin's solution<sup>40</sup> undermines the goodness of God as witnessed to in Scripture,<sup>41</sup> other descriptions have also arisen through the ages. We now turn to consider two such accounts, observing the distinct placement of the mystery of predestination in each.

### **Arminius: The Mystery of the Human Rejection of Free Grace**

Jacob (Harmenzoon) Arminius (1559-1609) was a Dutch Reformed pastor who studied under J. J. Grynaeus and Theodore Beza and read widely in the patristic, humanist, Reformed, and scholastic traditions. He sought unity in the church and boldly opposed the Roman Catholic Church in his day.<sup>42</sup> In their overview of Arminius' theology, Tom McCall and Keith Stanglin point out that it is inaccurate to depict Arminius as an anti-predestinarian (anti-Calvinist) who subscribes to Reformed teaching in every regard except predestination. McCall and Stanglin summarize the problem of this method of study,

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<sup>38</sup> *Comm. Rom.* 11:33; *CO* 49:230.

<sup>39</sup> In regards to non-believers for whom we care, Calvin again appeals to God's (merciful) nature, saying that our hope for others is the fact that we were once lost like they are. Just as we have emerged from unbelief to belief only by God's mercy, so we ought to "leave place for [God's mercy] for others also," *Comm. Rom.* 11:33; *CO* 49:229.

<sup>40</sup> Of course, this was generally Augustine's and Luther's (and many others') solution as well. Cf. Augustine, "On the Predestination of the Saints." Cf. Luther, "On the Bondage of the Will."

<sup>41</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas H. McCall and Keith D. Stanglin, *Jacob Arminius: A Theologian of Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 25-36.

Arminius cannot be understood simply by means of a reductionistic ‘central dogma’ approach, as if his opposition to absolute predestination equals the sum of his thought. Such an approach makes him to be a controversialist only, and it unduly ignores his doctrines of God, creation, providence, assurance, and the church, all of which are distinct from the typical Reformed options of his time.<sup>43</sup>

Drawing on McCall and Stanglin’s broad work of recovery, we shall see that for Arminius, the mystery of predestination is located in the human rejection of God’s freely given and empowered grace. Although there is not space to engage in significant exposition of Arminius’ teaching, we shall briefly summarize Arminius’ account of creation as an expression of God’s goodness and his description of providence and predestination in accord with that goodness before pinpointing the mystery in Arminius’ description of the relationship between salvation and predestination.

First, for Arminius, God, who is the *summum bonum*, creates in accordance with his simple, good nature for the end of human communion with him. Arminius teaches that, “whatever is done by the will of God is perfectly consistent with his sheer goodness.”<sup>44</sup> God’s primary will, as displayed in his work of creation, is the communication of good. There is, in Muller’s words, “a universal will for the whole behind the universal call to salvation rather than an original intention to create for destruction as well as for eternal fellowship [as in typical Reformed accounts].”<sup>45</sup>

For Arminius, the non-coercive nature of divine love means that the grace of salvation can be rejected even though God wills that all be saved.<sup>46</sup> Thus, in accord with God’s loving and good purposes for creation, God has freely limited himself to allow humanity the freedom to love God or reject God’s love.<sup>47</sup>

Second, in contrast to Reformers like Calvin, Arminius directly and openly links his doctrine of God to God’s will for *all* humanity as displayed in providence and predestination. God’s purposes in providence correspond to his intentions in the

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<sup>43</sup> McCall and Stanglin, *Jacob Arminius*, 13. Cf. Richard Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius: Sources and Directions of Scholastic Protestantism in the Era of Early Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 281.

<sup>44</sup> McCall and Stanglin, *Jacob Arminius*, 92.

<sup>45</sup> Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence*, 234.

<sup>46</sup> McCall and Stanglin, *Jacob Arminius*, 200.

<sup>47</sup> McCall and Stanglin, *Jacob Arminius*, 93.

act of creation, which emerge from God's simple divine nature of omnipotent love.<sup>48</sup> Predestination, as a specific instantiation of God's providence, similarly expresses God's goodness and love.

Therefore, Arminius directly opposes proponents of unconditional predestination.<sup>49</sup> McCall and Stanglin summarize, "The view that God created humans so that he could save some and condemn others by his unconditional decree is seen by him to be utterly inconsistent with any adequately Christian understanding of the nature and character of God."<sup>50</sup> As Arminius says, "God cannot prescribe what is unjust, because he is justice, wisdom, and omnipotence itself."<sup>51</sup>

Finally, Arminius is not a Pelagian. Instead, for Arminius, faith is a free, undeserved gift of God to hopeless sinners. In the giving of that gift, God has also made humanity to be a willing participant. Therefore, in Arminius' *ordo salutis*, God creates, permits the fall, sends Christ as redeemer, and *then* saves in Christ those who repent or condemns those who reject Christ. Salvation occurs by God's enabling faith and repentance in the elect according to his divine foreknowledge of their choice. Based on his foreknowledge of their rejection of him, God does not enable faith and repentance in the reprobate.<sup>52</sup> As McCall and Stanglin summarize, "The relationship is one of mutuality; God takes the initiative, but salvation is a cooperative process. God desires the salvation of all; nothing can prevent the demonstration of God's mercy except a refusal to repent."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> McCall and Stanglin, *Jacob Arminius*, 106.

<sup>49</sup> "Unconditional predestination" means that there is no conditional mutuality in the reception of salvation; the human faith that is a necessity for salvation is also ultimately decreed by God.

<sup>50</sup> McCall and Stanglin, *Jacob Arminius*, 111. Cf. James Arminius, "A Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius," in *The Works of James Arminius, Vol. 1*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 623. Although Calvin tended toward infralapsarianism, his commitment to God's compatibilist causing of all things still makes him liable to this critique.

<sup>51</sup> James Arminius, "A Modest Examination of Dr. Perkins's Pamphlet," in *The Works of James Arminius, Vol. 3*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 358. Cf. McCall and Stanglin, *Jacob Arminius*, 113-114.

<sup>52</sup> McCall and Stanglin, *Jacob Arminius*, 140. For Arminius, this order avoided the Reformed dual problem of assured complacency or fearful despair when one's salvation is only founded upon God's hidden decree. His account provided both assurance through God's loving, gracious goodness and motivation to piety through the fact that one's salvation is not complete until the end of life. Some traditions will still perceive a works-based salvation in this account.

<sup>53</sup> McCall and Stanglin, *Jacob Arminius*, 188.

With this overview in place, we can now see where the mystery lies Arminius' account, namely in the human acceptance or refusal of God's freely given grace. God has provided all people with everything necessary for salvation, including the power to receive grace, but God does not force people to repent. It is inexplicable that any human being created for communion with God, and for whose sins Christ died on the cross, would reject God's grace. Yet, somehow it happens.

Therefore, we see in Arminius' account of creation, fall, and redemption that God acts directly and openly in accord with his good and loving nature. He creates for good purposes and wills the salvation of all, but he also creates humanity with the ability to resist God's will. Inexplicably, some people choose to reject God's grace and receive condemnation. This is the mystery of Arminius' position.

### **Karl Barth: The Impossible Possibility of Rejecting the Reality of Redemption**

In his book *Deviant Calvinism*, which seeks to broaden the boundaries of what should be considered "Reformed theology," Oliver Crisp includes a chapter entitled "Barthian Universalism?". There Crisp points out the fact that although Karl Barth explicitly denies teaching universalism,<sup>54</sup> there has been much disagreement between Barth scholars regarding Barth's actual stance on the extent of salvation.<sup>55</sup> In light of the confusion, Crisp applies the tools of analytic theology to "the letter" of Barth's teaching on election in *Church Dogmatics* II/2 (and elsewhere) and concludes that Barth's teaching is either inconsistent or that he teaches a species of universalism.<sup>56</sup> However, contrary to his previous analyses,<sup>57</sup> Crisp does not cease his explorations of Barth's doctrine there. Instead, he proceeds to provide an account of what he describes as "the spirit" of Barth's

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<sup>54</sup> Throughout this account, I refer to the species of universalism that definitively asserts all human beings will be saved. This is in contrast to other species like "hopeful universalism." Cf. Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism*, 151-152.

<sup>55</sup> Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism*, 152.

<sup>56</sup> Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism*, 169-170.

<sup>57</sup> Oliver Crisp, "On the Letter and Spirit of Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election: A Reply to O'Neil," *Evangelical Quarterly* 79, (2007): 53-67. Cf. Oliver Crisp, "On Barth's Denial of Universalism," *Themelios* 29, (2003): 18-29.

teaching on election, coming to a different conclusion.<sup>58</sup> Crisp makes three key observations: (1) all humanity is derivatively elect in the Father's election of the Son; (2) because of this election in Christ, "all humans are born elect, but *remaining in this state is conditional upon each human's not finally opting to reject Christ;*" and (3) the church's mission of evangelism is to awaken people to their status as elect in Christ.<sup>59</sup> In short, there is eschatological *hope* for the salvation of all people but no declaration of universal salvation. Crisp acknowledges that this "spirit-not-letter" account makes better sense of Barth's broader teaching and direct denials of universalism, but Crisp asserts that it still necessitates ignoring a few of Barth's claims in *CD II/2* that directly identify all of humanity as unconditionally elect in Christ.<sup>60</sup>

Besides the general benefits of drawing on Crisp's clear analysis of Barth's teaching on election, we highlight Crisp's work here because it directly illustrates where Barth places the mystery in his account of predestination and salvation, namely how it could be that humans who have been objectively and decisively redeemed in Christ could not be eternally saved.

Although one could write at length on this topic, we shall briefly expand upon Crisp's account to further clarify Barth's stance and show that for Barth, the mystery of predestination exists in the "impossible possibility" of rejecting the reality of one's redemption. We shall first glance at Barth's teaching on predestination before touching on Barth's account of reconciliation and drawing a few conclusions.

First, Barth teaches that God reveals his one life-giving will in his election of the incarnate Son as the elect and reprobate One. Barth sees his account of predestination as an important correction to his own Reformed tradition, contending that an account of predestination that is founded upon God's hidden decision in eternity to elect by hidden means in time results in a dual unknown: both God and the elect. This leaves humanity without assurance and without a

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<sup>58</sup> In his "spirit-not-letter" account, Crisp seeks to charitably tell the story of the breadth of Barth's account without becoming overly focused on the details of some specific statements Barth makes, particularly in *CD II/2*, Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism*, 170-174.

<sup>59</sup> Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism*, 170-172. Emphasis orig.

<sup>60</sup> Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism*, 173.



known God to adore with proper humility.<sup>61</sup> Thus, instead of the Reformed divines' accounts of the hidden will of God's secret good pleasure, Barth declares that God's will has been made known to us: in Jesus Christ, God and humanity are unconditionally united in a covenant of grace.<sup>62</sup> Human sin is the rejection of God's will, but God's will does not change. His wrath is therefore the expression of his rejection of the human spurning of God. To use Barth's terminology, God has said "Yes" to humanity, but humanity has replied with a "No." God responds with an emphatic "Yes" to his eternal purposes for humanity by becoming incarnate in Christ, thus uniting God and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. By assuming our sinful humanity in the incarnation, Jesus Christ becomes the reprobate One, taking upon himself the guilt of the human contradiction of God.<sup>63</sup>

Second, Barth's specific teaching on our reconciliation with God further clarifies Barth's teaching on predestination. In *CD IV/1*, Barth describes the root of human sin as the desire to judge good and evil apart from God who is the true Judge. Therefore, in Christ's four-fold act of reconciliation for us, (1) Christ the true Judge (2) takes the deserved judgment of fallen humanity upon himself and (3) enacts judgment on humanity at the cross, (4) thus establishing the righteousness (justice) of God again in humanity.<sup>64</sup> In the cross and resurrection, God fulfills his purposes of life for humanity, saying "Yes to man and the world, even in the No of the cross which it includes."<sup>65</sup>

This reconciliation with God is an objective reality completed in Christ on behalf of all humanity. Thus, the grace of Jesus Christ is "the grace in which God from all eternity has chosen man [*den Menschen*] (all men) in this **One**, in which He has bound Himself to man – before man ever existed – in this **One**."<sup>66</sup> Then, as Crisp notes, conversion is simply awakening to the reality of our reconciliation with God in Christ. It does not bring about a new ontological reality as if the act of believing made one into a forgiven child of God. Instead, "We believe that we are

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<sup>61</sup> *CD II/2*, p. 146-147; *KD*, p. 157-159.

<sup>62</sup> *CD II/2*, p. 157; *KD*, p. 171.

<sup>63</sup> *CD II/2*, p. 164-167; *KD*, p. 179-183.

<sup>64</sup> *CD IV/1*, p. 211-283; *KD*, p. 231-311.

<sup>65</sup> *CD IV/1*, p. 347; *KD*, p. 383. Emphasis in German.

<sup>66</sup> *CD IV/1*, p. 91; *KD*, p. 97. Emphasis in German.

because we are,"<sup>67</sup> and the church lives in the freedom of God's "Yes" of covenant love and life while inviting those outside the church to recognize that same reality for themselves.

Finally, one concept that helps clarify Barth's stance on predestination and the scope of salvation is his phrase "the impossible possibility" (*die unmögliche Möglichkeit*). For Barth, the impossible possibility is the initial human choice to sin and the general (non)existence of evil or "nothingness" (*das Nichtige*). Barth describes the person of sin, both before and after Christ's work of redemption, as an "impossible possibility, which as such is not amenable to rational presentation. It is simply a brute fact."<sup>68</sup> Thus, just as evil "exists" as an impossible possibility in a universe created by an all-good God, and just as humanity chose the impossible possibility to sin instead of trusting God in the beginning, so the impossible possibility remains that some people might reject the reality of their redemption by rebelling against God's "Yes" to them in Christ.<sup>69</sup> This is unthinkable and inexplicable, but as witnessed to by the presence of evil and sin in the world, such rejection of God and his purposes could still occur.

This impossible possibility is the locus of mystery in Barth's account of election and salvation. It also makes sense of his ambiguity on the scope of salvation that has caused Crisp and others so much confusion. It is unthinkable that any who are elect in Christ could not be saved, and yet the tragic fact remains that some may impossibly reject God's gracious covenant love.<sup>70</sup>

Therefore, Barth's account of predestination and the scope of salvation places the mystery in the impossible possibility that any human being who has been graciously redeemed in Jesus Christ would reject God's love. This is quite similar to Arminius' account. Both theologians believe that God has one, openly disclosed will

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<sup>67</sup> *CD IV/1*, p. 357; *KD*, p. 394.

<sup>68</sup> *CD IV/3*, p. 463; *KD*, p. 553.

<sup>69</sup> For Barth, God's wrath is God's opposition to anyone and anything that opposes his loving purposes for humanity. As an expression of his love, God rejects human rejection of him. This opposition to human opposition is "the scorching fire of the love of God," *CD IV/1*, p. 173; *KD*, p. 189. Cf. Wynne, *Wrath Among the Perfections*. For those who tenaciously say "No" to God, God's even more insistent "Yes" will be received as eternal wrath.

<sup>70</sup> One further clarification to Crisp's "spirit-not-letter" account (particularly point two) is the way that for Barth, the rejection of Christ does not change one's ontological status (e.g. from elect to reprobate), even though it results in the wrath of God, as seen in the previous footnote.

of communion with humanity in accord with his goodness. Both believe that God's grace precedes any human response to God. Regarding predestination, the key difference lies in the application of Christ's work. For Arminius, Christ's redemptive work is applied only to those whom God foreknows will receive his grace, but for Barth, Christ's redemptive work is an objective reality for all people as they are elect in Christ. For him, only those who fight against Christ's redemption will experience the fiery wrath of God's love.

### **Conclusion: Mystery, Humility, and Ecumenism**

As we have seen in this brief case study, three prominent interpretations of the Bible's teaching on predestination all include a distinct locus of mystery. For Calvin, it is inexplicable why the righteous and good God somehow chooses not to save all whom he has made.<sup>71</sup> For Arminius, it is incomprehensible that people would reject God's freely given grace in Christ. For Barth, it is unthinkable that anyone would fight against the reality of his or her redemption in Christ.

The existence of these unknowns should not lead to dismay. As finite human creatures seeking to talk about God, it is no surprise that our language and doctrines seek comprehensive descriptions in vain. Instead of despairing or disposing of the doctrine because we cannot comprehensively describe it, the presence of mystery should lead Christians toward an attitude of theological humility.

With theological humility, we acknowledge that in the midst of our sincere and thoughtful theological and ecclesial commitments, none of us has exclusive access to Christian truth. In whatever manner I and my tradition interpret Scripture's teaching on predestination, a mystery remains. Therefore, instead of labeling the "other" as the theological enemy, perhaps the presence of mystery in all of our accounts should lead theologians away from finger-pointing at each other and instead lead them to gather around the cross of Christ. There the only appropriate

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<sup>71</sup> The case can be made how such a doctrine can be deemed consistent with the nature of God based on the general benevolence of any creation and the inherent goodness of existence, Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism*, 125-150. This logically removes the problem of soteriological evil but does not definitively explain the relation of God's nature to his reprobative acts.

theological response is gratitude for God's gracious redemptive work in Christ that reveals God's love and that sends us out to proclaim God's love to all the people he has made. I can only imagine that Calvin, Arminius, and Barth would all rejoice in such an outcome.

### **LIFE IN THE BLOOD: A RECLAMATION OF CALVIN'S TEACHING ON SACRIFICE**

In and of itself *the death or slaughter of the victim, while necessary to procure the blood/life that is offered, has no particular atoning significance.* Thus it is generally *the ritual manipulation of the blood* that results in the redemption and purgation both of those things to which that blood is applied, and for those people on whose behalf it is offered.<sup>72</sup>

As we observed in Chapter 4, Calvin's account of sacrifice introduces inconsistencies in his teaching, particularly the way that Calvin's description of sacrifice portrays God as a vengeful deity who can only be appeased by the death of an innocent victim.<sup>73</sup> This is in continuity with Calvin's understanding that the efficacy of sacrifice lies in the death of the victim. However, as we also saw in Chapter 4, a broader look at Calvin's teaching on Christ's reconciling work reveals that Calvin does not depict God as a bloodthirsty deity who needs to expend his wrath. Instead, God is a righteous, loving, and judging God who condemns sin and evil while faithfully loving his people. Further, an analysis of Calvin's complete account shows that although Christ's death is the central act of his reconciling work, it is by no means to be separated from the other aspects of his one, multifaceted work of freeing humans from the curse of sin and restoring them to union with God.

Here we examine one area in which recent biblical scholarship would make Calvin's project more consistent and cohesive, namely a more accurate understanding of the logic of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible. We shall first briefly describe Calvin's teaching on Mosaic sacrifice before surveying recent biblical

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<sup>72</sup> Moffitt, *Atonement and Resurrection in Hebrews*, 271. Emphasis orig.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. "Perhaps the greatest error in Calvin's view is the way the reformer interprets sacrifice in terms of propitiation instead of expiation, and assumes that the essence of sacrifice is the punishment of sin in a substitute," Culpepper, *Interpreting the Atonement*, 102.

scholarship that recovers the Jewish placement of the efficacy of sacrifice not in the death of the victim but in the priestly performance of rites in relation to the sacrificial gift, particularly in the application of the life-containing blood in the tabernacle along with the burning of parts of the victim on the altar. Finally, we shall discover a few specific ways in which Calvin's teaching on reconciliation and his exegesis would be improved in light of this reclaimed understanding of the logic of sacrifice.

### Calvin's Teaching on Old Testament Sacrifice

Although we have already examined Calvin's New Testament teaching, here we describe Calvin's specific understanding of sacrifice in the Old Testament. We find that Calvin teaches that God is made propitious through sacrificial death, that Passover, the Levitical sin offering, and Yom Kippur are all sacrifices that expiate sin as a type of Christ, and that the "life in the blood" is primarily a pedagogical tool to teach people to respect life.

First, Calvin teaches that God is made propitious to people through sacrificial *death*. He says regarding the first Passover, "Faith alone confers upon us the salvation [*salutem*] which has been obtained [*partam*] by the slaughter of the victim [*hostiae mactatione*]." <sup>74</sup> Faith receives the salvation that death has procured. For Calvin, a hermeneutical key in this line of thinking is Hebrews 9:22, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins," <sup>75</sup> which he understands to mean that the death of the sacrificial victim is the means of cleansing. Thus, he says regarding this verse, "Uncleanness [*immundities*] was imputed until it was expiated by a sacrifice [*sacrificio*]." <sup>76</sup> For Calvin, in the Old Testament, God only looked upon humanity favorably through the death of a sacrificial victim.

Second, Calvin assigns all Old Testament sacrifices the same purpose, namely expiation of sin as a type of Christ's ultimate sacrificial death that restores humans to favor with God. Again commenting on the first Passover, Calvin says that the

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<sup>74</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Ex. 12:23; CO 24:136.

<sup>75</sup> We shall address the failings of this common translation below.

<sup>76</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 9:22; CO 55:116. For an example of his reference to Heb. 9:22 in his OT work, see *Harmony of Moses*, Lev. 16:7; CO 24:502. Cf. *Harmony of Moses*, Ex. 12:21; CO 24:136.

sacrifice is a “type [*typum*] of Christ, who by his death propitiated [*placavit*] his Father, so that we should not perish with the rest of the world.”<sup>77</sup> In regards to the Levitical sin offering, Calvin says, “He now descends to the sin-offering [*expiationem*] which held the chief place amongst the sacrifices, inasmuch as, without reconciliation, there could never be any intercourse between men and God...The whole hope of salvation must needs be founded on the remedies [i.e. sacrifices] provided for propitiating [*placandi*] Him.”<sup>78</sup> He goes on to describe the sin-offering as a sacrament that, like baptism, shows forth the expiation of our sin. The main difference is that baptism sets Christ clearly before us, but the sin-offering presents Christ as “obscurely sketched [*obscure...adumbratus*].”<sup>79</sup> Finally, regarding the annual Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), Calvin interprets the two goats as together representing Christ. The scapegoat makes atonement by taking the sins and curse of the people upon itself, but “God was not propitiated without blood, since the efficacy of the expiation depended on the sacrifice of the other goat.”<sup>80</sup> Thus, in all three cases, the sacrifice atones for sin through the death of the animal as a witness to and participation in Christ’s sacrificial death.

Third, even though Calvin is aware of the biblical teaching that “the life is in the blood” (e.g. Leviticus 17:11),<sup>81</sup> he does not associate the life in the blood as having particular atoning significance. Instead, for Calvin consumption of blood is forbidden because blood is set apart for expiation and because rejecting the blood teaches people to respect life. For example, Calvin says that the people should not consider it wasteful to pour out the blood in obedience to Scripture because “it was given for atonement [*expiationem*]...Surely, since it was the price [*pretium*] they were to pay for appeasing [*placandi*] God, this was an employment of it far to be preferred to food.”<sup>82</sup> However, the “higher reason”<sup>83</sup> for the rejection of blood as

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<sup>77</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Ex. 12:21; CO 24:136.

<sup>78</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Lev. 4; CO 24:516.

<sup>79</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Lev. 4:22; CO 24:519.

<sup>80</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Lev. 16:7; CO 24:502. Cf. Lev. 16:20; CO 24:504.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. *Harmony of Moses*, Deut. 12:15-16; CO 24:618. Cf. *Comm. Gen.* 9:4; CO 23:145.

<sup>82</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Lev. 17:10-11; CO 24:619.

<sup>83</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Lev. 3:16-17; CO 24:514.

food is to teach people to respect life.<sup>84</sup> The restraint on the consumption of blood was to “prevent savagery [*feritatem*]...for if they abstained from the blood of beasts, much more necessary was it to spare human blood.”<sup>85</sup> Therefore, for Calvin the Old Testament teaching that the life is in the blood was primarily the grounds for a moral imperative to respect life.

Here we have briefly summarized Calvin’s teaching on sacrifice, showing that Calvin understands Jewish sacrifice as appeasing God through the death of a victim as a witness to and participation in Christ’s one sacrificial death. Also we have found that the Bible’s teaching that the life is in the blood did not directly influence his understanding of the efficacy of sacrifice.

### **Recovering the Logic of Mosaic Sacrifice**

Recent Hebrew Bible scholarship has made significant strides in understanding the logic of sacrifice. Drawing upon such scholarship, we shall see here that the ancient Jews identified both moral and ritual impurity as preventing communion with God and that the hierarchical process of sacrifice culminated in the application of the life-containing blood in the tabernacle along with the burning of parts of the victim on the altar to purify God’s people and thus enable communion with God. To close, we shall highlight the fact that the death of the sacrificial animal was not the effectual or central moment in Mosaic sacrifice.

First, the problems conceived in the Pentateuch that preclude human communion with God are moral impurity and ritual impurity, both of which prevent communion with God. Moral impurity results from sinful transgression of God’s commands. Ritual impurity, on the other hand, comes about through natural and (often) non-sinful occurrences, such as birth, sex, skin diseases, and contact with a dead body.<sup>86</sup> Jacob Milgrom synthesizes the different causes of ritual

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<sup>84</sup> Thus, the gathering of the biblical passages that prohibit eating the blood into one subsection within the exposition of the sixth commandment (do not murder). Cf. *Harmony of Moses*, Deut. 12:15-25, Lev. 17:10-11, Lev. 7:26-27; *CO* 24:618-620.

<sup>85</sup> *Harmony of Moses*, Deut. 12:15-16; *CO* 24:618.

<sup>86</sup> Moffitt, *Atonement and Resurrection in Hebrews*, 259-260. Whereas ritual impurity is contagious, moral impurity is not. For a detailed analysis, see, Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 21-42.

impurity into one category with the common denominator of mortality.<sup>87</sup> God cannot dwell with his people as long as they are polluted by any impurity. Thus, Jay Sklar asserts, “The end point of sin and [ritual] impurity is the same: both endanger (requiring ransom) and both pollute (requiring purgation).”<sup>88</sup>

Second, as Roy Gane demonstrates, sacrifice is an irreducible, hierarchically structured process in which atonement is actually effected by the performance of the rites at the altars, namely by the application of the blood and the burning of the parts of the victim.<sup>89</sup> Although the Hebrew Bible does not provide one systematic explanation of *how* atonement is secured, it clearly highlights the importance of the application of the life-containing blood and also the smoke of the burnt offering. Particularly drawing upon the account of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16 and the emphases of the book of Hebrews, Moffitt asserts that it is the *life* in the blood (e.g. Leviticus 17:11 & Genesis 9:4) of the sacrifice that expiates sin as it is rightly manipulated by the priest in the tabernacle.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, according to Milgrom, it is the *life* that is the solution to the (ritual and moral) deathly impurity.<sup>91</sup> As Moffitt summarizes, the *telos* of this blood application is to overcome the impurifying force of death and thus enable “the divine presence and the human being to come together in close proximity because it deals with the interrelated problems of sin, impurity, and mortality.”<sup>92</sup>

As a corrective to an overly simplified emphasis on the blood as the only instrument of atonement, Moffitt and others point out that in the sin offerings of Lev. 4-5, atonement is attributed to the application of the blood *and* the burnt offering. For example, Christian Eberhart says that although “the blood application

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<sup>87</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 123-128. For example, a scale (skin) disease makes the body appear as if it were dying, and the spilling of menstrual blood or semen is associated with life exiting the body.

<sup>88</sup> Jay Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions* (Sheffield, TN: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), 182. He goes on to conclude that the atoning act of sacrifice is thus both a purging and ransoming act. Cf. Moffitt, *Atonement and Resurrection in Hebrews*, 264, 302.

<sup>89</sup> Roy Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 3-24.

<sup>90</sup> Moffitt, *Atonement and Resurrection in Hebrews*, 257.

<sup>91</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, 101. Cf. Moffitt, *Atonement and Resurrection in Hebrews*, 257-258.

<sup>92</sup> Moffitt, *Atonement and Resurrection in Hebrews*, 267. Moffitt also points out that in Levitical terms, it would make no sense if the blood of sacrifice primarily referred to death. The blood actually combats mortality because “mortality cannot approach God, nor can God dwell in the presence of corruption unless the mortal first becomes ritually pure,” p. 219.



rite is the most characteristic ritual component of the sin offering, the burning rite is also important” in effecting atonement.<sup>93</sup> This affirms again that Mosaic sacrifice must be understood as an irreducible process instead of a single act.

Although it cannot be reduced to one act, the process of sacrifice still finds its high point in the presentation of the blood in the tabernacle. The only explicit explanation of the logic of sacrifice in the Pentateuch comes in Leviticus 17:11, “For the life [נֶפֶשׁ; *nephesh*] of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your life on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement.” Moffitt concludes that in Levitical sacrifice, “the blood/life of the animal is usually the agent that atones—i.e., it both redeems and purifies. Moreover, the focal point in the sacrificial process appears to consist more in the presentation and manipulation of the blood/life before God than in any other part of the process.”<sup>94</sup> In sum, according to the logic of Mosaic sacrifice, it is the life of the blood (primarily) along with the burnt offering presented before God that purifies from sin and ritual impurity (including mortality itself) to enable communion with God.

Third, to be absolutely clear, the slaughter of the sacrificial victim is not effectual in itself or even the central moment in Levitical sacrifice.<sup>95</sup> Eberhart points out that there is no evidence of any ancient Hebrew writings that give specific value or effect to the act of animal slaughter in the context of sacrificial rituals.<sup>96</sup> This is further illustrated in the fact that there are no instructions in the Pentateuch for *how* the slaughter is to be executed. Drawing upon sources that he believes predate the Leviticus instructions on sacrifice, Milgrom finds in the Talmud extensive instructions on the method of slaughter, “whose purpose is to render the animal immediately unconscious with a minimum of suffering.”<sup>97</sup> The sacrificial offering was not intended to vicariously suffer physically, but it was

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<sup>93</sup> Christian A. Eberhart, *The Sacrifice of Jesus: Understanding the Atonement Biblically*, ed. Christian A. Eberhart (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 88. He suggests that the blood purifies from sin (expiates) and the burnt offering makes God pleased (propitiates), p. 98.

<sup>94</sup> Moffitt, *Atonement and Resurrection in Hebrews*, 271.

<sup>95</sup> See statement from Moffitt at the head of this chapter.

<sup>96</sup> Christian A. Eberhart, “Sacrifice? Holy Smokes! Reflections on Cult Terminology for Understanding Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. Christian A. Eberhart, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 29.

<sup>97</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, 105-106.

meant to be killed quickly and humanely as a subordinate step in a larger process. As Eberhart summarizes, “*ritualized killing is not the purpose of cultic sacrifices in the Hebrew Bible.*”<sup>98</sup>

To summarize, recent Hebrew Bible scholarship has recovered the logic of Levitical sacrifice, in which the sacrificial victim was not to suffer vicariously for the sin of the people but was instead killed as a part of an irreducible hierarchical process that culminated in the appropriate application of the blood to the sanctuary and in the burning of certain parts of the victim at the altar to purify from moral and ritual impurity and thus enable communion between God and humanity. With this in mind, we now turn to examine how this understanding of the logic of sacrifice would influence Calvin’s account.

### **Calvin's Renewed Teaching**

By integrating this recent Hebrew Bible scholarship into Calvin’s project, Calvin’s teaching regarding Christ’s reconciling work becomes more consistent with his broader theological commitments and exegesis. This is particularly apparent in his doctrine of God as it relates to reconciliation and in his understanding of the Old Testament as foreshadowing Christ.<sup>99</sup> After explaining these two ramifications, we shall also briefly provide an example of an exegetical difficulty from Calvin’s Hebrews commentary that would be attenuated through this improved understanding of the logic of Mosaic sacrifice.

First, if sacrifice primarily concerns extending life and purity instead of effecting death, Calvin’s teaching on Christ’s sacrificial reconciling work would integrate more naturally into his doctrine of God. As we observed in the previous chapter, it is clear that Calvin’s grounding of the efficacy of sacrifice in death leads to apparent contradictions in his teaching about God. Is God an angry deity placated only by death, particularly the innocent death of his Son? Or is God a faithful and loving God who hates sin and can only be reconciled with humanity

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<sup>98</sup> Eberhart, *The Sacrifice of Jesus*, 96. Emphasis orig. Cf. Culpepper, *Interpreting the Atonement*, 102-103.

<sup>99</sup> Another area of correspondence is the way that sacrifice is understood as a hierarchical process of distinct but inseparable events, just as in Calvin’s account of Christ’s multifaceted reconciling work.

when its sin has been rightly removed and condemned? Calvin teaches the latter, but his language of sacrifice often implies the former.

However, if sacrifice is primarily about the purifying life of the victim enabling communion with God, Calvin's account of sacrifice would more properly fit his understanding of God as loving, righteous, and judging in all he does. In that case, Christ still dies in our place according to the punishment of the law and as one alienated from God who is the source of life. However, instead of somehow placating God's violent wrath in his death, Christ's sacrifice is now about restoring communion with God through the purification of moral impurity (sin) and ritual impurity (death) by means of his life-giving blood and obedience.<sup>100</sup> Further, as opposed to Calvin's interpretation that links death and forgiveness, Hebrews 9:22 is understood as saying, "without the *pouring out* [αἱματεκχυσία] of blood there is no forgiveness of sin."<sup>101</sup> This translation makes better sense of the immediate context of the passage as Jesus, the mediating high priest follows the example the Levitical priests in pouring out the blood in the tabernacle. By doing so, he procures forgiveness before God through his *life*, namely his resurrected humanity, as he intercedes on our behalf in the heavenly sanctuary. Forgiveness comes from God through life and purity, not simply through death. In sum, with a better understanding of the logic of sacrifice, Calvin's doctrine of reconciliation would more consistently represent a unified portrait of the God who loves his people and judges their sin by providing purification for them through Christ's life-giving work.

Second, this improved understanding of the logic of Levitical sacrifice aligns more naturally with Calvin's teaching on the continuity of the Old and New Testaments. Calvin consistently teaches that Christ's death and resurrection provide life in a manner that the previous sacrifices as a type of Christ could not.<sup>102</sup> However, describing Christ's blood as life-giving would be more fitting if Calvin recognized the blood of the Mosaic sacrifices as a life-giving foreshadow of Christ. Christ's sacrifice would then organically fit with character of Levitical sacrifice and

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<sup>100</sup> Perhaps Christ's life and death of obedience could be seen as a parallel to the burnt offering that provides a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

<sup>101</sup> Emphasis added. Cf. Moffitt, *Atonement and Resurrection in Hebrews*, 291.

<sup>102</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 7:18; *CO* 55:92. Cf. *Inst.* 2.7.1, p. 349; *CO* 2:253.

align directly with Calvin's broader teaching that the law is a shadow of what is fulfilled in Christ.

Finally, we examine one brief example from Calvin's Hebrews commentary in which a revised understanding of sacrifice would free him from an exegetical quandary.<sup>103</sup> Regarding the description of Jesus' high priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary in Hebrews 8:2, Calvin asks the question, "What does the Apostle mean by locating Christ's priesthood in heaven?" Calvin, who typically identifies Christ's priestly office with his death,<sup>104</sup> must stretch to explain: "Whatever of an earthly kind appears at first sight to be in Christ, is to be viewed spiritually by the eye of faith...The Apostle therefore does not refer to what belongs peculiarly to human nature, but to the hidden power [*arcanam vim*] of the Spirit."<sup>105</sup> As we have seen, Calvin elsewhere has a very strong account of Christ's mediation in heaven.<sup>106</sup> However, because of his commitment to Christ's *death* as the location of Christ's work of expiation (as attested in his earlier comments on the verse), he here locates Christ's atoning work solely on earth and thus must discount the words of the author of Hebrews through an abstract appeal to visualize all of Christ's work as occurring simultaneously in heaven and on earth. If the main point of Christ's sacrifice is to provide *life* through the offering of his blood and body before God on our behalf as priest, it would make perfect sense to speak of the risen and glorified Christ ministering in the heavenly sanctuary as he fulfills the duty of the crucified, resurrected, and ascended high priest, providing purity and life for his people.<sup>107</sup>

In summary, Calvin's teaching on Christ's reconciling work would be more consistent with his broader theological understanding if he had a better understanding of the logic of Hebrew sacrifice as providing purity and life in order to enable human communion with God.

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<sup>103</sup> For another example, see *Comm. Heb.* 10:19; *CO* 55:129.

<sup>104</sup> E.g. *Inst.* 2.15.6, p. 501-502; *CO* 2:366-367.

<sup>105</sup> *Comm. Heb.* 8:2; *CO* 55:97.

<sup>106</sup> See "The Ascension and Ongoing Mediation of Christ" in Chapter 4.

<sup>107</sup> "The writer of Hebrews...thinks in terms of Jesus' presenting his blood—his life—before God *in heaven*. Jesus' immortal, resurrection life is the sacrifice—that is, the object that Jesus offers to God—that he offered to effect atonement," Moffitt, *Atonement and Resurrection in Hebrews*, 219.

## Conclusion

We have seen here that Calvin understands Old Testament sacrifice as primarily about God's being placated through death and that recent biblical scholarship has shown that a better account of the logic of Levitical sacrifice locates the atoning efficacy in the life of the sacrificial victim as it is presented to God in the tabernacle and offered on the altar. Finally, in incorporating the Hebrew understanding of sacrifice into Calvin's teaching on reconciliation, we have found a more coherent and consistent account. One can only wonder whether Calvin, the humanist who sought to return to the sources and was criticized for his overly Jewish interpretation of Scripture,<sup>108</sup> would not welcome such a modification to his theological project.

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<sup>108</sup> Cf. G. Sujin Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin: Sixteenth-Century Debates Over the Messianic Psalms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 103-104.

## **Chapter 6—CONCLUSION: PROCLAIMING "GOD LOVES YOU"?**

"Preach like an Arminian; believe like a Calvinist." This popular saying relating Calvinist and Arminian teaching brings us back to our original question, namely, what is God's disposition toward humanity in Calvin's theology? Although the statement could be interpreted in a variety of ways, one such interpretation points out an insecurity about God's disposition toward humanity in Calvin's teaching. To rephrase the statement, "Preach *as if* God loves all people, but when only a few come to faith, believe that God has redeemed his own according to his sovereign decree." To put in in the form of a question, if God has really chosen some people from eternity for heaven and some for hell, how could a preacher stand in front of a gathered group of people and say, "God loves you!"? Even though Reformed theology (and the Bible) admonishes gospel preaching to all people, its depiction of God's disposition toward humanity presents a problem. Although an analysis of Reformed orthodoxy is beyond the scope of this project, we have sought to determine here how Calvin's theology addresses this question. So, on Calvin's account, can a Christian stand in front of a group of unknown people and proclaim, "God loves you!" without adding an explicit or implicit qualification such as, "if you respond in faith" to limit the statement to the elect?

Although there are many ways to consider this question, we have considered it from the perspective of God's disposition toward humanity by particularly examining Calvin's teaching on the knowledge of God, predestination, and the atonement. We shall review what we have found before offering a glimpse into three recent biblical approaches that provide a contrasting account of God's disposition toward humanity.

### **GOD'S TWO, DECIDEDLY ASYMMETRICAL DISPOSITIONS TOWARD HUMANITY**

We seek here to summarize what we have discovered regarding God's disposition toward humanity in Calvin's theology. Unsurprisingly, based on the

complexity of this topic in the Bible, there is not one simple answer. In short, according to Calvin's teaching, God has one righteous will that is expressed in two, decidedly asymmetrical dispositions toward humanity. In the quest for clarity, I shall provide a series of statements summarizing Calvin's teaching. For Calvin the biblical interpreter, these statements are not necessarily in order of development, but they emerge in a synthetic fashion from his reading, teaching, and preaching of Scripture. Calvin teaches that:

1. God can only be known by those with faith.
2. God's nature is known through his works, particularly his works of creation and providence, his inspiration of Scripture, and most of all the life, death, resurrection and ascension of the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.
3. God's unchanging nature is one of love, righteousness, wisdom, goodness, power, judgment (of evil), holiness, etc.
4. God himself has one righteous will in accordance with his nature.
5. God's gracious actions in creation, in Christ's multifaceted and complete reconciling work that is sufficient for the redemption of all, and in election to salvation as witnessed to in Scripture and experience directly correspond to God's revealed nature and one righteous will. This is God's disclosed disposition (will) toward humanity.
6. From our human perspective, the limited efficiency of Christ's reconciling work and God's sovereign rule over the fall and reprobation (creating some people whom he would allow to remain in their sin) as detailed in Scripture and witnessed to by experience only correspond in part with God's revealed nature and one righteous will. This is God's veiled disposition (will) toward humanity.
7. God's two dispositions toward humanity (disclosed and veiled) are both included in God's one, righteous will, even though humans cannot understand how.
8. Because God has made himself known to those with faith, they are to abide in God's revealed nature and will, therefore trusting that all of God's actions align with his nature and righteous will. Believers submit to God's secret counsel and hidden wisdom but not by separating God and his acts from his

righteous character and will. Instead, they recognize their epistemic limits and thus humbly submit to the limits of their knowledge of God while trusting in what they do know of God.<sup>1</sup>

9. Therefore, those with faith proclaim God's disclosed will of love to all humanity because it accords with God's nature and provides an accurate depiction of God's revealed disposition toward humanity.
10. Finally, believers also submit to God's inscrutable wisdom and rule in the fact that some people seemingly do not come to a place of saving faith in Christ and have therefore been passed over by God. This fact is inexplicable but true. It provides no unique information about God's nature, nor does it explicitly inform us of God's disposition toward humanity.<sup>2</sup>

To summarize, God has one righteous will that is expressed as two, decidedly asymmetrical dispositions toward humanity. For Calvin, these dispositions are distinctly asymmetrical in regard to their connection to God's nature, human epistemic access, and proclamation, which I shall expand upon here.

First, regarding God's nature, God's disclosed disposition toward humanity corresponds directly with God's loving, wise, righteous, good, powerful, judging nature. In contrast, humanity can only perceive a few connections between God's veiled disposition toward humanity and God's nature, namely his judgment of evil, his freedom, his sovereign rule, and his display of love to the elect (via the contrast). It is not clear how God's reprobative actions toward people correspond with his loving, wise, powerful, good, righteous nature.

Second, these two dispositions toward humanity are markedly asymmetrical in regards to human epistemic access. On the one hand, only God's disclosed disposition can be known positively and substantially, and then only by those with faith. Believers can know God's nature through God's works, most of all Christ's redeeming life, death, resurrection, ascension, and ongoing priestly intercession that restores humanity to communion with God without regard for human merit.

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<sup>1</sup> Obviously, not every person will be comfortable theologically or logically with this step. For Calvin, this is what made the most sense of the biblical witness and his experience, but other Christian theologians have provided different accounts through the ages. For three alternative perspectives, see below.

<sup>2</sup> Again, this step is potentially controversial, but this was Calvin's approach.



Thus Calvin consistently returns to his description of God as loving Father in accordance with God's nature.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, God's veiled reprobating disposition toward humanity is only known in part, as a shadow of God's disclosed disposition. Metaphorically, God's disclosed disposition has been set out in the light of day for all to see while his veiled disposition is locked in a black box with no way of opening it. By peaking in through the cracks, silhouettes can be deciphered that roughly correspond with what is seen in broad daylight, but the resultant quality and quantity of information is minute compared with what is seen in broad daylight.

Third, God's two dispositions toward humanity are drastically asymmetrical in terms of proclamation. In the gospel, Christians proclaim the good news of God's gracious love revealed in Christ's multifaceted and complete work of redemption. Although God's judgment of evil and sin is unquestionably part of the good news of the gospel, it is God's nature and disclosed disposition toward humanity that is proclaimed to all people in the hope that they will repent and receive the free grace of God in Christ. Calvin is clear that proclamation of judgment is not an end in itself. Rightly used, it can only help humble people enough to lead them to receive God's grace in Christ.<sup>4</sup> Humans, including the leaders of the church, never assign any person to reprobation but long for each person's redemption until his or her very last breath. Therefore, God's disclosed will provides the content of the preaching of the gospel.

In sum, according to Calvin's exposition of the breadth of Scripture, God has one righteous will that is expressed as God's two, patently asymmetrical dispositions toward humanity. God's disclosed disposition of love, righteousness, wisdom, power, goodness, and judgment (of evil) concurs with God's unchanging nature, is known by those of faith, and is proclaimed to all. God's veiled, sovereign, reprobating disposition is known as a fact but does not clearly emerge from or reflect God's nature.

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<sup>3</sup> For an excellent recent essay on God's fatherhood and our adoption in Calvin's theology, see Canlis, "The Fatherhood of God and Union With Christ in Calvin," 399-426.

<sup>4</sup> Calvin also sees the preaching of the gospel as revealing and amassing the guilt of those who reject Christ, but this is a side-effect, not the primary goal, of the gospel proclamation.

For Calvin, the only God that can be known, proclaimed, and trusted is God the Father, the God of creation, election and redemption who relates to his people according to his fatherly love; for reasons known only to him, he inexplicably creates some whom he does not rescue from their sinful state of rebellion against him. Held together, this is God's disposition toward humanity in the theology of John Calvin.

Can a pastor who ascribes to Calvin's theology stand in front of a group of unknown people and say, "God loves you!"? According to Calvin's theology, Yes. The God of love seen in Christ is the only God that can be known and preached. This was Calvin's conclusion based on his synthesis of Scripture, but other options abound for interpreting Scripture's teaching on God's disposition toward humanity. We turn to consider three now.

### ***INSIGHTS FROM CONTEMPORARY BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP***

Calvin perceives God's two, decidedly asymmetrical dispositions toward humanity as a faithful expression of the whole witness of Scripture, explaining the good news of God's fatherly love expressed in Christ and offered to all. However, since his days, friends and foes have questioned his teaching and the way that it seems to make God a tyrant or the author of evil. As we have seen, Calvin was unswayed by such criticisms,<sup>5</sup> and many today have followed in his footsteps. Still, many others have offered relevant constructive criticisms that could make Calvin's account more true to Scripture and more pastorally useful, two of Calvin's central goals. Although a full exposition of these ideas would take more space than is available here, I briefly mention two developments in recent biblical scholarship and theology that may enhance or modify Calvin's account: first Karl Barth's and Richard Bauckham's elevation of God's self-revelation in Christ, and second, N. T. Wright's work of recovering the Jewish nature of the teaching of the New Testament.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example his response to Pighius and Bolsec (amongst others), *De Aeterna*; CO 8:253-366.

First, Barth, as a systematic theologian who sought to base all his work on the exegesis of Scripture,<sup>6</sup> and Bauckham, as a theologically-minded biblical scholar, both elevate God's self-revelation in Christ as the first and proper filter through which we must press all of our talk about God. Barth is famous for this "christocentric" approach that has precipitated much division in Calvin scholarship over the past 60 years.<sup>7</sup> Although Barth and Calvin both provide accounts that recognize Christ as the center of God's self-revelation and the center of God's redeeming work in the world, their methodologies are distinct. For Calvin, Christ is the supreme accommodation of the God who dwells in unapproachable light. That accommodation aligns with and clarifies God's accommodation in creation and providence and Scripture's broader witness. God is known in Christ, but no limited human could ever know God fully. For Barth, Christ provides direct knowledge of God's being and is thus the lens through which one examines all of Scripture and all of God's works. In short, "The one God is revealed to us absolutely in Jesus Christ. He is absolutely the same God in Himself."<sup>8</sup> Because God in himself has been made known in Christ, Barth's theology leaves no doubt about God's disposition toward humanity. In accord with Barth's reading of Scripture in light of God's assuming flesh in Christ, God's word to humanity is always "Yes." In other words, Barth sees Calvin's description of God's disclosed disposition toward humanity as expressing God's *only* disposition toward humanity.

Similarly, in his work relating Jewish monotheism and New Testament Christology, Bauckham contends that the New Testament teaches that Jesus provides us direct knowledge of God. Showing similar reticence to Calvin

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<sup>6</sup> In a 1935 farewell address to a group of students in Bonn with his expulsion from Germany imminent, Barth said, "And now the end has come. So listen to my piece of advice: exegesis, exegesis, and yet more exegesis! Keep to the Word, to the Scripture that has been given to us," Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life From Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 259.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Richard Muller, "A Note on 'Christocentrism' and the Imprudent Use of Such Terminology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 253-260. Cf. Marc Cortez, "What Does it Mean to Call Karl Barth a 'Christocentric' Theologian?," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60, no. 2 (2007): 127-143. Cf. Gibson, *Reading the Decree*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> *CD* II/1, p. 297; *KD*, p. 334. It is worth noting that Barth, like Calvin, does not teach that God can be comprehensively known by humans. Barth affirms God's mystery, transcendence, and freedom that is actually most clearly expressed in God's self-revelation in Christ. Cf. *CD* I/1, p. 165; *KD*, p. 171. Cf. Alan J. Torrance, "The Trinity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 83-84.

regarding descriptions of God's being, Bauckham utilizes the term "divine identity" as a means to describe *who* God is, not to describe God's essence or being.<sup>9</sup> Recognizing the manner in which the New Testament ascribes worship to Jesus as Creator and Ruler, Bauckham contends, "the highest possible Christology - the inclusion of Jesus in the unique divine identity - was central to the faith of the early church even before any of the New Testament writings were written."<sup>10</sup> For Bauckham, what Jesus does and who Jesus is are both indicative of God's divine identity.<sup>11</sup> For example, Bauckham contends that for the New Testament writers, Jesus' life and death do not simply reveal truths about God, but "Jesus reveals that God is always like this...In this act of self-giving God is most truly himself and defines himself for the world."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, because Jesus is included in the identity of God, God's identity cannot be described through analogy with a lone human subject but must be understood in terms of the "interpersonal relationship between Jesus and his Father."<sup>13</sup> This understanding of God's identity revealed in Jesus does not rob God of his freedom. Instead, it acknowledges that God always acts according to his identity but not necessarily according to human expectations.<sup>14</sup> In short, Bauckham, like Barth, sees in the Bible grounds for a direct connection between Jesus and our knowledge of God. What we see in Jesus, including his self-giving life and death and personal relations with the Father, teaches us who God is.

In Barth's and Bauckham's accounts, Jesus as the incarnate Son of God provides insight into God's nature and God's triune identity for which Calvin did not find grounds. Where Calvin's God is *for* humanity but sometimes acts in ways that appear contrary to that, Barth and Bauckham see in Jesus the grounds to say God is *for* humanity, full stop.

As another example, biblical scholar N. T. Wright seeks to interpret the teaching of the New Testament in light of its distinctively Jewish first-century

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 7. This term is analogous to the common use of "personal identity."

<sup>10</sup> Bauckham, *God Crucified*, 19.

<sup>11</sup> Bauckham, *God Crucified*, 31.

<sup>12</sup> Bauckham, *God Crucified*, 51.

<sup>13</sup> Bauckham, *God Crucified*, 55.

<sup>14</sup> Bauckham, *God Crucified*, 53.

context.<sup>15</sup> He thus sees in the whole of Scripture not a story about getting “saved” from sin and into heaven but a much grander narrative of God’s purposes for creation and God’s faithful commitment to accomplish those purposes, first through the people of Israel and then through Israel’s Messiah. Wright observes a few key themes in God’s interactions with Israel that continue in a redefined manner in light of the coming of Jesus and the sending of the Spirit. We name two here. First, there is creation and the new creation. In the beginning, God created all things; the end will not be a spiritual escape but an embodied new creation in which God puts all things to rights, condemning evil and restoring people to right standing with God as they serve as God’s vice-regents, ruling over and stewarding God’s good creation. Christian ethics emerge in part from a realized eschatology of God’s kingdom and the work of new creation on earth now. Second, there is exodus and new exodus. Just as God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt, so the New Testament speaks of God’s rescue of humanity from the bondage of sin and death through the work of the Messiah. Through these (and other) themes, Wright discovers riches in the New Testament texts that Calvin simply did not have the resources to access. For example, Wright points out that Israel’s election is toward a specific end, namely God’s purposes of undoing sin, rescuing the world, and making his glory known in all the earth. New Testament election is thus similarly for the sake of the redemption of the world, not a selection of a few to escape the world.<sup>16</sup> Although Calvin sought to return *ad fontes* and deeply respected the Jewish roots of Scripture,<sup>17</sup> he was simply not aware of much of the first century Jewish context of the New Testament from which Wright and others draw today.

Wright’s depiction of God, God’s purposes, and God’s disposition toward humanity is clear: God is faithful to his purposes in creation by bringing them to completion in the new creation. There is no hidden God or shadow within God. The

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<sup>15</sup> Although these themes are present in many of his books, for his most recent and most fully developed account, see N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, vol. 2 (London: SPCK Publishing, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Implicitly echoing Barth’s “Yes” and “No” approach, for Wright, God’s wrath is the covenantal wrath of God that arises from God’s unwillingness to abandon his purposes for creation or his covenantal relationship with his people.

<sup>17</sup> Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin*, 77-101.

one God of Israel shows his faithfulness to his covenant promise by sending his Messiah to complete God's purposes of putting the whole world to rights.

In sum, Barth, Bauckham, and Wright provide three examples of the ways in which thoughtful biblical and theological analysis results in accounts of the teaching of Scripture that do not include the potential confusion of God's two asymmetrical dispositions toward humanity. It will remain up to the pastor, elder, theologian, biblical scholar, parishioner, and lay leader to evaluate both the scriptural faithfulness and the pastoral usefulness of the different approaches.

We end with Calvin's exhortation to all those who engage in this ongoing task of theological reflection and practice:

True, indeed, the fountain of life, righteousness, power, and wisdom, is with God, but this is a hidden and inaccessible fountain to us. Yet an abundance of those things has been exhibited [*exposita*] to us in Christ, so that we may be allowed to seek these in him; for of his own accord, he is ready to flow to us, if we give a way for him by faith.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Comm. John* 1:16; *CO* 47:16. My translation.

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