

THE LIFE, TIMES, AND THEOLOGICAL METHOD OF JOHN CALVIN

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It seems that the name John Calvin has the ability to evoke passionate responses in either of two directions. On the one hand, some love Calvin for his faithful and fruitful labors, and yet, on the other hand, others have the strongest of hatred for him and view him as a virtual enemy of the gospel. One thing is certain: the last five hundred years of Christianity have indeed been strongly influenced by this man. One of the particular positive contributions that is recognized by many is that Calvin was one of the first (or perhaps even the greatest) to give Christian theology a scientific and organized form. In the words of Archer E. Anderson, John Calvin is the one who gave the Protestant Reformation “a complete biblical theology,” and stands out as one of the “torch-bearers of mankind.”¹

Purposes of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to give the reader a brief introduction to the man John Calvin from various perspectives. This will begin with selected information about the historical context of Calvin’s life, background, and education, his work as a servant of the gospel, and how God used him to impact the world through his work as a Bible exegete,

¹ Archer E. Anderson, “John Calvin, A Prophet of God,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 91:364 (October 1934): 474.

expositor, and theologian. The goal of this investigation will be to examine any exegetical tendencies of Calvin and any peculiar theological methods or motifs that may seem to characterize him or dominate his writings.

Methods of the Study

In terms of critiquing the theological methodology of Calvin, this will be accomplished by doing research in two primary areas. Most importantly, the author will present findings from reading and research directly out of *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (hereafter *The Institutes*). Secondly, the author will interact with, and present, observations from other writers out of a variety of theological journals.

Chapter two will look at the historical background of Calvin's life. This will include a discussion about the significance of the Roman Catholic Church and its influence upon the thoughts and theology of that age and consider the way in which world view changes came about with the Renaissance and erupting Reformation. Chapter three will expand on the background information of chapter two by giving an overview of the ministry of Calvin and some of the people, doctrines and concepts that may have been direct influences upon his life. Chapter four will focus on Calvin as a Bible exegete, expositor, and theologian. This will include an examination of his work at five different levels: (1) Calvin's exegesis and biblical theology, (2) Calvin's integration of Scripture across biblical time periods and authors, (3) Calvin's systematization of theology, (4) Calvin's integration of his theology with knowledge from any extra-biblical disciplines, and (5) Calvin's application of his

theology to life. Chapter five will build upon the studies of chapter four, but the focus here will be to see if there are any particular theological issues that would seem to dominate the methodology and conclusions of Calvin. The final chapter will present a summary of the findings and how this study might be applicable to the reader's life and ministry.

Limitations of the Study

This study is not intended to be an exhaustive analysis of Calvin. Rather, the purpose is to survey his teachings (including observations from others) to see if one can identify any major and recurring points of emphasis (i.e., any theological centers or main theological motifs). Secondly, due to the huge quantity of written materials by Calvin and by others who have written on Calvin, the study will be limited to research within *The Institutes* and to a limited number of journal articles that focus in on the objectives of this paper.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF JOHN CALVIN

John Calvin was born in Noyon, France in July 10, 1509 and died in 1564.

Without question, the age into which Calvin was born was one of incredible change and turmoil. As a whole, the western world was emerging from some thousand years of the Dark (Middle) Ages, and, for the prior two centuries, the influences of Renaissance and Enlightenment thinking had been preparing the soil of man's thinking for significant changes. Among the more significant events of the age were the following: (1) a growing rebellion against Rome and the Papacy, (2) the work and influence of pre-reformation evangelicals, and (3) the explosive impact of the Reformation.

Rebellion against Roman Catholic Authority and the Papacy

For at least the last couple of centuries, the stage had been getting set for significant changes in the European/Roman world. The stranglehold that the Papacy had exerted had reached its climax around the beginning of the thirteenth century with Pope Innocent III. Between 1200-1500, Europe had to deal with the continuing threat of Moslem invasions (which eventually led to the fall of Constantinople in 1453) not to mention political fragmentation within Europe that led to much inter-country conflict.

In the midst of all this political turmoil, the Roman Catholic Church (hereafter RCC) was beginning to lose its grasp over men both in issues of politics as well as in thinking. The so-called Babylonian Captivity from 1305-1377 saw the Papal chair

kidnapped from Rome and taken to Avignon, France. The papal schism (1387-1417) saw Rome divided to the extent that it ended up with three Popes at one moment, each of whom was anathematizing the other as being a false Pope. In general, mankind was beginning to see through the corruption of RCC religious veneer.

One of the most significant factors that would play a role was Guttenberg's printing press (ca. 1450). The ability to put the Word of God into mass printing was a major factor for bringing light to a very dark world. Men began to see and read truth on their own and see that the false and mystical claims of Rome were religious lies to hold sway over men for personal gain.

Pre-Reformation Evangelicals

The opposition to RCC authority was given tremendous theological justification by certain men who came to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ through exposure to the Word of God. In God's providence, He was at work to save certain individuals who would have their part in turning the world upside down, much as did the Apostles some 1400 years earlier. Many of these children of God were executed by church (generally civil authorities acting on behalf of the RCC) with the accusation of heresy.

Some of the major figures of this age included men like John Wycliffe, John Huss of Prague (1369-1415), and others. All across the European world, the stage was being set for something new that would radically altar the face of the religious world.

Birth of the Reformation

Not all true Christians met with swift martyrdom as did many who proclaimed the truth. For example, in Germany, the RCC priest Martin Luther (1483-1546) came to faith

through his own personal study of God's Word. Luther, of course, became a huge catalyst in 1517 to ignite the Protestant Reformation with the posting of the 95 theses and all that God did through that action. Without question, Luther would certainly have a significant influence upon Calvin, who was only eight years old at the time when Luther posted the 95 theses.

At this same time God was raising up other men in other places who would also become great influences on the spread of the Gospel. Among these were men like Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) in Switzerland, John Knox in Scotland (born in 1505), and even unsaved kings like Henry VIII of England, who would re-shape the political environment of England in a way that would later facilitate the gospel. It is clear that God was at work to providentially pave the way for a mighty wave of change. Numerous natural factors had been at work for years, but all of it was a part of God's gracious work to save sinners.

Calvin's Birth

There is little doubt that all people are influenced in some way by their background. This section begins to examine the specific influences in the life of Calvin personally. Noyon, France, the birthplace of John Calvin, was in northwestern France. His actual name, Jean Cauvin, became "Calvin" years later when as a scholar he adopted the Latin form (Calvinus). Noyon had been an old and important center of the Roman Catholic Church in northern Europe and much of the city life revolved around the RCC and the local cathedral.

Calvin's father (Gerard) was a middle-class man who served in the church in various offices including notary public, and eventually became the bishop's secretary. As a result, young Calvin was closely tied to church affairs from the beginning. These

strong church influences gave Calvin a certain “in” to those of higher economic and religious status.

Calvin's Education

As with Luther's father, Calvin's father wanted his son to receive education, but Calvin's father wanted to see his son advance in the church. His father did all he could to see that Calvin received the best possible education. At age fourteen Calvin was enrolled in the University of Paris, the intellectual center of western Europe. He eventually attended the College de Montaigu, the same institution Erasmus had attended one generation earlier. The influence of this Renaissance learning (humanism) was beginning to have a significant influence on young Calvin.

In, Paris, a strong movement for reform in the church had been taking place under the leadership of Jacques Lefevre d'Etapes (1455–1536). Calvin also was influenced by a close friend who was one of Lefevre's disciples. On top of this, Luther's writings and ideas were being circulated and probably also having an influence on Calvin. After Calvin's father's conflict with church officials in 1528, he told his son (who had just completed his master of arts degree) to leave theology and study law. Calvin came to Orleans to study.

With great progress, Calvin earned a doctorate in law and his law license. He also learned Greek and spent considerable time in classical studies. He continued in this basic path until the death of his father in 1531. Twenty-two year old Calvin went to Paris to pursue his Renaissance studies, and with these further studies, become increasingly exposed to the biblical truths that would eventually lead to his conversion.

Calvin's Conversion

Though little is known about the exact details of his conversion, it would seem to have taken place somewhere between 1532 and 1533. One basis for this reasoning is the fact that when Nicholas Cop was elected rector at the University of Paris, his strongly Protestant public address ended up getting him accused of heresy. When Cop was forced to flee Paris, Calvin also had to flee with him. During the next three years, Calvin traveled between various parts of France, Switzerland and Italy. During this time, King Francis I had become furious with the Protestants due to an incident involving “the Placards” on October 18, 1534. This group had posted copies of a handbill that made crude attacks on the Catholic Mass into numerous public places (including the royal bedchamber), leading to many severe persecutions and executions against Protestants.² It was around this time in 1534 that Calvin’s official break with the RCC came when he resigned from his RCC ecclesiastical post. With this persecution, Calvin realized it was no longer safe to live in Paris or anywhere else in France. For the rest of his life, therefore, he was a refugee from his home country.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. By John T. McNeill, transl. by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), xxxi.

CHAPTER 3

THE GOSPEL MINISTRY OF JOHN CALVIN

It is interesting the way that God often works by casting people into the midst of situations that they never could have envisioned. Such is the case with John Calvin. From the evidence, what one sees is a man who was reluctantly cast into a role of high leadership responsibility as the lead non-Catholic pastor in Geneva. This came about because of the reputation that young Calvin had already gained, in large part due to his writing of *The Institutes*. This portion of the paper will examine the birth of the Institutes in the context of a Roman Catholic Europe, Calvin's commitment to Scripture as a source of authority, Calvin's initial ministry in Geneva, his time in Strassburg, his return to Geneva, his encounter with Michael Servetus, and how these and other influences might have had an influence upon the life, ministry, and theology of Calvin.

Birth of The Institutes and Its Apologetical Purposes

Among the earliest events in Calvin's gospel ministry was his time in Basel, Switzerland in early in 1536 when he published the first edition of *The Institutes*, actually first printed in June 1535. One of the main reasons Calvin wrote *The Institutes* was to serve as a defense and apology for Francis I for Protestant theology (using the term "Protestant" in the general sense). The king had been under the impression that all Protestant theology was subversive to civil government. Calvin wanted to demonstrate that this faith was biblical, reasonable, and innocent of many of the false accusations (some of which arose because of various Anabaptist insurrections). Knowing that King Francis thought the gospel to be a political threat and that Protestants rejected civil

authority, as some Anabaptist groups in fact did, Calvin rushed *The Institutes* to press with a dedication and preface to the king, acknowledging the king's authority and laying out the articles of Reformed Faith in clear fashion.

This initial work underwent several revisions before its final exhaustive edition in 1559. It has been, without question, one of the most influential works in church (and perhaps world) history. As with Luther, Calvin was not really seeking a great name, but God used the circumstances for great things that were surely beyond their wildest dreams. Calvin put it this way, "God thrust me into the fray."

Because *The Institutes* were originally written as an apology for the Protestants who were also under attack by the RCC, there are constant references to the RCC and its theological and practical errors throughout the writings. For example, when Calvin was discussing the issue of the knowledge of God and issues of idolatry (including the idea of images), he made this comment, "Therefore, if the papists have any shame, let them henceforward not use this evasion, that pictures are the books of the uneducated, because it is plainly refuted by very many testimonies of Scripture."³

The Background of a Semi-Pelagian Roman Catholicism

Without question, the major historical issue of the day was the battle against Roman Catholicism and the Papacy. It is true that Calvin did have training in law, and that this training may have helped him in developing a very analytical mind, but this legal background does not seem to be a factor in his exegesis and theology (unlike as in someone like Charles Finney). The fact is that Calvin was born into the cradle of the Reformation, and that this, no doubt, was the greatest external issue that would have

³ Ibid, 106.

influenced Calvin. But even here, it would not seem fair, in this writer's mind, to say that Calvin's exegesis and theology were strongly shaped by Roman Catholicism (neither from his former days as a Catholic nor from his Christian days as one in opposition to the RCC).

It would probably also be fair to say that the semi-Pelagian views of the RRC were a significant factor in the fact that Calvin often placed a strong emphasis upon human depravity, on the one hand, and God's sovereign grace on the other hand. With reference to this issue, it is not hard to see the fact that Augustine with his views on sovereign grace also had a significant influence upon Calvin. There are many times in his writing when Calvin makes reference to the teachings of Augustine on this issue as well as others.

God's Sovereign Purposes and Calvin's First Stay Geneva

In 1536, Calvin was traveling to Strassburg (a free city between northern France and Germany) and he stopped for the night in Geneva. With the help of its Swiss neighbors, Geneva had recently declared its political independence from the Holy Roman Empire. Two months before Calvin's stop, the Reformer William Farel (1489–1565) had led the city to declare its allegiance to Protestantism after three years of prior gospel laboring. Farel, knowing about Calvin and that he was in town, asked him to join their labors in Geneva. Calvin declined, explaining that he desired only to find a quiet refuge for study. Farel would not take "no" for an answer. Eventually Farel told Calvin that God would bring curse down upon him unless he stayed there to minister. These words shook Calvin enough to accept the "invitation." For the 28 year old young man, this would become the beginning of many years of Christian labors in Geneva.

Calvin immediately set to work reorganizing the church. This included changes in things like the frequency of Communion, church discipline (only for those who truly belong to the Body of Christ), the introduction of singing as a part of worship, and most especially, in his dedication to the clear preaching of God's Word.

Calvin's Time in Strassburg

Opposition to Calvin's work forced him to flee Geneva in 1538. Calvin went to Strassburg and had peaceful studies from 1538-1541. During this era, he spent considerable time with Martin Bucer (1491–1551), whose ideas, particularly on predestination, the Lord's Supper, and church organization, markedly influenced Calvin's own. In Strassburg Calvin also pastored a congregation of Protestant refugees from France, organizing its church government after what he believed to be the New Testament pattern and compiling a liturgy and popular psalm book. He also participated as a representative of Strassburg in the religious colloquies at Worms and Regensburg (both in Germany) between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals (Protestants). He succeeded, in fact, in converting to the Reformed faith at least two Anabaptist observers. One of them, Jean Stordeur of Liege, died in 1539, and Calvin, who had been urged by his colleagues to find a wife, married Stordeur's widow, Idelette de Bure. She brought him much consolation and happiness. "During her life she was the faithful helper of my ministry," Calvin wrote at her death ten years later. "Truly mine is no common grief. I have been bereaved of the best friend of my life."

Calvin's Return to Geneva

In 1541, the Genevan leaders who had gotten Calvin exiled fell into disgrace, thus opening the door for Calvin to return to Geneva. Though hesitant to return to the fiery trials of ministry in Geneva, at Farel's insistence, he reluctantly returned. Calvin dedicated himself to preaching the Bible and bringing Christian reforms to the city. None of this was an easy task, for there were many unsaved Catholics in the civil realm who desperately wanted to get rid of Calvin, despite all the good that he was accomplishing for the city in diverse areas such as law, foreign affairs, and public policy. Calvin was committed to the idea that all of life was to be brought under the lordship of Christ. Geneva enjoyed great prosperity that was largely influenced by the work of this Reformed Pastor. As a result, Geneva became a "Christian republic," which the Scottish reformer John Knox called "the most perfect school of Christ ... since the days of the apostles." Church and state served as separate but equal partners.

Calvin's Conflict Involving Michael Servetus

The immediate years of Calvin's return to Geneva (1541-46) were basically peaceful, but those years were not to last forever. From around the years 1546 to 1555, opposition began to arise and present many threats. One of the biggest challenges took place in 1553. The conflicts revolved around a Spanish physician named of Michael Servetus who had been instigating conflicts in France over issues of Trinitarian theology.

In 1531 Servetus, using the pseudonym Villeneuve, published at Hagenau a radical work, *De Trinitatis erroribus*, which was repugnant to Romanists and Protestants alike. In Paris he met Calvin who greatly disapproved of his views, but refused to debate him in private. In 1540 Servetus began writing another theological work, *Restitution of Christianity*, completed about 1546 and published in 1553. In this work Servetus denied

the pre-existence of Christ and called the Trinity “a sort of three-headed Cerberus.”

Servetus was known by all as a brash and arrogant man.

Although Calvin had not sought his arrest, authorities in France used some of the correspondence between Calvin (in Geneva) and Servetus as evidence to arrest Servetus for his mockery of the Trinity. French authorities condemned Servetus to be burned, but he managed to escape.

The real problems for Calvin arose when Servetus fled France to go back to Spain, but passed through Geneva instead. As known to many, Calvin did have a role in the subsequent arrest and execution of Servetus in Geneva, but one needs to take into account the specific historical details and context before drawing conclusions about Calvin as a person and spiritual leader. G. Coleman Luck provides helpful background regarding the historical details.

First, one must remember that blasphemy against the Trinity in Medieval Europe was clearly an easy way to draw the wrath of religious and civil authorities. Secondly, one of the commonly held concepts according to RCC theory was that it was justifiable to kill the body to save the soul and, thirdly, that it was acceptable to execute a heretic if that would preserve peace and order in the Church. Fourth, one must be recognize that Calvin did not simply exterminate or suppress anyone who disagreed with his personal views. Calvin’s patient discussions with the heretic (Unitarian) Socinus demonstrate this fact (Servetus taught God as impersonal and that all matter was of divine essence). Fifth, one must understand how arrogant, brash and sarcastic Servetus conducted himself toward others. After having spoken with Servetus, Oecolampadius (a theologian of Basel) wrote to Zwingli, saying that Servetus was “so proud, presumptuous and

quarrelsome that it is all to no purpose,” a view that was also held by Melancthon, one of the fairest and most tolerant men of his age. After Servetus’ execution, Melancthon wrote to Calvin on October 14, 1554, that it was “justly done.” Sixth, one must recognize that Servetus was the one who was incessantly instigating conflict of a public nature. This instigation with Calvin began around 1545 when Servetus was working on *Restitution of Christianity* (Servetus wrote to Calvin: “False are all the invisible Gods of the Trinitarians, as false as the gods of the Babylonians”), but continued even after Calvin quit correspondence and walked away from any contact. It was Guillaume Trie, a merchant from Lyons, who, in the midst of a debate with his Catholic cousin Antoine Arneys, obtained evidence against Servetus that came from some dialogue between Calvin and Servetus. At length, Arneys took Servetus’ writings to the authorities who had him arrested and condemned at to be burned on June 17th 1553. Servetus escaped on April 7th, so they burned him in effigy. The reality, as noted by Wadkins, is that Servetus, by his own efforts, made himself “a hunted heretic.”⁴

Servetus continued this instigation by coming right to Calvin’s church in Geneva on a Sunday morning service. Calvin informed the Council which had him arrested. At the request of the Council, Calvin drew up articles of accusation. The seventh and final point one should be aware of is that the Genevan sentence of condemnation came from a universal consensus of civil authorities and not from John Calvin himself on his own authority, and that Servetus so forced Calvin’s role in the trial that the only logical outcome was his own death. At that time, Calvin’s position in Geneva was being seriously challenged by strong opposition including those on the city Council of

⁴ Timothy H. Wadkins, “A Recipe For Intolerance: A Study of the Reasons Behind John Calvin’s Approval Of Punishment for Heresy,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26:4 (December 1983): 431.

“Libertine Party” who saw this incident as an opportunity to discredit Calvin, even if it meant siding with a heretic. For over a month Servetus used every effort to discredit Calvin and turn the focus away from himself and against Calvin, saying things like Calvin was a disciple of Simon Magus. Servetus even demanded that they arrest Calvin as a false accuser and heretic, saying that “the case be settled by his or my death or other penalty.” He demanded that Calvin “be not merely condemned but exterminated” and his goods adjudged to himself.

The Council could not overlook the extreme errors of Servetus and sent the evidence to the ministers and magistrates of Bern, Basel, Zürich, and Schaffhausen, asking for their advice. Replies were received October 18th, and all without exception condemned Servetus. Bern especially indicated that they should “remove this pest” from the churches. On October 26th the Council condemned Servetus and ordered him to be burned the next day. Calvin begged them to alleviate this to a milder form of execution, but without avail. After an initial breakdown, Servetus faced his fate with courage. Interestingly he even sent for Calvin begged his pardon for any wrong he might have done the Genevan Reformer.⁵

To summarize these events, one should be very careful about portraying Calvin as a tyrant who used ecclesiological power mixed with civil authority to dominate Geneva. Such was not the case in the death of Michael Servetus. Calvin did strive to see godly values put in place in Geneva, but his efforts were also applauded by many. When died in 1564 all Geneva turned out to honor him.⁶

⁵Dallas Theological Seminary. (1947; 2002). *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 104* (Vol. 104, Page 236-242). Cited in electronic form from Libronix.

⁶Douglas, J. D., Comfort, P. W., & Mitchell, D. (1997, c1992). *Who's who in Christian history*. Illustrated lining papers. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House. Cited in electronic form without pagination with Libronix

Calvin's Later Years

The later years of Calvin's life have been called by some the "good years" (1555-64). This included the founding of the Genevan Academy in 1559 for the training of men for ministry, a ministry placed under the direction of Calvin's successor Theodore Beza.⁷

Another significant accomplishment was the completion of The Geneva Study Bible in 1557. The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* adds these comments: "This 1557 translation was only the first part of a larger project which reached its culmination with the total Bible of 1560, normally called the Geneva Bible from its place of origin and also, perhaps, its theological slant. . . . The polemical notes, which champion Calvinism and condemn Romanism, caused offence in some quarters, but for others they gave the Bible its strength; in fact, they are no stronger than was customary in annotated Bibles of the period. . . . A folio edition came out in 1561 and several editions followed, some printed in Geneva and others in England. In 1576 L. Tomson issued a revision of the NT which was often used in subsequent editions of the whole Bible. The Scottish edition of 1579 was the first Bible ever printed in Scotland, and even in later competition with the AV the Geneva Bible held its own for many years in Scotland. In England, too, editions of the Geneva Bible continued up to 1644.⁸" Along with The Academy, the Geneva Study Bible would serve to crown Calvin's thirty plus years of labor for the glory of Jesus Christ at his death in 1564.

⁷ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Harper, 1985), 68.
AV Authorized (King James) Version

⁸Bromiley, G. W. (1988; 2002). *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (Vol. 2, Page 89). Wm. B. Eerdmans. Cited in electronic form without pagination with Libronix.

CHAPTER 4

PERSONAL INFLUENCES ON THE LIFE AND TEACHING OF JOHN CALVIN

Over many years, writers have tried to trace various kinds of influences in the theology of Calvin. Some of these suggested influences seem very clear, while others are not very convincing. This chapter will briefly consider the following possible influences on the methods and theology of Calvin: (1) the Influence of Greek Philosophers, (2) the influence of Erasmus of Rotterdam, (3) the influence of Martin Luther, (4) the influence of various others, (5) the influence of Augustine.

The Influence of Greek Philosophers

From time to time some suggest that John Calvin was influenced by Greek philosophy or by certain Greek philosophers. Due to the sparseness of citations, one certainly cannot strongly support this assertion by showing direct evidence in *The Institutes*, although there are places where he does make allusion to some Greek thinker. Peter J. Leithart makes mention of the way that Egil Grisliis argues for both “literary dependence” and “basic general agreement” between Calvin and Cicero, but that Charles Partee disagrees, saying that there is not dependence, but merely the presence of certain parallels in selected topics.⁹ Compier comments on the way that some have accused Calvin of “humanist methodology” in his teaching and that he developed a doctrine in Geneva that was “decisively shaped by typical themes of the Renaissance.”¹⁰

⁹ Peter J. Leithart, “The Eminent Pagan: Calvin’s Use of Cicero in Institutes 1.1-5,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 52:1 (Spring 1990): 1-2.

¹⁰ Don H. Compier, “The Independent Pupil: Calvin’s Transformation of Erasmus’ Theological Hermeneutics,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 54:2 (Fall 1992): 217.

When it comes to theology, however, it seems clear that Calvin was no fan of Greek philosophy. Compier goes on to add that divergences between Calvin and the philosophers and humanists was due to differences in the “theological grids” held.¹¹ In other words, Calvin was dedicated to Scripture and this meant he could not be a slave to any idea that was not biblical. One example of Calvin’s independence from Greek philosophy, and Cicero in particular, is the way Calvin repudiates the idea that over the ages man is growing in wisdom and drawing nearer to God, a concept Cicero presented in *De natura deorum*. Rather, Calvin insisted that men are striving to “cast away all knowledge of God” and to do all he can to “corrupt the worship of him.”¹²

Others have sought to paint Calvin, with his serious view of life, as being under the influence of Stoic philosophy. Although some, as noted by Leithart, have tried to portray the Reformer and his teachings as “prudish” or “passionless,”¹³ the reality is that this is not due so much as the influence of Stoic philosophy, but more to Calvin’s own view of what the Scripture teaches on the “doctrine of mortification.”¹⁴ Yes, one can find certain parallels in Calvin to certain Greek thinkers, but one thing is clear: John Calvin was no slave to popular thinking if it meant a denial of biblical truth.

The Influence of Church History and RCC Councils

It is refreshing to see the way that Calvin used Church history and/or former church councils as sources of theological instruction, and yet it is very clear that he did not indiscriminately adopt these former theological articulations. Rather, Calvin was

¹¹ Ibid, 219.

¹² Leithart, 2.

¹³ Peter J. Leithart, “Stoic Elements in Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life, Part I: Original Corruption, Natural Law, and the Order of the Soul,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 55:1 (Spring 1990): 31.

¹⁴ Ibid, 33.

very bold to object to anything past or present that went against Scripture. He writes, “But a most pernicious error widely prevails that Scripture has only so much weight as is conceded to it by the consent of the church.”¹⁵ If Calvin felt history was sound, he appealed to it, but he also refused anything from history that he felt was not theologically sound—or even theologically precise. In the words of Reynolds, even though Calvin embraced the Athanasian and Nicene creeds, he saw the Nicene creed as “unsuitable as a concise confession of faith and spoke against the view that it was composed by the fathers at the Council of Nicaea.”¹⁶ To put it in other words, for Calvin, theological articulation had to be biblical, as well as lucid and clear. Reynolds goes on to explain that Calvin saw it necessary “to have words truly in conformity with the biblical truth” and which offered “the least possible of those asperities which can offend pious ears.”¹⁷ In summary, if Calvin felt that historical theology was sound and serviceable, he used it, but if he disagreed with it he was quick to point out the faults he saw.

The Influence of Erasmus

A second, and what could be more immediate, influence upon Calvin may be the Humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam. Regardless of how much direct influence Erasmus had or did not have upon Calvin and his theology, no one would deny the general influence of Erasmus there at the birth of the Reformation. As a “Humanist,” Erasmus was one who taught that men should do what they can to explore learning in order to expand human thinking and human potential. This would include the study of ancient languages like Greek and the Classical Greek writings of the past, including the New Testament in its

¹⁵ Calvin, 75.

¹⁶ Stephen M. Reynolds, “Calvin’s View of the Athanasian and Nicene Creeds,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 23:1 (Nov. 1960): 36.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 37.

original Greek. Even though Calvin was quick to criticize Renaissance Humanism in a number of areas (as he did in *The Institutes*), it has been noted by some writers that when Calvin saw that Humanism's good points were helpful, it was something to be "freely embraced."¹⁸

History shows that Erasmus had some amount of personal contact with William Farel, the exiled Frenchman taking refuge in Switzerland, the very man who convinced Calvin to stay and teach in Geneva.¹⁹ Farel, however, did not flock to this "prince of learning" as did most because Erasmus would not commit wholeheartedly to the cause of the Reformation.²⁰ One can also take note of the fact that Erasmus never embraced a strong Reformed view of man's total depravity as held by men like Luther, Zwingli and Calvin. This would be one example of a major theological chasm between Erasmus and men like Calvin. Nevertheless, Calvin did look upon Erasmus as a master in letters and learning and certainly was influenced by him in this sense.²¹ Methodologically and theologically, though, Erasmus was not a significant influence on John Calvin. Whereas Calvin was a committed exegete (driven by a commitment to contextual interpretation from literal hermeneutics), Erasmus was driven more by a theological grid, one which was largely based upon a "Christocentric" view of the Bible.²²

The Influence of Martin Luther

A third source of influence upon Calvin would certainly be the German Reformer Martin Luther, although it is hard to demonstrate historically any direct connection or

¹⁸ Richard C. Gamble, "Exposition and Method in Calvin," *Westminster Theological Journal* 49:1 (Spring 1987): 155.

¹⁹ Charles A. Nash, "The Relation of Erasmus to the Reformation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 96:381 (January 1939): 52.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 53.

²¹ *Ibid*, 56.

²² Compier, 222.

dependence. One can see very strong similarities on issues like man's sin, God's free grace and election, but one can also find these themes very strongly in other Reformers as well. As has been noted by many, "Calvin never slavishly followed anyone, including Luther, who may well have been the decisive influence at the moment when [Calvin] enlisted in the Reformed cause."²³ In 1555 when accused of contradicting Luther, Calvin replied by saying that he would not bow to "slavery."²⁴ History certainly shows strong disagreements between these and other Reformers when it came to the subject of The Lord's Table. Making what is clearly a reference to Luther and his view of Consubstantiation (where Christ is "under the bread"), Calvin says, "We must for a little while drag these subtleties out of their lurking places. . . . They disguise it with every possible color, but when they have said everything, it is clear enough that they insist on the local presence of Christ."²⁵ Calvin, though most certainly influenced by Luther, was by no means dependent upon him.

The Influence of Various Others

From time to time, some have suggested that one of the strong influences on Calvin, especially with reference to issues like man's sinfulness and the need for grace, may have been John of Fidanza, otherwise known as Saint Bonaventure (and parallels certainly can be found).²⁶ With reference to an innate knowledge of God Payne holds that both Calvin and Bonaventure hold to "the classic Augustinian position."²⁷ Others have pointed out that some influence probably came from Bernard of Clairvaux as one

²³ Ibid, 220.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Calvin, 1379.

²⁶ Gordon R. Payne, "Augustinianism in Calvin and Bonaventure," *Westminster Theological Journal* 44:1 (Spring 1982): 2-3.

²⁷ Ibid, 9.

who lived at the “climax of medieval Augustinianism.”²⁸ Others have pointed out the admiration that Calvin had for Martin Bucer of Strassburg, the city where Calvin stayed between 1538 and 1541 when asked to leave Geneva. As *Who’s Who in Christian History* notes, Bucer was “the leading Reformer in the strategic German city of Strassburg.”²⁹ It would seem that Bucer had a profound impact upon Calvin especially with reference to issues of ecclesiology. In his preface to his Romans commentary, Calvin “expresses his admiration” for both Philip Melancthon and Martin Bucer, although he also was quick to point out how his exegesis differed from theirs in various areas.³⁰

The Influence of Augustine

Although all these other sources were probably influential on Calvin to one degree or another, from *The Institutes* themselves one influence comes through strong and clear, and that is the influence from Saint Augustine, perhaps the greatest theological influence on the church throughout the Middle Ages and one from whom Calvin often quoted although he preceded him by some 1,100 years. As noted by Godfrey, “[T]here is a remarkable affinity between the theologies of Augustine and Calvin. But the exact lines of influence are elusive. . . . It is hard to prove that Calvin reached his Augustinian positions through the direct influence of Augustine rather than through the Augustinianism of others.”³¹

²⁸ W. Stanford Reid, “Bernard of Clairvaux in the Thought of John Calvin,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 41:1 (Fall 1978): 127.

²⁹ Douglas, J. D., Comfort, P. W., & Mitchell, D. (1997, c1992). *Who's who in Christian history*. Illustrated lining papers. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House. Cited in electronic form without pagination with Libronix.

³⁰ Compier, 220.

³¹ W. Robert Godfrey, “‘Beyond the Sphere of Our Judgment’: Calvin and the Confirmation of Scripture,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 58:1 (Spring 1996): 30.

In any case, without question, Calvin cites Augustine more often than any other historical source as one can easily note in *The Institutes*. This would be most especially the case in issues of anthropology, hamartiology and soteriology, in all of which the strong emphasis is upon man's inability and the need for God's free grace. Leithart points out that Calvin follows Augustine in the view that in the fall, "man's supernatural abilities were lost," and that his natural abilities were "corrupted."³² Calvin follows Augustine in the very strong conviction that the natural state of man is absolutely incapable of approaching God by means of performance of law. God must act upon man first, for "[if] the Spirit of grace is absent, the law is present only to accuse and kill us."³³

In summary, one does indeed find parallel between Calvin and a number of other sources, but none of these other influences can match the influence that Augustine himself had upon this powerful Reformer, particularly when it came to the need for God's intervention with saving grace.

³² Leithart, "Stoic Elements in Calvin's Doctrine of Christian Life," 37.

³³ Calvin, 356.

CHAPTER 5

A CONSIDERATION OF JOHN CALVIN AS A BIBLE EXEGETE, EXPOSITOR, AND THEOLOGIAN

This chapter will concentrate on the exegesis and theology of Calvin. It will do so by looking at the quality and consistency of his methods and will do so by examining five particular issues. The first issue to be examined is the quality and consistency of Calvin's work at the basic level of exegesis and biblical theology. The second issue to be examined will be the quality and consistency of how well Calvin integrates Scripture from different authors and different time eras within the Bible. The third point to look at will be to examine the ways in which Calvin pulls his theology together into a systematic form. The fourth major point this chapter will look at is how much and how well Calvin interacts extra-biblical information into his theology. The final issue this chapter will examine is the way that Calvin does, or does not, apply his theology to life.

First Issue: Calvin's Hermeneutical Approach to the Bible and Biblical Theology

Many writers have expressed their appreciation for the work of Calvin as a reliable exegete and interpreter of Scripture. Calvin's consistency is tied with three key principles as this section will discuss:

First Key Principle: Literal, Grammatical, Historical Hermeneutics

Many would agree that the best way of describing Calvin's hermeneutics and approach to the Bible would be that of literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutics. Calvin certainly did not approach the Bible like the RCC with its mystical view of multiple layers of meaning. Calvin, by and large, strived to find authorial intent in the text, and to do so by a careful reading of the words according to grammar, lexical

meaning, and context. As noted by Gamble, Calvin's style shows that his desire to try and be concise and clear for the reader to gain good understanding,³⁴ with the real goal being as an expositor as being that of "unfolding the mind of the biblical writer."³⁵ This truly is what makes John Calvin shine when it comes to his excellence in hermeneutical consistency, exegesis, and the formation of biblical theology.

It was this kind of discipline that gained Calvin the lasting reputation as a scientific interpreter of Scripture and organizer of truth. Regardless of how some today might think about John Calvin, or of "Calvinism" as a system of theology, there is no question that he was the most important systematizer of theology in the 16th century—and perhaps even to this very day.³⁶ Such quality in *The Institutes* led historian Will Durant to call this work as among the world's ten most influential works, a work that gave birth to a distinctive "Reformed" theology that was sometimes named after Calvin himself.³⁷

Second Key Principle: The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture

One of the reasons why we find such consistency in Calvin's exegesis and biblical theology is because of Calvin's strong commitment to the Inspiration and Authority of Scripture. Although one does not often see this stated by Calvin in explicit terms, it certainly is clear that Calvin believed that God gave the Bible as it stands, and that this record of God's revelation is to be understood as authoritative, including the belief, as Letham suggests, that the creation account of Genesis should be taken literally since "the

³⁴ Gamble, 156.

³⁵ Richard C. Gamble, "Brevitas et Facilitas: Toward an Understanding of Calvin's Hermeneutic," *Westminster Theological Journal* 47:1 (Spring 1985): 2.

³⁶ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Harper, 1985), 61.

³⁷ Douglas, J. D., Comfort, P. W., & Mitchell, D. (1997, c1992). *Who's who in Christian history*. Illustrated lining papers. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House. Cited in electronic form without pagination with Libronix.

six days of Genesis 1 are not for the mere purpose of conveying instruction.”³⁸ Roger Nicole has said, “If anyone deserves to be called a ‘man of the Bible,’ surely John Calvin will qualify.”³⁹

It is well known that the RCC gave lip service to the Bible, but in reality the real authority for the RCC rested in the church itself. Calvin reminds the reader at various points that the Bible is infallible, but the church is not. One example Calvin cited in *The Institutes* is when Eugenius was deposed by the Counsel of Basel, or the fact that this counsel was actually summoned by two Popes.⁴⁰ Throughout his writings, Calvin makes the point that the church is not the author of or authority over truth, but it is the Bible that stands as the sole source of truth and authority. Because of this huge battle the Reformers had with the RCC, the topic of Bibliology was a very big one in Calvin’s writings and Calvin’s dedication to “the authority of Scripture” is very apparent.⁴¹ On issues of textual transmission, one finds very little insight from Calvin,⁴² but it certainly is clear that “he held the Scriptures in the highest esteem and believed them to be infallible in all their parts.”⁴³

Third Key Principle: Perspicuity and the God-Given Capacity to Recognize Revelation

As one would rightly expect, Calvin’s dedication to literal hermeneutics includes, as noted, a high view of Scripture, but also a third key principle: man’s God-given capacity to reason and think and receive revelation from God. This would begin, first of

³⁸ Robert Letham, “In the Space of Six Days: The Days of Creation from Origen to the Westminster Assembly,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 61:2 (Fall 1999): 166.

³⁹ Roger Nicole, “John Calvin and Inerrancy,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25:4 (December 1982): 425.

⁴⁰ Calvin, 26.

⁴¹ Nicole, 426.

⁴² Harold Lindsell, “Biblical Infallibility: The Reformation and Beyond,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 19:1 (Winter 1976): 28.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

all, with the fact that all men have access to knowledge by General Revelation. Calvin writes, “There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy.⁴⁴ This natural God-given ability is part of what has been called the *sensus divinitatis*.⁴⁵ But this natural ability to have and obtain knowledge through General Revelation also includes man’s natural capacity to learn from Special Revelation. N. H. Gootjes quotes Calvin (1.3.3) where Calvin writes, “Men of sound judgment will always be sure of this, that a sense of divinity, . . . which can never be effaced, is engraven upon human minds.⁴⁶

For Calvin, even though man’s sinful nature always strives to suppress God’s truth, he was committed to the concept that man can know truth. Early in *The Institutes* he tells the reader that his desire is to simply assist men in knowing that things that God has spoken. He himself believed in the perspicuity of Scripture and that the common man can understand God’s truth, but he also recognized that a man with no prior knowledge of Scripture may stumble in trying to begin his study of the Bible. He wrote, “. . . yet a person who has not much practice in it has good reason for some guidance . . . in order not to wander . . . but to hold to a sure path.”⁴⁷ Calvin’s goal in *The Institutes* was not to supplant Scripture with his own systematic theology, but to assist the reader (especially the novice) in gaining a sure and proper view of what God has spoken.

Along this same theme, Calvin is very strong in making the point that even though God has given clear Revelation, and even though man has a natural capacity to know Revelation, the fall of man has so corrupted man that he constantly twists and

⁴⁴ Calvin, 43.

⁴⁵ Leithart, “That Eminent Pagan: Calvin’s use of Cicero in Institutes 1.1-5,” 161.

⁴⁶ N. H. Gootjes, “The Sense of Divinity: A Critical Examination of the Views of Calvin and Demarest,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 48:2 (Fall 1986): 340.

⁴⁷ Calvin, 6.

rejects that perfect Revelation that God has so graciously given. Man's sin nature has so perverted him that even if he should see God's truth, his will does not allow him to choose it unless God does a work of grace.⁴⁸ This would be true with regard to the General Revelation of Creation, Providence, and Conscience, as well as the Special Revelation of Scripture. As a matter of fact, Calvin makes it a point to remind the king that the reason why the RCC rejects message they preach is because "to them both Christ Himself and his gospel are new."⁴⁹ In other words, they do not know God and this is why they hate the Protestants and accuse them of a new message.

To summarize this section, here are three of the main reasons why John Calvin is respected by so many: (1) he had a very high view of Scripture and its authority, (2) he believed that God gave the Bible to be understood in a plain and normal sense, and (3) he generally employed a method of interpretation—literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutics—that allowed him to expose the clear and plain meaning of God's truth so that men could understand what God has spoken. For this reason, he is outstanding in general as an exegete and biblical theologian.

Second Issue: Calvin's Integration of Scripture

By "integration," what this paper is referring to is manner in which portions of Scripture from one writer (or from one era of biblical theology) are integrated with passages of other biblical authors, especially those in of different time periods.

One concept that is relevant to this discussion is the concept commonly known as "The Analogy of the Faith" (hereafter AOF). In essence, this is the idea that one should find all Scripture in harmony with itself, and that if one passage has less clarity than

⁴⁸ Ibid, 286.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 16.

another, the passage with more clarity should be used to help interpret the other. Although AOF is not a biblical mandate nor a principle of hermeneutics, this idea has basically come to be understood as a hermeneutical principle. In defending Protestantism, Calvin used this expression to help the king of France see that Protestants really are being true to the message of the Bible as a whole. He wrote, “Indeed, our adversaries cry out that we falsely make the Word of God our pretext, and wickedly corrupt it. By reading our confession you can judge according to your prudence not only how malicious a calumny but also what utter effrontery this is. . . . When Paul wished all prophecy to be made accord with *the analogy of the faith* (emphasis mine), he set forth a very clear rule to test all interpretation of Scripture. Now, if our interpretation be measured by this rule of faith, victory is in our hands.”⁵⁰ What Calvin is doing is inviting the king to test the doctrine and lives of the Protestants by Scripture and compare their lives with those of the Catholic adversaries so that he might see for himself that the Protestant cause is fully biblical.

Unfortunately, many use the concept of AOF wrongly by misinterpreting certain passages because of a theological presupposition. Calvin is guilty of this at times when he reads NT truths back into the OT and violates the concept of Progressive Revelation. On the whole, though, Calvin generally does justice to the Bible in this respect, but there are times when his theology overrides his exegesis. This error occurs when he is at the step of integrating Scripture. This section will present a brief sample by looking at how consistent Calvin is in three different areas: (1) soteriology, and (2 & 3) ecclesiology/eschatology.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Soteriology

Soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, is certainly one of the most crucial doctrines of all, especially the doctrine of justification by faith. According to W. Stanford Reid in his article on Calvin's view of justification, "To call the doctrine of justification by faith a crucial doctrine is to echo Calvin's own feelings."⁵¹ In the words of Reid, he believes that those who think that Calvin's dominant focus is the doctrine of election are wrong. Reid thinks that both Calvin's *Institutes* and the commentaries show that justification is really the heart of Calvin's teaching.⁵²

In this writer's opinion, when it comes to the doctrine of salvation, John Calvin does a fine job of integrating passages from within the Bible and comes away with a unified doctrine of soteriology that is consistent, yet also very biblical.

Some writers have approached this subject and their study of Calvin with a desire to bolster the concept that Calvin's (and Augustine's) view of saving faith was that faith is "nothing else than to think with assent" with the idea that one should hold a "free grace" position rather than a "lordship salvation" position.⁵³ Anderson sees Calvin holding the view that "obedience flows from faith and is part of the nature of the Christian life . . . and nothing more (a clear desire to defend the doctrine of salvation as being by faith alone and without works)"⁵⁴ Other writers like John MacArthur have made clear that no major proponent of "lordship salvation" (to use the label) denies the doctrine of justification by faith alone.⁵⁵ MacArthur, citing *The Institutes* (99), does point

⁵¹ W. Stanford Reid, "Justification by Faith According to John Calvin," *Westminster Theological Journal* 42:2 (Spring 1980): 291.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ David R. Anderson, "The Nature of Faith," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 5:4 (September 1999): 3.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 4.

⁵⁵ John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 361.

out, though, that according to Calvin, “Christ . . . justifies no man without also sanctifying him. . . . You cannot possess him without being made a partaker of him.”⁵⁶ In the opinion of this writer, it seems that some of the statements on both sides of this issue often say virtually the same thing, and that unnecessary haggling on this point sometimes clouds the issue. Calvin rejected false kinds of easy believism when he wrote, “Nothing can be imagined more absurd than (the doctrine of the Schoolmen). . . . They insist that faith is an assent with which any despiser of God may receive what is delivered by Scripture,”⁵⁷ but he also recognized, as noted by Beeke, that “in actual experience the Christian gradually grows into a more full faith” over time⁵⁸ and that the Christian life is continually one of “tension” between flesh and spirit.

For Calvin, it was clear though, that profession without a concomitant turning to God was absurd. Calvin obtained such theology from an exegesis that supported this view out of both the Old and New Testaments, and he found no difference in the New Testament that somehow changed the doctrine of soteriology from the Old Testament. In all places, salvation comes by faith alone, but always because of the grace of God to draw men to himself (a good integration of Scripture). For example, within the same paragraph Calvin appeals to Isaiah 44:3 where God speaks about the way He will “pour out” His Spirit upon those who thirst, and from Ezekiel 36:25 where God promises to wash away the filth of sin by the power of His Spirit, and also to John 7:37 where Jesus gave an open invitation to all who are thirsty, and that if they will come, the Spirit will do

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 362-63.

⁵⁸ Joel R. Beeke, “Does Assurance of Faith Belong to the Essence of Faith? Calvin and the Calvinists,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 5:1 (Spring 1994): 53.

His work from within.⁵⁹ John Calvin does a commendable job when integrating passages that deal with salvation.

Ecclesiology/Eschatology

Ecclesiology and Eschatology are two related areas where one begins to see a certain degree of inconsistency in Calvin's methods of integration. The reason for this inconsistency is due to his confusion between the church and Israel (an error in Ecclesiology), and because of this confusion in Ecclesiology, he also makes errors of integration when it comes to areas of Eschatology. Those who follow strictly in Calvin's teaching perpetuate the same kinds of errors—errors that end up in a bad systematic theology, but errors which take place at the step of integration.

Because of the historical record, it is easy to demonstrate that a future Millennium was “widely believed” by the church for first three centuries of Christian history.⁶⁰ Robert Clouse thinks that Origen (third century) was one of the main forces that led the church away from “the literal acceptance of the teaching of the Millennium” to that of a “figurative interpretation.”⁶¹ In other words, a shift in theology began to overtake the church from around the third century onward, even though this old belief was “deeply entrenched in the Scriptures themselves” and that it was the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century that further caused the hope of an earthly kingdom to diminish, and that the influence of Augustine toward Amillennial theology cemented this view as being

⁵⁹ Calvin, 540.

⁶⁰ Robert Clouse, “Millennialism in the Seventeenth Century,” *Grace Journal* 6:1 (Winter 1965): 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

held by the church throughout the middle ages.⁶² Clouse is very accurate in his general assessment of how things changed with reference to Ecclesiology and Eschatology.

Unfortunately, during Calvin's own time, some of those who had begun to hold and teach Millennialism had certain views and/or practices that discredited them in the eyes of Calvin, and for this reason, in part, he strongly resisted the doctrine.⁶³ Calvin often makes the error of calling Israel "the church." This idea is a violation of Progressive Revelation and basically shows how errors in integration due to theological presuppositions have led Calvin to wrong positions in this area. One illustration is sufficient to demonstrate the error. When quoting a reference to Israel in Isaiah 60:19ff., Calvin says that "The Lord will be an everlasting light for his church."⁶⁴ How is it that such an excellent exegete could call Israel "the church" when nothing in context supports the idea? The answer is that Calvin is reading NT truth back into the OT, and by doing so is violating the doctrine of Progressive Revelation, and in so doing is making an error in the process of integration.

On the other hand, there certainly are many areas of Calvin's Ecclesiology that are excellent and for which the church is in great debt. This would be particularly true with reference to Calvin's pursuit of a pure church. Some of Calvin's refined thinking in this area came from the influence of Martin Bucer when Calvin spent three to four years in Strassburg when exiled from Geneva.⁶⁵ Calvin was very dedicated to seeking purity for individuals and for the church as a whole. Part of Calvin's efforts to work toward a healthy church included a reformation in the structure of the church that made the church

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Calvin, 290.

⁶⁵ Stephen Johnson, "The Sinews of the Body of Christ: Calvin's Concept of Church Discipline," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59:1 (Spring 1997): 87.

autonomous and self-governing, but in such a way that there were numerous checks and balances for those in power. This Presbyterian form of structure was called by the name “The Consistory.”⁶⁶ The Consistory provided a very well thought out structure that provided for the care of the church as well as accountability for those who gave oversight to the church. Its structure may be found to one degree or another in churches that hold to some form of Presbyterian form of church government.

In summary, even though Calvin did implement some great (and largely biblical) concepts in his Ecclesiology, he nevertheless had certain errors in his view of the church that he simply inherited from Medieval traditions going back to Augustine and even earlier.

Third Issue: Calvin’s Practices in Systematic Theology

Even though Calvin is often described as one of the great systematizers of theology, he is better seen as an exegete and biblical theologian. His writings are more closely related to Biblical Theology rather than Systematic Theology in comparison to those who practice systematic theology in the present age. Even though Calvin’s teachings on the whole were more on the biblical side, he certainly did systematize his theology and stratify his teachings according to fixed categories.

It is worthwhile to note that the “Calvinism” that many adhere to today is often much more systematic than the “Calvinism” of Calvin. In other words, many of his later disciples have actually “Out-Calvined” Calvin. George Peters refers to certain views that were crystallized at the Council of Dort a generation after Calvin and how “this peculiar type of Calvinism (“Dortianism”) must not be identified with general Reformed theology

⁶⁶ Mark Larson, “John Calvin And Genevan Presbyterianism,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 60:1 (Spring 1988): 43.

or classical Calvinism as known from Calvin's *Institutes*.⁶⁷ Peters reminds the reader that "Dortianism (with its strong focus on a complete theological system) arose in the midst of a dispute and has in it all the heat of defense and counterattack."⁶⁸ The problem becomes one of overemphasis on issues like divine sovereignty and "double-predestination" and an imbalance on other doctrines.⁶⁹ The result for many who wholeheartedly embrace Dortianism is that they become so theological that they become unbiblical (something that was not a real problem in Calvin himself in the opinion of this writer). Peters says that such a philosophy of dogmatic determinism "appeals to many people because of its God concept and seeming absoluteness in foundations, purpose, and victory."⁷⁰ However, in Peter's opinion, because of its unbalanced emphasis on the sovereignty of God in election (as well as other areas), Dortian Calvinism often weakens the urgency of evangelism and the proper understanding of human responsibility, with some even charging that Calvinism in any form leads toward errors like Islamic fundamentalism.⁷¹

Based upon the lack of systematic statements in Calvin that do appear in later Calvinists, some suggest that it may be best to not consider Calvin as being in the camp of a Covenant Theologian.⁷² Others would add the thought that many of the post-Calvin, Aristotelian Reformers were actually "innovators who betrayed the existential spirit and experimental method of the more humanistic reformers by venturing into metaphysics and scholastic theology and developing a doctrinal position concerning the efficient

⁶⁷ George W. Peters, "Current Theological Issues in World Missions," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135:538 (April 1978): 160.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ R. Scott Clark, "The Catholic-Calvinist Trinitarianism of Casper Olevian," *Westminster Theological Journal* 61:1 (Spring 1999): 18.

⁷² Peter Alan Lillback, "Ursinus' Development of the Covenant of Creation: A Debt to Melancthon or Calvin," *Westminster Theological Journal* 43:2 (Spring 1981): 272-73.

relationship of first and final causes.”⁷³ The point is this: one should be careful about attributing to Calvin some of the theological speculations of theologians who are claiming to walk in the footsteps of Calvin himself.

In terms of stratification (placing Systematic Theology into a certain order), beginning with Book One of *The Institutes*, one sees how Calvin begins with issues that today might be classed as Prolegomena and Theology Proper, dealing with the knowledge of God. Interrelated with this would be Calvin’s treatment of Bibliology, Anthropology and also Hamartiology, all of which relate to the concept of Revelation and how man can know God. Book Two goes into Christology as Calvin discusses the knowledge of God that God grants to man through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer. Book Three begins to address the doctrines of Pneumatology and Soteriology as Calvin discusses “the way in which we receive the grace of Christ.” Within this section would be discussions about issues such as justification and sanctification, as well as the significance of God’s grace in unconditional election. Book Four would focus primarily upon issues of Ecclesiology. Little discussion is given in *The Institutes* to the subjects of Angelology or Eschatology. One should applaud Calvin for the masterful work that he produced in *The Institutes*, even if there is room for theological and hermeneutical criticism in certain areas.

Fourth Issue: Calvin’s Integration with Extra-Biblical Disciplines

Calvin does not make extensive integration of Scripture with other extra-biblical disciplines except perhaps with reference to historical theology. As noted earlier, when Calvin did make references to historical theology and citations from church fathers, he

⁷³ Lynne Courter Boughton, “Supralapsarianism and the Role of Metaphysics in Sixteenth-Century Reformed Theology,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 48:1 (Spring 1986): 65.

did so in a way that properly recognized the quality labors of some, but also rejected the assertions of others. When Calvin found a church father who articulated sound, biblical theology, he was willing to quote him and use him as an evidence of sound doctrine. On the other hand, if he found a father guilty of bad exegesis, or if he found inconsistency, he was very capable of pointing out the errors and fallibility of these former teachers. The editor of *The Institutes* writes, “Calvin’s command of the patristic literature was already well developed in 1535. . . . Calvin effectively replied to the charge that he and his associates rejected ‘the holy doctors of antiquity’. . . . While he recognizes in general the authoritative position of the fathers in Christian thought, this is always under the limitation of their fallibility and mutual divergences, and of the superior authority of Scripture.”⁷⁴

Fifth Issue: Calvin’s Desire for Application of Theology

Throughout *The Institutes*, one finds Calvin to be very devotional and applicational. It is very clear from Calvin’s writings that one of his prime motivations is that men would come to a proper knowledge of God, and that this proper knowledge would translate into lives of personal worship. For example, when writing to Francis I, Calvin says, “My purpose was solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness.”⁷⁵ Again and again throughout his writing, Calvin reminds the reader that he is not writing for the sake of academia or abstract philosophical ponderings (unlike so many today), but rather, so that men might know the truth and that they might become true worshippers of God by this deeper knowledge.

⁷⁴ Calvin, 18. n. 12.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 9.

Calvin was disgusted by those who perverted biblical Revelation so as to keep people from a clear knowledge. He writes, “All the fathers with one heart have abhorred and with one voice detested the fact that God’s Holy Word has been *contaminated by the subtleties of sophists and involved in the squabbles of dialecticians* (emphasis author’s). Then they attempt nothing in life but to *enshroud and obscure the simplicity of Scripture* (emphasis author’s) with endless contentions and worse than sophistic brawls, do they keep themselves within these borders?”⁷⁶ Calvin wanted men to know true theology and to see this theology applied to life for godly living. Calvin’s sincere desire was that his main contribution would be guidance for the Christian’s spiritual pilgrimage. His theology was intended to be a worship aid. Yet he was also convinced that the worship of God must properly penetrate every aspect of societal life. To do that effectively the church must commit itself to a maximum use of the gifts God has given it for service in every area of life.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ibid, 22.

⁷⁷ Douglas, J. D., Comfort, P. W., & Mitchell, D. (1997, c1992). *Who's who in Christian history*. Illustrated lining papers. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House. Cited in electronic form without pagination with Libronix.

CHAPTER 6

THE SEARCH FOR A CENTRAL INTERPRETIVE MOTIF IN CALVIN

As a preliminary thought with reference to the Central Interpretive Motif of Calvin (hereafter CIM), some have compared Luther with Calvin and pointed out that one big difference between the two was that Luther tended to get a tunnel vision kind of focus on certain doctrines, but Calvin tended to stay away from narrow constraints. Several reasons why Calvin's work was more systematic than Luther's could be that (1) Luther was of the first generation of Reformers who had to keep the entire focus of work on justification by faith, (2) Luther always had a personal struggle with sin that kept his attention focused more on justification, or (3) Calvin and the personal drive and thinking that led him in this broader direction. Having said this as a preface, it is possible to find several recurring themes, and, if one wanted, one might call these themes interpretive motifs.

Desire for Application of God's Truth in Personal Living

Though it is not exactly an interpretive motif, it is very clear from Calvin's writings that one of his prime motivations is that men would come to a proper knowledge of God, and that this proper knowledge would translate into lives of personal worship. For example, when writing to Francis I, Calvin says, "My purpose was solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness."⁷⁸ Again and again throughout his writing, Calvin reminds the reader that he is not writing for the sake of academia or abstract philosophical ponderings (unlike so many today), but rather, he is writing so that men might know the truth, so that

⁷⁸ Calvin, 9.

the truth might set them free, and so that they might become true worshippers of God by this deeper knowledge. Calvin was disgusted by those who perverted biblical Revelation to as to keep people from clear knowledge. He writes, “All the fathers with one heart have abhorred and with one voice detested the fact that God’s Holy Word has been *contaminated by the subtleties of sophists and involved in the squabbles of dialecticians* (emphasis mine). Then they attempt nothing in life but to *enshroud and obscure the simplicity of Scripture* (emphasis mine) with endless contentions and worse than sophistic brawls, do they keep themselves within these borders?”⁷⁹ Calvin wanted men to know true theology and to see this theology applied to life for godly living. Calvin’s sincere desire was that his main contribution would be guidance for the Christian’s spiritual pilgrimage. His theology was intended to be a worship aid. Yet he was also convinced that the worship of God must properly penetrate every aspect of societal life. To do that effectively the church must commit itself to a maximum use of the gifts God has given it for service in every area of life.⁸⁰

The Need for a Strong Role of the Church in Civil Government

A second suggested CIM would be one that is very contrary to what one finds in American thinking (where “separation of church and state” is often celebrated). This CIM would be the strong emphasis that Calvin placed upon the relationship between the church and state. History shows that Calvin’s ministry in Geneva indeed did have a very strong influence upon all aspects of Genevan culture. Calvin was very concerned that God’s truth be put into practice, personally and societally. As Gatis put it, “Calvin

⁷⁹ Ibid, 22.

⁸⁰ Douglas, J. D., Comfort, P. W., & Mitchell, D. (1997, c1992). *Who's who in Christian history*. Illustrated lining papers. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House. Cited in electronic form without pagination with Libronix.

advanced a doctrine of separation of church and state, not religion and state.”⁸¹ In other words, Calvin did not want a state church, but he was very committed the concept of applying Christian theology to all of life.

Calvin was dedicated to the idea that the church should have authority only over matters of the church and that the state should have authority only over matters of the state. However, he also believed that the state had its own “responsibility to God” as being that which God Himself ordained for society.⁸² This is evident in the way that Calvin brought moral reform to bear in all aspects of Genevan society. Gatis shows that for Calvin, there was a “symbiosis of purpose” between church and state, but that they also have a distinction of purpose. The state sets the stage for the church and the church does not obstruct the state. For Calvin, the state and the church should be seen as “mutually religious . . . a unified force that protects the people.”⁸³ These views do raise interesting questions about the issues of Theonomy (the view that God’s law should be imposed upon societies now during the church age), especially in view of Calvin’s weak teachings on issues of Ecclesiology and the exact relationship of the Law of Moses to the church. Wadkins points out that for Calvin, his view of religious tolerance was very much shaped by three areas of theology: (1) theology proper (e.g., the need to give glory to God and why capital punishment may be appropriate at times), (2) ecclesiology (the role of the church to bring God’s truth to mankind and to bring God’s kingdom to earth), and (3) hermeneutics (the way in which the Bible is interpreted to support any particular position).⁸⁴ Wadkins point is valid: Calvin had a certain view of the church and other

⁸¹ G. Joseph Gatis, “The Political Theory of John Calvin,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153:612 (October 1996): 449.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 451.

⁸⁴ Wadkins, 432.

doctrines which led him to impose biblical truth very persuasively upon Geneva.

Whether or not Calvin was always justified in the way he did so is a subject for its own consideration.

One can see, however, that Calvin's knowledge of sin gave him a strong conviction that power over people should not rest solely in the hands of one individual.⁸⁵

In any case, in addition to theology, two areas in which Calvin made major contributions were education and church government. Calvin encouraged the development of universal education and he was convinced that for every person to be adequately equipped to "rightly divide" God's Word, he or she had to be educated in language and the humanities. To that end he founded an academy for Geneva's children, believing that all education must be fundamentally religious. The city's university grew out of the academy, linked to evangelical preaching and offering an education comparable to the finest in Europe. Some have called the University of Geneva Calvin's "crowning achievement."

Calvin also had a significant impact on ideas on church government, which have also had a powerful effect on political theory in the West. It was to a great degree by his influence that the Presbyterian form of church structure was once again given strong recognition. This same kind of church structure also became influential in secular forms of civil government that would operate by representative forms of government.

The Sinfulness and Idolatrous Nature of Man

A third possible CIM comes from one of the major themes that Calvin addresses over and over again in his writings: it is the sinfulness of man, and how it is that man's sin is

⁸⁵ Ibid, 453.

the cause of all evil. Calvin is very strong in pointing out that the reason why sinners go to hell must be understood first and foremost is because of the fact that men reject the knowledge of God. He writes, “Therefore, God provided man’s soul with a mind, by which to distinguish good from evil, right from wrong, and, with the light of reason as guide, to distinguish what should be followed from what should be avoided. . . . In this integrity (Adamic innocence), man by free will had the power, if he so willed, to attain eternal life. Here it would be out of place to raise the question of God’s secret predestination because our present subject is not what can happen or not, but what man’s nature was like.”⁸⁶

A very important point to recognize is that Calvin does not merely point to divine sovereignty and unconditional election as the only biblical doctrine that explains everything else. He very clearly gives each doctrine its respective place (even if not perfectly) as making its own contribution to a holistic systematic theology. But even here, when Calvin speaks about the sinfulness of man, this is never the end of the subject. In the end, the subject always needs to point back to God and to God’s work in redeeming sinners.

The Sovereignty of God in Granting Saving Grace by Election

A third possible CIM, one that Calvin teaches on very strongly, perhaps more than any other, is the fact of, and necessity for, God’s sovereign grace. For some, it is a foregone conclusion that this is the CIM of John Calvin. R. Scott Clark notes that “In the nineteenth century, scholars generally agreed that whereas Martin Luther’s *Zentraldogma* was justification, Calvin’s was predestination and the later Calvinists were thought to be,

⁸⁶ Calvin, 195, 232.

in the main, faithful to their master.”⁸⁷ Without a doubt, Calvin certainly did teach the doctrine of unconditional election, and that this is one of the most important truths of the Bible.

Gordon Payne asks the question, “How is John Calvin to be understood? Is he to be interpreted on the basis of a single doctrine, such as predestination or sanctification . . . ?”⁸⁸ Quoting Calvin, Payne goes on to show that Calvin follows closely in the traditions of Augustine and Bonaventure by showing the absolute need that man has for God to intervene with saving grace: (1) “The remedy is divine grace by which the depravity of nature is corrected and healed (2.3.6),”⁸⁹ and (2) that it is “By the gratuitous mercy of the Lord [that] the human will is converted,”⁹⁰ etc. As these references, and multiplied others, make clear, without God’s initiation to give saving grace, mankind is totally helpless and lost. For Calvin, because “all of us are blind by nature [God’s truth] cannot penetrate into our minds unless the Spirit, as the inner teacher, through His illumination makes entry for it.”⁹¹ Going along with this is the fact that those whom God wills to elect and call and save can also be assured, if they truly are his, that they will persevere. Davis comments: “With respect to the gift of perseverance, writes Calvin, there is no doubt that God ‘applies this idea to all the elect.’”⁹² In other words, “God’s sovereignty in election and predestination, then, is the basis for Augustine’s (and as noted later, Calvin’s) understanding of final perseverance.”⁹³

⁸⁷ Clark, 15.

⁸⁸ Payne, 1.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 20.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Godfrey, 32.

⁹² John Jefferson Davis, “The Perseverance of the Saints: A History of the Doctrine,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34:2 (June 1991): 217.

⁹³ Davis, 213.

According to Calvin, two key truths we must remember and hold in tension are these: (1) all men are accountable to God and God will hold all men accountable and guilty for their sin (Gen. 11; 18; Dan. 5). The issue is this: all men are responsible to do what God says and desires. (2) A second major theme that comes out in Calvin is that God is absolutely sovereign. For starters, this means that men are accountable to seek God out and live for Him and glorify Him because He commands them to do so.

For Calvin, what God does in His Word is tell mankind what man is responsible to do and give them command to obey. However, the Bible also shows us that God Himself is the One who rules over all things by His providence. Calvin held to the view that nothing will more effectually preserve us in a straight and undeviating course, than a firm persuasion that all events are in the hand of God, and that He is as merciful as He is mighty. For Calvin, God is sovereign over everything. The necessary consequences of this knowledge should be gratitude in prosperity, patience in adversity, and a wonderful security respecting the future.

Thus, what Calvin believed was that man is responsible to obey God, yet because he is dead in sin he cannot do so as he should. For this reason, if men are to have any hope, God must intervene to draw men to Himself.

Calvin does a commendable job of bringing out both of these aspects in his works as noted by the following work called *Who's Who in Christian History*:

In the past some have said that the sovereignty of God was Calvin's central teaching. Today many Calvin scholars argue that he made no attempt to reduce the biblical message to any one central idea, but rather appreciated and retained the biblical teachings in their complexity, affirming, for example, both human responsibility and God's sovereign control, as well as other teachings that seem inconsistent when paired. Calvin's system does possess unity. Behind everything that he wrote is the idea suggested earlier by Augustine of Hippo (345–430) that God created human beings for fellowship with himself. Lacking that fellowship,

they are miserable and disoriented. Thus Calvin began his *Institutes* by stressing that all wisdom comes from a knowledge of God and of ourselves. The God–man relationship was so basic for Calvin that he argued that in knowing God we learn of ourselves, and vice versa. Knowledge meant much more to Calvin than intellectual exercise. Rather, theological knowledge requires a moral response by the whole human personality. The whole person, including mind and body, is engaged in the spiritual relationship. The one goal of that “knowing” experience is the worship of God in obedience and gratitude.”⁹⁴

One thing is absolutely certain: from a study of John Calvin, it is very clear that he strongly believed in the reality of, and need for, God’s unconditional grace in election if a man is to be saved. Having said this, there is but one final suggestion for a CIM—a suggestion that this writer is even more inclusive than the former.

The Suggested Center of John Calvin’s Theology: The Love of God Through Redemption in Christ, Without Whom Man is Hopeless

Even though many would suggest that divine sovereignty or unconditional election are the major theological motifs of John Calvin, this writer has come to the conviction that there is a theme that is even more central and more pervasive than this. From a direct study of Calvin, one can make a good case for saying that the central point of Calvin’s focus is upon Jesus Christ. To be more specific, it would be the love of God through redemption in Christ, without which man is absolutely hopeless.

As Archer Anderson has noted, predestination is truly a part of Calvinism, but is only a part. “The true heart of Calvinism is the twice-repeated Scriptural assertion that ‘salvation is of the Lord.’”⁹⁵ Thus, Calvin and Calvinism are bigger than the one constituent doctrine called “election” (or “predestination”). As Anderson notes, Calvinism begins with God, it centers in God, and it ends with God. The heirs of

⁹⁴Douglas, J. D., Comfort, P. W., & Mitchell, D. (1997, c1992). *Who's who in Christian history*. Illustrated lining papers. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House. Cited in electronic form without pagination with Libronix.

⁹⁵ Anderson, 475.

salvation were “known, loved, and chosen by God in grace from before the foundation of the world.”⁹⁶ Yes, these issues deal with “sovereign decrees of God,”⁹⁷ but these are also decrees that come out of God’s love for His creation. As noted, all of this was done “in love.” (Eph. 1).

W. Stanford Reid echoes some of these same thoughts when he writes, “As one studies *The Institutes* and his commentaries, one finds that the love of God is a major theme which he continually elaborates. He always comes back to it as the *fons et origo* of man’s salvation.”⁹⁸ God does this work of salvation “not because he has to, nor because man is in some way worthy of God’s justification, but out of sheer divine mercy and love.”⁹⁹ Reid says that it was this divine love “which made the first move in reconciling man. . . . Thus, love was the basic motive for the atonement and not the other way around. The atonement was the result of divine love and mercy, but did not cause them.”¹⁰⁰

For this writer, it seems that Reid is very close to finding a well-defensible CIM based upon the writings of Calvin himself, and this is the one which this paper commends as being true to Calvin as well as being true to the Scriptures.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 476.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 477.

⁹⁸ Reid, “Justification by Faith According to John Calvin,” 291.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 293.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that John Calvin has had a huge impact on the world. He was a dedicated teacher of God's Word and labored very diligently to preach and teach the Word of God in a way that would give men understanding and lead them to live holy lives. In the eyes of this writer, it is sad that so many who name the name of Christ would be so harsh (and hateful) to one who gave so much for the cause of Christ. Without a doubt, John Calvin had his sinful faults, just like every other sinner. Nevertheless, he certainly served Christ as a faithful teacher and persevered to the end with diligence, leaving us all a noble example to follow both as an exegete and theologian, and most of all, a man of God.

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