The Priestly Office of Jesus Christ in the Thought of John Calvin

by

John Christian Clark

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of St. Michael’s College
and the History Department of the Toronto School of Theology
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theology
awarded by the University of St. Michael’s College

© Copyright by John Christian Clark (2013)
The Priestly Office of Jesus Christ in the Thought of John Calvin

John Christian Clark

Doctor of Philosophy in Theology
University of St. Michael’s College
Toronto School of Theology
2013

Abstract

This study is born of the conviction that Calvin’s thought on the priestly office of Christ is best understood by situating Calvin within his own exegetical and theological project, and within the historical context of sixteenth-century reform. Following the introductory chapter, therefore, chapter two sets this study against the backdrop of Calvin’s own life and times in order to demonstrate how Calvin worked as a biblical commentator and theologian, and why his biblical commentaries and Institutes constitute the primary source materials herein. Chapter three then examines Calvin’s interpretation of the second commandment; for as will be seen, Calvin’s reading of the second commandment, with its prohibition against idolatry and promotion of true knowledge and pure worship of God, had a profound impact upon Calvin’s understanding of Christ’s priestly office. The remaining chapters of this study, chapters four through seven, go on to discuss Christ’s priestly office in relation to Israel’s priesthood, Christ’s priestly self-sacrifice, Christ’s priesthood in relation to his threefold office, and how believers come to receive Christ and thereby enjoy the benefits of his priesthood, respectively. What this study will demonstrate is that Calvin’s thought on the priestly office of Christ is characterized by several key features, chief of which is a deep and consistent connection between the priestly office of Christ and the
worship of God’s people. In addition, the priestly office of Christ will prove to be a motif which not only bears upon, integrates, and illuminates other key aspects of Calvin’s thought, but also provides a helpful vantage point by which to critique the offerings of other Calvin interpreters.
Acknowledgments

Significant and rewarding undertakings are not often brought to a happy end without sustained sacrifice on many levels, and they are rarely the result of any one individual working in solitude. This Ph.D. thesis is surely a case in point. It could never have come to fruition without the love and support of others, so I wish to express my deep gratitude for what might well be called their long obedience in the same direction.

The value of good parents is incalculable, and blessed are those who have them. My parents, James and Nancy Clark, have been exceedingly good to me all of my days, and thus I am abundantly blessed. What is more, my wife’s parents, Patrick and Margaret Aulwes, have been so very kind, patient, and generous. I am eternally grateful to and for the four of you.

I have benefited terrifically from the community of scholars at the Toronto School of Theology, University of Toronto. And of those scholars, none are more precious to me than Drs. Victor Shepherd and Marcus Johnson. I am indelibly marked by your prodigious theological learning and pastoral wisdom, Victor. My grandest hopes were not merely met but surpassed by having you as my Doktorvater. Marcus, since we met on the first day of our doctoral studies, we have shaped each other to such an extent that I feel as though we are brothers from different mothers. Dearest friends, my life is immensely richer because of you.

I am also grateful to the Meeter Center at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Being the recipient of the H. Henry Meeter Research Fellowship, and the able assistance of Karin Maag, Paul Fields, and Ryan Noppen has been of great help to me in this undertaking.

Last, though anything but least, I am grateful to my own “little” family—that is, to my son, William, my daughter, Gwyneth, and my wife, Kate. William and Gwyneth, you are both so
bright and beautiful. My doctoral studies were not undertaken without cost to you, and you have borne the burden like little champions. Please know that the title “Doctor” never will nor could be sweeter to me than that of “Daddy.” And how might I ever adequately thank one who is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh, most precious Kate? You have so faithfully, loyally, and beautifully taken what is mine and made it your own. I know it has not always been easy, but you have done it so very well. It is to the three of you that I dedicate this work. Now and forever, may you experience with increasing delight the acceptance and intimacy of drawing near to the Father in, through, and with the Son, Jesus Christ—your never-failing, ever-faithful high priest.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii

Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................... iv

Abbreviations ..................................................................................................................... vii

Chapter One  The Priestly Office of Jesus Christ in the Thought of John Calvin: An Introduction .................................................. 1

Chapter Two  The Priestly Office of Jesus Christ in the Thought of John Calvin: An Orientation ............................................. 11

Chapter Three  The Second Commandment as Rubric for Christ’s Priestly Office ................................................................. 47

Chapter Four  Israel’s Priesthood as Type of Christ’s Priestly Office ................................................................. 79

Chapter Five  Sacrifice as the Infrastructure of Christ’s Priestly Work of Reconciliation ................................................................. 129

Chapter Six  Christ’s Priesthood and His Threefold Office ................................. 181

Chapter Seven  Satisfaction, Intercession, Participation: Receiving Christ and Enjoying the Benefits of His Priesthood ..................... 225

Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 245

Bibliography ..................................................................................................................... 247
Abbreviations


Comm.  Commentary


OS  *Ioannis Calvini opera selecta.* Edited by Peter Barth, Wilhelm Niesel, and Dora Scheuner. 5 vols. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1926-52.


WA  D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Weimar: Böhlau, 1883—
Chapter One

The Priestly Office of Jesus Christ in the Thought of John Calvin: An Introduction

The revitalization in Calvin research that began in the early twentieth century has shown little evidence of diminished momentum thus far in the twenty-first century, as seen by the many publications in 2009 marking the 500th anniversary of Calvin’s birth. Amidst this renaissance of Calvin research, some aspects of his thought have garnered prompt and ample treatment, while others have not. We ought not to assume, however, that Calvin’s own estimation of a topic is accurately reflected in every instance of this relative disparity. One Calvin scholar observed in 1983, for example, that while several important contributions had been made to Calvin’s understanding of the knowledge of God, predestination, the church, and the sacraments, Calvin’s understanding of something so dear to him as Christ’s atoning death had yet to receive much attention.1 What could be said in 1983 about the relative lacuna in secondary literature on the death of Christ in the thought of Calvin can still be said at present about a topic that is not only intimately related to the death of Christ but also every bit as dear to Calvin; that topic is the priestly office of Christ. There are a small number of quality book chapters regarding the priestly office of Christ in the thought of Calvin.2 There are also a small number of quality book chapters heavily influenced by, albeit not directly related to, Calvin’s thought on Christ’s


priesthood. Yet there are no book or dissertation-length studies of which I am aware that examine the priestly office of Christ in the thought of Calvin with any breadth or detail. The present study, therefore, is intended to address a clear need in Calvin research.

Causation is more often complex than singular. Thus while there may not be only one reason for the relative paucity in the secondary literature of Calvin research on the priesthood of Christ, the chief reason may well be that, until the latter decades of the twentieth century, the tendency of Calvin scholars was to look primarily, and in some instances nearly exclusively, to the *Institutes* for their understanding of Calvin’s thought. In other words, despite the fact that the *Institutes* constitute less than seven percent of Calvin’s total literary output, a figure matched nearly ten times over by Calvin’s biblical commentaries, he has routinely been treated as if he were a “man of one book.” This time-honoured tendency toward preoccupation with Calvin’s *Institutes* and neglect of his biblical commentaries has no doubt influenced the emphases of Calvin research. Yet that is not all. In the mid-twentieth century, T. H. L. Parker began warning that the tendency to sunder Calvin the systematic thinker from Calvin the biblical exegete, and thus the tendency to view Calvin’s biblical commentaries as merely illustrative of the *Institutes* and incidental to his reforming efforts, had helped create and perpetuate distortions regarding both the character and content of Calvin’s work. To be sure, Parker’s intention was not to accentuate the importance of Calvin’s biblical commentaries to the detriment of the *Institutes*. Rather, Parker’s intention was to help Calvin interpreters understand

---

that Calvin’s dogmatic and exegetical labours were not two separate enterprises, but two aspects of one activity.\(^4\)

Slightly later in the twentieth century, Parker wrote two monographs—*Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, published in 1971, and *Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries*, published in 1986—which helped stimulate interest in Calvin’s labours as a biblical commentator.\(^5\) Calvin’s exposition of the Hebrew Scriptures, however, has tended to attract less attention than his labours in the New Testament, a trend noted by David Wright just prior to the publication of *Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries* in 1986, and confirmed as an ongoing reality by Raymond Blacketer in 2006.\(^6\) Consequently, Calvin’s commentary on the last four books of the Pentateuch, the *Mosaic Harmony*, has been commonly undervalued and overlooked, as the rather diminutive body of secondary literature utilizing it demonstrates. This is an issue of great significance for the present study, which draws heavily from the *Mosaic Harmony*. Appearing in July 1563, the last of Calvin’s commentaries published in his lifetime, the *Mosaic Harmony* constitutes Calvin’s biblical commentating in its most seasoned, mature form. What is more, the *Mosaic Harmony* not only postdates the final edition of the


Institutes, but is also the product of a methodological approach unique to Calvin’s work as a biblical commentator, rendering this commentary the place to find what is by far Calvin’s largest and most sustained doctrinal treatment of the priestly office in general, and of Christ’s priesthood in particular.

The manner in which Calvin has been approached helps answer the question as to why little has been written on his understanding of Christ’s priestly office. Similarly, the extent to which any writing on this topic illumines or obscures the character and content of Calvin’s thought will have much to do with the manner in which Calvin is approached. As such, this study is born of the conviction that Calvin’s thought on the priestly office of Christ is best understood by situating Calvin within his own exegetical and theological project, and within the historical context of sixteenth-century reform. What will be found in the pages ahead is that Calvin’s thought on the priestly office of Christ is characterized by several key features, chief of which is a deep and consistent connection between the priestly office of Christ and the worship of God’s people. Moreover, the priestly office of Christ will prove to be a rich motif in that it bears upon, integrates, and helps us understand several important aspects of Calvin’s thought. Finally, expounding Calvin’s understanding of Christ’s priesthood in keeping with Calvin’s own approach to this topic yields occasions to critique the research of other Calvin interpreters along the way. Amidst both exposition and critique alike, my aim is to present Calvin in his own words, emphases, and accents.

Chapter Prospectus

The following chapter, chapter two, builds on the introduction at hand in the form of an orientation to this study on the priestly office of Christ in the thought of Calvin. The
intent of this orientation is to give substance to the approach advocated above by situating Calvin within his own exegetical and theological project, and within the historical context of sixteenth-century reform. Against the backdrop of Calvin’s life and times, therefore, I explain why Calvin’s commentaries and Institutes are the primary source materials used in this study, how Calvin implemented a carefully considered programme of working and writing with respect to his commentaries and Institutes, and why Calvin desired his commentaries and Institutes to be viewed and employed as two complementary aspects of one effort to instruct ministers in evangelical churches throughout Europe. The focus of this orientation then turns to Calvin’s exegetical and theological project regarding one commentary in particular, the Mosaic Harmony, and in turn, one specific section of that commentary, the second commandment; for Calvin’s latest and by far his largest discussion on the priesthood is found in his exposition of the second commandment.

Chapter three presents Calvin’s interpretation of the second commandment for the purpose of showing how and why he used the second commandment to raise the issues and set the direction for his discussion on the priesthood in the Mosaic Harmony. Calvin understood the second commandment to prohibit idolatry and, at the same time, promote the true knowledge and pure worship of God. In the Mosaic Harmony, then, the second commandment served as a rubric to which Calvin affixed his treatment of Israel’s cultic system, as in his estimation, Israel’s tabernacle, priesthood, and sacrifices were divinely intended to uphold and advance Israel’s observance of the second commandment. What is more, Calvin maintained that the primary significance of Israel’s cultic system is that it typified the person, accomplishments, and benefits of Christ with respect to his priestly office. As Calvin’s understanding of the conceptual correspondences among the second
commandment, Israel’s cultic system, and Christ’s priestly office become clearer, so too
does the deep and consistent connection in Calvin’s thought between the priestly office of
Christ and the true knowledge and pure worship of God’s people.

Drawing primarily from Calvin’s exposition of the second commandment in the
Mosaic Harmony, chapter four examines what Calvin considered to be the very heart and
centrepiece of Israel’s programme of worship: its priesthood. Yet Israel’s priesthood is
not treated as an end in itself. For according to Calvin, Israel’s priesthood was intended to
instruct and draw God’s people to the object which that priesthood typified: their true and
eternal priest, Jesus Christ. To examine Calvin’s thought on Israel’s priesthood, therefore,
is to examine the foundation for Calvin’s understanding of Christ’s priestly office. Here
Calvin’s comments on the garments of Israel’s priesthood are used to frame an overview
of that priesthood as a type of Christ’s priestly office. The following sections of this
chapter then provide substance to this overview. Calvin’s thought on the qualifications
for Israel’s priesthood—namely, that of calling and consecration—develop the sacrificial
aspect of the priesthood, and the final section develops what Calvin deemed to be most
basic to the priesthood: its prophetic, or forth-telling, aspect. As this chapter makes clear,
Calvin thought the priesthods of Israel and Christ to be possessed of two distinguishable
yet indivisible aspects: a sacrificial, mediatorial aspect and a prophetic, forth-telling
aspect. To Calvin’s mind, these two aspects of the sacerdotal office serve to protect and
perpetuate the true knowledge and pure worship of God.

Continuing to draw heavily from Calvin’s exposition of the second commandment
in the Mosaic Harmony, chapter five revisits and greatly expands the sacrificial aspect of
the priesthood that was raised in the previous chapter. Sacrificing was practised by
virtually all peoples from early times, and its origin is to be traced to the most ancient people of God, declared Calvin. Yet while the sacrifices of ancient Gentiles had long been marked by superstition and idolatry, Israel’s sacrifices were codified in the law and made the singular province of Israel’s priesthood; thus Israel’s sacrifices were intended to counteract superstition and idolatry by retaining their proper end and use, that being to lead God’s people upward and onward to Christ, the true mediator and sacrifice. As such, the first and foremost objective of this chapter is to expound Calvin’s understanding of Christ’s self-offering as prefigured and informed by Israel’s sacrifices. This chapter then concludes with an excursus regarding Robert Peterson’s important book on Calvin and the atoning death of Christ. Peterson’s ability to show much of the comprehensiveness but little of the coherency in Calvin’s thought on the atoning death of Christ has much to do with Peterson’s almost total neglect of the *Mosaic Harmony*. Peterson’s research is illustrative of the fact, I posit, that the *Mosaic Harmony* is a neglected yet nonetheless indispensible resource for Calvin’s thought on priesthood, sacrifice, and the nature of the relationship between them, and a resource which indicates that sacrifice constituted the infrastructure for Calvin’s understanding of Christ’s priestly work of reconciliation.

Chapter six examines Christ’s priesthood within the context of what is commonly known as his threefold office of prophet, priest, and king. Calvin saw these three aspects of Christ’s office as distinguishable; thus he gave sustained focus to Christ’s priesthood, and even accentuated its immense importance by calling it “the principal point” on which salvation turns, and “the very turning point” on which salvation depends. At the same time, Peterson’s research is

---

time, however, Calvin held that ancient Israel’s offices of prophet, priest, and king were not only fulfilled but transformed in Christ, having been forever joined together and embodied in the incarnate Son of God. Calvin maintained, therefore, that to treat Christ’s office as if it were divisible, in that any one aspect of it could be pared off and isolated from the others, is to rend Christ asunder, and thus to subvert the faith. The aim of this chapter, then, is to discuss Calvin’s understanding of Christ’s priesthood in relation to, and as a constituent facet of, his threefold office. Attention is given first to the threefold office of Christ as found in Calvin’s theological expositions of the faith, tracing the development of Calvin’s thought on this topic up to its fullest and final expression in the 1559 *Institutes*. The focus then turns to Calvin’s commentaries, so as to demonstrate something of the scriptural underpinnings and dynamic interconnections in Calvin’s thought on Christ’s threefold office. This chapter concludes with an excursus regarding John Frederick Jansen’s influential book, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Work of Christ*. Jansen contends that the threefold office of Christ was never more than peripheral to Calvin’s thought, given that the prophetic aspect of Christ’s office neither reflects nor flows from Calvin’s biblical exegesis. Jansen’s thesis is critiqued in light of Calvin’s commentaries, particularly his commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews and the *Mosaic Harmony*.

The final chapter of this study, chapter seven, concerns a feature that characterizes Calvin’s thought on the priestly office of Christ, namely, the people of God’s union with Christ. Throughout Calvin’s soteriology is a salient and robust affirmation of substitution, in that the redeeming actions of Christ were and are undertaken for us and our salvation. Yet Calvin’s understanding of applied soteriology in general, and thus his understanding of the benefits of Christ’s priesthood in particular, is grounded on a relationship between
substitution and participation, between what Christ did for us and what Christ does in and with us, respectively. According to Calvin, this relationship between substitution and participation demands distinction yet forbids division, as it is only by our participation in the very person of our substitute that we come to partake of his benefits. Thus Calvin maintained that Christ undertook his priestly office not only to render the Father favorable and propitious towards us, but also that believers might be given a share in the singular and utterly unique priesthood of Christ. Pursuing the notion of receiving Christ and enjoying the benefits of his priesthood, this chapter examines first the nature of the believer’s participation in Christ, and then the implications of that participation with respect to the priestly work of Christ in his death, resurrection, ascension, and intercession. The chief of these implications, for Calvin, is that Christ’s priesthood aids and abets the true knowledge and pure worship of God as Christ’s members participate in their ascended substitute’s relationship with the Father; for no human truly knows or rightly relates to the Father but the Son—and those who have been included in the Son.

Calvin’s Works in Latin and English

The most highly esteemed and widely accepted critical editions of Calvin’s works in both Latin and English are employed throughout this study, as these texts are the acknowledged standards in the current field of Calvin research. With respect to the Institutes, therefore, I use the Opera Selecta edition in Latin, and the Library of Christian Classics edition in English. For Calvin’s biblical commentaries on the Hebrew Scriptures, I use the Opera Omnia series in Latin, and the Calvin Translation Society series in English. For Calvin’s commentaries on the New Testament in Latin, I use the Opera
Exegetica, Series II whenever possible. This series, however, remains a work in progress. Available to date in the Opera Exegetica, Series II are Calvin’s commentaries on John, Romans, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Hebrews, and 2 John. For the remainder of Calvin’s commentaries on the New Testament in Latin, I use the Opera Omnia series; and for all Calvin’s commentaries on the New Testament in English, I use the Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries series. Immediately following the table of contents are two pages on abbreviations. The bibliographical information on all Calvin’s works in Latin and English is located there, as is a guide on how these works are cited in the footnotes throughout this study.
Chapter Two

The Priestly Office of Jesus Christ in the Thought of John Calvin: An Orientation

Calvin’s commentaries and Institutes are the primary source materials used in this study. That is because the commentaries and Institutes: (1) are easily, and so unarguably, the most fruitful and important sources for gaining an understanding of Calvin’s thought on the priestly office of Christ; (2) share a common audience and objective; and (3) were intended to be used together. Thus the purpose of this chapter is to orientate its readers to Calvin’s thought on Christ’s priestly office by orientating them to Calvin’s commentaries and Institutes.¹ This orientation begins by showing how the fruition of Calvin’s long-held aspiration to write biblical commentaries—which occurred in 1540 with the publishing of his Romans commentary—effected the development of the Institutes after the first edition of 1536, and in turn, how Calvin’s intentions for the Institutes, beginning with the second edition of 1539, lastingly effected his approach to biblical commentating.² That is to say,


this orientation begins by discussing the carefully considered programme of working and writing that Calvin implemented in 1539-40, and maintained with very little deviation for almost the next twenty years. Calvin considered his commentaries and Institutes to be the two constitutional and complementary aspects of this programme, whose aim was to help evangelical pastors and teachers be theologically astute readers and handlers of Scripture.

The focus of this orientation then turns to one particular commentary, the Mosaic Harmony, in which Calvin expounded the final four books of the Pentateuch.\(^3\) Published in 1563, only months before Calvin’s death, the Mosaic Harmony contains Calvin’s latest treatment on the priesthood. What is more, due to some quite remarkable departures from his long-established approach to biblical commentating, the Mosaic Harmony contains a doctrinal treatment on the priesthood that is far larger and much more sustained than what can be found anywhere else in Calvin’s works, including the last edition of the Institutes.

Three prominent features of Calvin’s thought are identified throughout the course of this orientation. These features surely influenced the overall shape of Calvin’s thought.

---

But more importantly, these features characterized Calvin’s thought on the priestly office of Jesus Christ. They are: (1) an attempt to set forth a heartfelt confession of the biblical, apostolic faith, a confession for which the chief concern is not so much logical or rational unassailability as it is faithful witness to the truth revealed by God in Christ; (2) an attack upon idolatry, particularly the perceived idolatry of the sixteenth-century Roman church; and (3) an emphasis upon the people of God’s union with Christ.

1536 Edition of the Institutes

John Calvin turned twenty-six years of age on July 10, 1535 while living in Basel under the pseudonym Martianus Lucianus. As indicated by the August 1535 dating of his dedicatory letter to the king of France, Francis I, Calvin entered his twenty-sixth year just a few weeks before finishing the first edition of the Institutes, printed at Basel by Thomas Platter and Balthasar Lasius in March 1536 for release at the spring book fair. However, the motivations behind this first edition of what proved to be Calvin’s magnum opus, and perhaps the early stages of its composition as well, originated in his native France. In the richly autobiographical preface of Calvin’s commentary on the Psalms, printed at Geneva by Robert Estienne in 1557, Calvin recollected the events that helped both precipitate and shape his 1536 Institutes. The mature Calvin there recalled that his obstinate young mind was “subdued,” and thus brought “to a teachable frame,” by a sudden and/or unexpected conversion (subita conversione), which most likely occurred during the years 1532-33. Scholars have exercised considerable energy and ingenuity trying to determine the exact

---


5 “John Calvin to the Godly and Ingenuous Readers,” *CO* 31:21; CTS 8:xl.
date, manner, circumstances, and agencies of Calvin's conversion. By way of contrast, Calvin himself said very little about the details of his conversion, though he did explicitly identify the "abyss of mire" from which God had delivered, or "extricated," him: namely, "the superstitions of popery." Therefore, as Carlos Eire notes, Calvin looked back upon his conversion as a softening to the will of God which focused on the rejection of Roman Catholic worship as a lifesaving moment, since Calvin had come to view Roman Catholic worship as idolatry. In fact, Calvin’s attack on idolatry, particularly the perceived idolatry of the sixteenth-century Roman church, remained a prominent theme in Calvin’s theology throughout his life. And as will be seen, Calvin’s attack on Roman Catholic “idolatry” is certainly a prominent theme in his thought on the priestly office of Jesus Christ.

Preparing for a career in law at the time of his conversion, Calvin recollected that, after receiving “some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein, that although I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardour.” Calvin seems to have made quick and significant progress, which did not escape the notice of his contemporaries interested in evangelical reform. For Calvin recalled being “quite surprised to find that before a year


7 “John Calvin to the Godly and Ingenious Readers,” CO 31:21; CTS 8:xl.

had elapsed, all who had any desire after purer doctrine were continually coming to me to learn, although I myself was as yet but a mere novice and tyro.”9

Yet this attention did not suit Calvin’s shy and retiring disposition, prompting the young scholar to seek a quieter place to continue his pursuit of theological learning. As a much older man, Calvin mused that his “one great object” had been to live a life marked by privacy and scholarship, and that God had led him through several “different turnings and changes” in his quest for that object, but never to the protracted seclusion he desired.10 One such episode for the recently converted Calvin was his move from Paris to the south of France, where he stayed at the home of a friend with evangelical sympathies, Louis du Tillet. The tensions of the times would ultimately pull this friendship apart, as reflected in Calvin’s later description of Louis as one who had “basely apostatised and returned to the papists.”11 For a period of several months beginning in late 1533, however, this pastor in Claix and canon of the cathedral in Angoulême provided the extensive library and placid environs that Calvin needed to pursue his studies. Calvin likely began the first edition of the Institutes while staying at Louis du Tillet’s home.12

The dedicatory letter to Francis I that prefaced the 1536 Institutes, and with some alterations, each subsequent edition as well, indicates that this undertaking was first and foremost a response to Calvin’s aforementioned experience with his French compatriots who, like him, desired the “purer doctrine” of evangelical reform. For Calvin wrote:


10 Ibid., CO 31:21, 23; CTS 8:xli.

11 Ibid., CO 31:25; CTS 8:xlii.

When I first set my hand to this work, nothing was farther from my mind, most glorious king, than to write something that might be offered to your majesty. 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. And I undertook this labor especially for our French countrymen, very many of whom I saw to be hungering and thirsting for Christ; very few who had been imbued with even a slight knowledge of him. The book itself witnesses that this was my intention, adapted as it is to a simple and, you may say, elementary form of teaching.\footnote{13 “John Calvin to King Francis I,” \textit{Institutes, 1536 Edition}, OS 1:21.9; Battles, 1.}

Following classical precedents from the likes of Quintilian and Lactantius, as well as from the celebrated sixteenth-century humanists Erasmus and Guillaume Budé, Calvin called his book an \textit{institutio}, a term used to describe a pedagogical undertaking; that is, a disposition or arrangement of the elements of instruction.\footnote{14 Cottret, \textit{Calvin: A Biography}, 112; Muller, \textit{The Unaccommodated Calvin}, 104. The word \textit{institutio} can also mean purpose, principles, and/or method. See Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds., \textit{A Latin Dictionary} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), s.v. “institutio.” Moreover, the notion of conveying the elements of instruction corresponds with Calvin’s stated desire “to transmit certain rudiments” to his readers, as \textit{rudimenta} in that context denotes beginning or first things. Ibid., s.v. “rudimentum.”} Calvin ordered this \textit{Institutio}, especially its first four chapters, which expound the law, the Apostle’s Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, respectively, according to the traditional catechetical pattern—although the particular influence of Martin Luther’s 1529 \textit{Small Catechism} has been widely recognized.\footnote{15 Hesselink, “The Development and Purpose of Calvin’s Institutes,” 68; Benoît, “The History and Development of the \textit{Institutio},” 103; Neuser, “The Development of the \textit{Institutes} 1536 to 1559,” 36-38; Gancz, \textit{The Young Calvin}, 137-45; De Greef, \textit{The Writings of John Calvin}, 197-98; Muller, \textit{The Unaccommodated Calvin}, 120.} With respect to its primary purpose, then, the 1536 \textit{Institutes} may be aptly described as a catechetically structured summary of evangelical doctrine, a summary intended to instruct and edify ordinary, inquiring French adults who were disillusioned with, and in many cases already alienated from, the Roman church. The full title helps capture Calvin’s intention: \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion:}
Embracing Almost the Whole Sum of Piety, and Whatever is Necessary to Know of the Doctrine of Salvation: A Work Most Worthy to be Read by All Persons Zealous for Piety, and Recently Published.\textsuperscript{16}

Yet the deteriorating circumstances of French evangelicals in late 1534 seemingly caused some alteration in Calvin’s intension for this work in its early stages.\textsuperscript{17} The events of October 17-18 of that year, in which placards attacking the Roman Mass were posted throughout Paris, fanned to flame the smouldering antagonism against France’s advocates of Protestant reform.\textsuperscript{18} Calvin had fled Paris nearly an entire year beforehand. By January 1535 Calvin was safely settled in Basel, from which vantage point he saw how reports of France’s brutal repression of Protestantism met with strong disapproval as they traversed French borders.\textsuperscript{19} Because this campaign of repression endangered Germans residing in France and threatened to impede political negotiations among the French king, Francis I, and German Protestant princes, Francis sought to distance French evangelicals from their German co-religionists by supporting measures that indiscriminately portrayed the former as subversive to France’s civil wellness.\textsuperscript{20} In an attempt to allay international indignation kindled against French “tyranny,” reported Calvin, “certain wicked and lying pamphlets

\textsuperscript{16} Institutions, 1536 Edition, OS 1:19; Battles, iii.

\textsuperscript{17} Neuser, “The Development of the Institutes 1536 to 1559,” 34; Muller, The Unaccommodated Calvin, 26.

\textsuperscript{18} See “Appendix I: The Placards of 1534,” in Battles, 339-42; Cottret, Calvin: A Biography, 82-88.

\textsuperscript{19} “John Calvin to the Godly and Ingenuous Readers,” CO 31:23; CTS 8:xli.

\textsuperscript{20} See “Introduction,” in Battles, xl.
were circulated, stating that none were treated with such cruelty but Anabaptists and seditious persons, who, by their perverse ravings and false opinions, were overthrowing not only religion but also all civil order.”

Reflecting on these events over two decades afterward in the preface of his 1557 commentary on the Psalms, Calvin maintained that silence in the face of such atrocities would have been tantamount to “cowardice and treachery.” In that preface, then, Calvin cited a twofold, apologetic motivation for the 1536 *Institutes*: (1) to vindicate his fellow French evangelicals from accusations he deemed false and unjust; and (2) to rouse other nations to compassion and solicitude for their evangelical residents, so similar atrocities may not befall them. Calvin interpreters should bear in mind that the autobiographical approach Calvin employed in the preface of his commentary on the Psalms was intended to demonstrate that Calvin’s own exile and sufferings as a reformer were comparable to those of David, whom Calvin considered the principal psalmist. In this way, Calvin sought to recommend himself to his readers as extraordinarily qualified to expound and to make pastoral applications from the Psalms, writings which Calvin viewed as lending voice to the exile and suffering commonly experienced by God’s people throughout the ages, and so writings especially suited to bring spiritual consolation to embattled sixteenth-century evangelicals. Beyond the issue of chronological distance from the events, therefore, the authorial intent of this preface naturally, and perhaps even

---

21 “John Calvin to the Godly and Ingenuous Readers,” *CO* 31:23; CTS 8:xli.

22 Ibid., *CO* 31:23; CTS 8:xli-xl.

somewhat disproportionately, accentuates the apologetic aspect of the 1536 Institutes. On the other hand, the Institutes’ dedicatory letter to king Francis I, the original draft of which Calvin dated August 1535, indicates, more accurately it would seem, that the apologetic aspect was in fact secondary to Calvin’s original intention for this work. For in that letter, immediately after declaring that his “purpose was solely to transmit certain rudiments” pertaining to the knowledge of Christ, Calvin stated:

But I perceived that the fury of certain wicked persons has prevailed so far in your realm that there is no place in it for sound doctrine. Consequently, it seemed to me that I should be doing something worthwhile if I both gave instruction to those I had undertaken to instruct and made confession before you with the same work. From this you may learn the nature of the doctrine against which those madmen burn with rage who today disturb your realm with sword and fire.24

This statement, which appears in all subsequent editions of the Institutes as well, suggests that from 1536 onward, Calvin viewed the apologetic aspect of the Institutes as secondary to, albeit subservient and complementary to, the work’s primary, pedagogical aspect. Moreover, by Calvin’s own description, the Institutes, from 1536 onward, present an apologetic of the confessional sort, and thus, I believe, not the philosophical or logical sort. On this important distinction I concur with Charles Partee, who observes that though Calvin was rightly concerned with giving correct theological answers, his answers should not be seen as a logically unassailable system of ideas, but rather as a heartfelt confession of biblical, apostolic faith, and thus a confession which attempted to protect the mystery of God’s revelation. That is because Calvin’s theology, in its essence, is neither a system explicating rational truth, nor even a system rationally explicating revealed truth. Instead, Calvin’s theology is a systematic offering of faithful witness to the truth revealed by God

in Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{25}

**Dividing Labours, Implementing a Programme**

The 1536 *Institutes* was well received, providing Calvin the impetus to produce a subsequent, revised edition, written in Latin and printed at Strasbourg by Wendelin Rihel in August 1539. Though Calvin published this new edition several months into his three-year-stay in Strasbourg (1538-41), he almost certainly completed the revisions before he arrived, either during his first ministry in Geneva (1536-38) or his brief, transitional stay in Basel after his dismissal from Geneva.\textsuperscript{26} The 1539 *Institutes* changed significantly by comparison with its 1536 predecessor, due in large part to Calvin’s teaching, preaching ministry in Geneva, and the fruition of his long-held aspiration of writing commentaries on Scripture.

Calvin was already giving serious thought to the best manner of commentating on Scripture during his first stay in Basel (1535-36), while working on the 1536 *Institutes*. It was in the intellectually vigorous atmosphere of Basel where the young scholar discussed the methodological and stylistic aspects of biblical interpretation with Simon Grynaeus—the former Heidelberg professor who was invited by Johannes Oecolampadius in 1529 to the University of Basel, where he taught Greek, and in 1536, began lecturing on the New


The Epistle to the Romans had been a favorite text of biblical commentators for centuries beforehand, and the large number of commentaries produced on that Epistle in and around Calvin’s time in Basel suggests not only the burden of scholars to write on Romans, but a strong enough interest among the reading public to make publishing those commentaries economically advantageous. Grynaeus was himself preparing a course of lectures on that Epistle during Calvin’s first stay in Basel, meaning that Romans probably loomed large in their conversation about biblical commentating.

Whatever immediate plans Calvin may have had to write a commentary, however, were temporarily suspended in the summer of 1536, when he succumbed to the urging of Guillaume Farel to help advance the Reformation in Geneva. By September 1536, Calvin had been appointed reader of theology in Geneva and sometime shortly thereafter became a pastor. As reader in theology, Calvin regularly lectured the residents of Geneva at the Cathedral of Saint Pierre on the Pauline epistles. Calvin’s commentary on Paul’s

---


Epistle to the Romans, dedicated in October 1539 and published the following March, was likely a byproduct of these lectures.32

Calvin dedicated this commentary to Grynaeus, recalling his “friendly discussion” with this established, elder scholar “three years” earlier in Basel to gain respectability for his first exegetical publication, and validity for the manner of biblical commentating that he proposed.33 Their discussion, related Calvin, was “about the best way of interpreting Scripture.” He and Grynaeus agreed that the singular virtue of a biblical interpreter was *perspicua brevitas*, or “lucid brevity.” For given that the interpreter’s primary task is “to unfold the mind of the writer whom he has undertaken to expound, he misses his mark, or at least strays outside his limits, by the extent to which he leads his readers away from the meaning of his author.”34 In other words, the methodological and stylistic means used by the interpreter must subserve, not impede or deflect, the proper purpose of interpretation: namely, explaining Scripture.

Calvin referred to two contemporaries responsible for “the most significant work” on Romans to contend that the proper purpose of biblical interpretation had not yet been sufficiently served, thereby justifying his own contribution to the already sizable number

---


33 Calvin’s concern to win support for his efforts was probably heightened by the ambiguity surrounding what a biblical commentary entailed, or even was, in the sixteenth century. Kenneth Hagen, “What Did the Term *Commentarius* Mean to Sixteenth-Century Theologians?” in *Théorie et pratique de l’exégèse*, eds. Irena Backus and Francis Higman (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1990), 13-38.

34 “John Calvin to Simon Grynaeus,” OE 13:3.5-12; *CNTC* 8:1.
of extant commentaries on this Epistle. The first was Philip Melachthon, the Wittenberg reformer and so-called Praeceptor Germaniae, who, by the time of Calvin’s dedication to Grynaeus, had published a Dispositio on Romans in 1529, and a full-length Commentarii in 1532. In his approach to commentating, Melanchthon sought to wed his concerns for biblical interpretation with effective pedagogical method by means of loci communes—commonplaces or topics that he culled from the text and arranged in a manner designed to present the biblical writer’s overall argument with optimal cogency, clarity, and force. Pastors were Melanchthon’s primary audience, and promoting effective use of Scripture in their preaching and teaching ministries was his intent. Calvin, however, considered the loci communes method ill-suited for the purpose of biblical commentating, saying in regard to Melanchthon:

His only object…seems to have been to discuss the points which were especially worth noting. He therefore dwells at length on these, and deliberately passes over many matters which can cause great trouble to those of average understanding…. Melanchthon achieved what he intended by illustrating the principal points. While he was occupied in this primary task, he neglected many points which require attention.

In Calvin’s estimation, such selectivity in handling the text of Scripture could not satisfactorily unfold the mind of the biblical writer. Moreover, the loci communes method

35 Ibid., OE 13:4.7-11; CNTC 8:2. Calvin also referred to Zwingli’s successor in Zurich, Heinrich Bullinger, as a significant contemporary commentator. In this instance, however, Calvin merely paid Bullinger a passing compliment. Bullinger’s commentary on Romans was published in 1533.


gave readers the results of biblical exegesis without necessarily acquainting them with, or exercising them in, this important ministerial skill. As made obvious by Geneva’s Friday morning *congrégations*, which he and Farel introduced in late 1536, Calvin believed that the best way to facilitate the biblical competency necessary for effective ministry was for entire books of the Bible to be studied in *lectio continua*. This conviction is mirrored in Calvin’s own general practice of biblical commentating, in which he produced a running, verse-by-verse exposition of the text.

Calvin’s second foil was the Strasbourg reformer Martin Bucer, whose work on Romans, titled *Metaphrases et enarrationes perpetuae…in epistolam ad Romanos*, was published in 1536. As this title indicates, Bucer’s work on Romans differs from that of Melanchthon’s by providing a running (*perpetua*) commentary on the Epistle by way of both paraphrastic restatement (*metaphrasis*) and continuous explanation (*enarratio*). To these Bucer added, among other things, *observationes*—that is, digested precepts on the Christian life. Yet like Melanchthon, Bucer also employed the *loci communes* method of documentary analysis, compiling his *loci, observationes, enarrationes*, and *metaphrases* in one elaborate, materially imposing volume.

A recent biographer of Bucer describes this “ponderous” tome on Romans as both a work of biblical exegesis and a discourse on the Christian life—as an offering intended to aid the theological, ethical education of pastors and teachers, and also the discipleship

---


of common folk.\textsuperscript{41} Calvin recognized the broad scope and intent of his colleague as well, and deemed the utility of this work compromised as a result, stating:

Bucer is too verbose to be read quickly by those who have other matters to deal with, and too profound to be easily understood by less intelligent and attentive readers. Whatever the subject with which he is dealing, so many subjects are suggested to him by his incredible and vigorous fertility of mind, that he does not know how to stop writing.\textsuperscript{42}

In Calvin’s assessment, Bucer’s work was too large, multifaceted, and awkwardly written for convenient use, particularly by busy pastors possessed of average training and intellectual ability. Calvin’s most salient criticisms concerned style, for he feared Bucer’s prolixity and so-called profundity acted as a barrier between Bucer’s readers and the text of Scripture. Consequently, Bucer’s style conflicted with Calvin’s conviction that biblical commentating ought to be undertaken with studied concision and clarity—or \textit{brevitas} and \textit{facilitas}.\textsuperscript{43} Still, Calvin’s critique of Melanchthon leaves no doubt that he judged Bucer’s method problematic as well, because Calvin deemed \textit{loci communes} ill-suited for biblical interpretation, and, as his own practice suggests, too different a genre to exist naturally or expeditiously alongside running biblical commentary.

Calvin’s convictions about biblical commentating, concretized amidst the pastoral and pedagogical exigencies of Geneva’s reform, lastingly shaped the \textit{Institutes} beginning with the 1539 edition. In terms of its material development, this new edition swelled from


\textsuperscript{42} “John Calvin to Simon Grynaeus,” \textit{OE} 13:5.1-6; \textit{CNTC} 8:3.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., \textit{OE} 13:3.8-16; \textit{CNTC} 8:1.
six to seventeen chapters, or more tellingly still, from roughly 85,000 to 200,000 words.\textsuperscript{44} The 1536 edition’s chapters on the sacraments and Christian liberty were augmented and divided into three chapters each. New chapters on the knowledge of God, self-knowledge and free will, repentance, justification and good works, the relationship between Old and New Testaments, predestination and providence, and the Christian life, respectively, were certainly given impetus by Calvin’s lectures from 1536 to 1538 on the Pauline epistles, as Calvin believed those epistles to be the heart of the theology of Scripture.\textsuperscript{45} Perhaps more precisely, this material development of the 1539 \textit{Institutes} bears the impress of Calvin’s study in preparation for his commentary on Romans—the Epistle that, once understood, provides “a passage opened to us to the understanding of the whole of Scripture.”\textsuperscript{46}

What is more, while Calvin disapproved of the \textit{loci communes} method for biblical commentating, he recognized that this method was extremely well-suited for expounding doctrine, a pursuit to which Calvin would thereafter devote the \textit{Institutes}. In other words, Calvin recognized that exegesis and theology are reciprocally, inextricably related tasks, yet distinct tasks nonetheless. And this recognition prompted Calvin to approach each of these tasks in a way that he felt would best correspond to its own character, an approach which resulted in Calvin dividing his labours as a biblical interpreter on the one hand, and a theologian on the other, between his commentaries and \textit{Institutes}, respectively. Thus the

\textsuperscript{44} Gilmont, “Appendix 1: Calvin’s Productivity,” in \textit{John Calvin and the Printed Book}, 293.


\textsuperscript{46} “John Calvin to Simon Grynaeus,” \textit{OE} 13:4.5-6; \textit{CNTC} 8:2.
1539 Institutes marked Calvin’s embrace of the loci communes method for his theological labours of expounding doctrine, labours in which Calvin revealed the particular influence of Melanchthon’s understanding of dialectics and rhetoric in his effort to present the ordo recte docendi, or right order of teaching.\(^4\) There Calvin incorporated his new material—consisting of exegetically derived, polemically informed, theological loci—into the 1536 edition without destroying the basic structure of that edition in the process; the byproduct was an integration of the existing catechetical pattern with the topics and order of Pauline soteriology.\(^4\)

Calvin’s confidence about having made a significant improvement upon the 1536 Institutes is reflected by his titular revision in the 1539 edition, as the former subtitle was omitted and replaced with: now at last truly corresponding with its title.\(^4\) As Jean-Daniel Benoît adduces, the subtitle of the 1536 edition, which reads, embracing almost the whole sum of piety, and whatever is necessary to know of the doctrine of salvation, a work most worthy to be read by all persons zealous for piety, and recently published, may well have been a publisher’s blurb that Calvin found pretentious and in need of change.\(^5\) However, the ultimate reason for the new subtitle was probably that Calvin deemed the 1539 edition more comprehensive and better ordered than the 1536, and thus in closer conformity with what he thought an institutio should be—a disposition or arrangement of, in this case, the elements of theological instruction.

\(^4\) Muller, The Unaccommodated Calvin, 118-39; Zachman, John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian, 37-39.

\(^5\) Muller, The Unaccommodated Calvin, 130.


This new edition of the *Institutes* also introduced a decisive alteration in authorial intent. Calvin wrote the 1536 edition to instruct untutored French laypersons and to decry their persecution before a wider European readership. But in the letter prefacing the 1539 *Institutes*, Calvin stated that his purpose was “to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology.”\(^{51}\) T. H. L. Parker and Wilhelm Neuser correctly note that the semantic domain of the word *candidatos* need not necessarily restrict Calvin’s intended readership only to academically trained students of theology, but may also include all reasonably informed Christians interested in studying doctrine.\(^{52}\) Yet the assumptions Calvin made concerning his readership’s religious conviction, spiritual maturity, and educational background—including working knowledge of classical and biblical literature, and patristic, medieval, and sixteenth century theology—imply that the *candidatos* Calvin had foremost in mind were university trained persons, many presumably having a theological education in the Roman church, preparing to be able teachers and preachers of the gospel in evangelical churches throughout Europe.\(^{53}\) Of course, this does not betray Calvin’s lack of concern for the instruction and edification of persons without advanced education and ministerial calling. On the contrary, such persons constituted the majority in his pastoral charges, to which he devoted nearly the last thirty years of his life. However, Calvin used sermons,


\(^{52}\) Parker, “Calvin the Biblical Expositor,” 186n16; Neuser, “The Development of the *Institutes* 1536 to 1559,” 42.

\(^{53}\) Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian*, 79-83.
catechisms, and French treatises to carry out that task, not the Latin Institutes.\textsuperscript{54}

Calvin intended the Institutes to prepare and instruct these candidates for ministry by teaching them to be purposeful, profitable students of Scripture, so “they may be able both to have easy access to it and to advance in it without stumbling.” For Calvin thought that those who approach Scripture untutored as to what they ought to seek in it risk being consigned to aimless wandering. Therefore, to describe how the Institutes should function relative to Scripture, Calvin used the metaphor of a paved road, as a paved road connotes both ease of access and ongoing orientation toward a specified goal. In keeping with this metaphor, then, this “road” called the Institutes was “paved” by a series of loci communes designed to set forward the major doctrines of the Christian faith in a comprehensive and orderly manner, a manner that accentuates the inner coherence and biblical basis of these doctrines while nourishing the piety of readers with its evangelical and confessional tone. Regarding the Institutes Calvin thus declared:

For I believe I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts, and have arranged it in such an order, that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to what end he ought to relate its contents.\textsuperscript{55}

Yet just as Calvin’s convictions about biblical commentating lastingly influenced the Institutes beginning with the 1539 edition, the method and purpose of the Institutes, in turn, lastingly influenced his approach to writing biblical commentaries. Thus in 1539, as

\textsuperscript{54} I distinguish the Latin editions of the Institutes from their French counterparts, the latter of which Calvin began producing in 1541, because: (1) Calvin addressed only the Latin editions to candidates in sacred theology; and (2) the considerable repetitions, explanations, and simplifications found in the French editions suggest that Calvin had a more generalized readership in mind. See Benoît, “The History and Development of the Institutio,” 104-7; Muller, The Unaccommodated Calvin, 30-31.

\textsuperscript{55} “John Calvin to the Reader,” OS 3:6.18-26; LCC 1:4-5.
Calvin anticipated the publication of his first commentary—on the Epistle to the Romans in March 1540—and envisioned writing many more, he vowed, “I shall always condense them, because I shall have no need to undertake long doctrinal discussions, and to digress into commonplaces.” Calvin could see no reason to be detained at any great length in his biblical commentaries by doctrinal discussions and commonplaces, or *disputationes* and *loci communes*, since that was the purpose and domain of the *Institutes*. By not repeating these discussions and digressions in his commentaries, Calvin sought to spare his readers from “great annoyance and boredom” as he attempted to unfold for them the mind of the biblical writer, so long as they “approach” these commentaries “armed with a knowledge of the present work [the *Institutes*], as a necessary tool.”\(^{56}\) The conceptual links are clear: Calvin intended the *Institutes* to be a primer for his commentaries, so that together, the *Institutes* and commentaries may help evangelical pastors and teachers be theologically informed readers and handlers of Scripture.

Though distinct labours to be sure, the 1539 *Institutes* and 1540 commentary on Romans were contemporaneously conceived and reciprocally influenced. What is more, their appearance marked the carefully considered yet newly implemented programme of working and writing that Calvin would maintain with very little deviation for almost the next twenty years. Between 1540 and 1559 Calvin wrote commentaries on every book of the New Testament except 1 and 2 John and Revelation. He also wrote commentaries on

\(^{56}\) Ibid., *OS* 3:6.26-31; LCC 1:5. As Parker notes (“Calvin the Biblical Expositor,” 186n17), the LCC edition has “Scripture” as the object of the verb “approach” (*accedat*), though Calvin was manifestly referring to his biblical commentaries. This error makes for a rather interesting and humorous rendition; namely, that Calvin considered the *Institutes* “a necessary tool” for persons wishing to be spared from “great annoyance and boredom” when reading Scripture!
Isaiah, Genesis, and the Psalms, and published lectures on Hosea and the Minor Prophets. During this period the Institutes continued to develop as well. Biblical commentating and theological controversy stimulated the development, as Calvin tirelessly wrote, compiled, edited, and rearranged material, wasting precious little along the way in his ongoing quest to achieve the right order of teaching. And in the winter of 1558-59, racing against what he believed was certain death from the quartan fever, Calvin finished the final, definitive, Latin edition of his masterwork. This last Latin Institutes had swelled to roughly 450,000 words, newly organized in four books totalling eighty chapters. Calvin felt this material and structural development was significant enough that the 1559 Institutes “could nearly be considered a new work.” Moreover, Calvin’s evident pleasure with the result leaves no reason to think that he intended any further revision of the Latin Institutes after 1559. For in August 1559, having considered the many years of effort devoted to the Institutes, he wrote: “Although I did not regret the labour spent, I was never satisfied until the work had been arranged in the order now set forth. Now I trust that I have provided something that all of you will approve.” There has never been complete agreement among Calvin interpreters regarding the organizing structure of Calvin’s theological presentation in the 1559 Institutes. However, Charles Partee argues persuasively that the order of exposition which finally satisfied Calvin was shaped throughout by Calvin’s understanding of union


\[\text{\textsuperscript{59}}\] “Recensio 1559,” in Discriptio et historia editionum, OS 3:xxxvi.4-7.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{60}}\] “John Calvin to the Reader,” OS 3:5.13-16; LCC 1:3.
with Christ.\textsuperscript{61} The structure of the 1559 \textit{Institutes} does still reflect the topics and order of Pauline soteriology, and particularly the topics and order of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, as identified by Luther’s colleague in Wittenberg, Philip Melanchthon.\textsuperscript{62} Melanchthon’s influence upon Calvin was, to be sure, direct and estimable. But since that influence was neither singular nor itself determinative for Calvin, and since union with Christ is in fact a major Pauline emphasis, the persuasiveness of Partee’s argument remains unimpaired. As will be seen, at any rate, union with Christ is certainly an informative and prominent feature in Calvin’s thought on the priestly office of Jesus Christ.

Despite this programme of working and writing Calvin set in place, the tendency of Calvin scholars for the greater part of the twentieth century has been to look primarily to the \textit{Institutes} for their understanding of Calvin’s thought. In 1944 T. H. L. Parker noted that this approach, which sundered Calvin the systematic thinker from Calvin the biblical exegete, resulted in distorted perceptions about Calvin and his work.\textsuperscript{63} And as recently as 1966 Parker lamented that many scholars still considered Calvin’s commentaries, at least in practice, as merely illustrative and incidental to the \textit{Institutes}.\textsuperscript{64} Parker’s aim was not to emphasize the importance of Calvin’s commentaries over and against the \textit{Institutes}, since that would merely redirect, rather than correct, the problem. Instead, Parker’s aim was to show that Calvin’s work as a commentator and theologian constituted two aspects

\begin{itemize}
  \item Partee, \textit{The Theology of John Calvin}, 35-43.
  \item Muller, \textit{The Unaccommodated Calvin}, 118-39.
  \item Parker, “The Approach to Calvin,” 165-72.
  \item Parker, “Calvin the Biblical Expositor,” 176.
\end{itemize}
of one activity.\textsuperscript{65} In 1989 Elsie Anne McKee described this complementarity between Calvin’s commentaries and \textit{Institutes} as a “symbiotic relationship,” voicing a fairly recent though growing recognition in Calvin scholarship.\textsuperscript{66} However, that this symbiosis is sometimes undervalued and overlooked—and that failure to account for it has resulted in distortions of Calvin’s thought—will become evident as secondary literature pertaining to this study is engaged, particularly literature about the atoning death and threefold office of Christ.

\textbf{From the Institutes to the Mosaic Harmony}

Despite the gravity of Calvin’s bout with quartan fever, it was not his physical life that ended in the winter of 1558-59, but rather the characteristic developmental symbiosis between his commentaries and \textit{Institutes}. Though burdened with ever-declining health, he remained strikingly productive until his eventual death on May 27, 1564, five years after the final revision of the Latin \textit{Institutes}, and four years after its 1560 French counterpart marked the definitive completion of this aspect of Calvin’s labours. In September 1559, however, just one month after Calvin revised the forward to his last edition of the Latin \textit{Institutes}, the final four books of the Pentateuch became the subject of Geneva’s Friday morning \textit{congrégations}.\textsuperscript{67} Out of this context came Calvin’s \textit{Harmony of the Four Last Books of Moses}, published in July 1563 in a single volume with the revision of his 1554 commentary on Genesis. The \textit{Mosaic Harmony} contains Calvin’s biblical commentating

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 182-84.

\textsuperscript{66} McKee, “Exegesis, Theology, and Development in Calvin’s \textit{Institution},” 168.

in its most seasoned, mature form.\(^{68}\) Furthermore, the *Mosaic Harmony* contains Calvin’s biblical commentating in its most enterprising and unique form, making this commentary the place to find Calvin’s most sustained doctrinal treatment of the priestly office.

Calvin started his preface to the *Mosaic Harmony* with a defense of the plan that he adopted for its composition. For beyond the fact that, in some ways, this commentary represented a significant departure from his prior method of commentating, harmonizing the Pentateuch had no precedent within the history of Christian exegesis to which Calvin could point.\(^{69}\) His stated concern was not so much to convince opponents of the propriety of his plan as it was to anticipate potential misgivings of otherwise sympathetic readers, who might interpret the plan as a presumptuous, superfluous alteration of what the Holy Spirit had prescribed.\(^{70}\)

Calvin maintained that his handling of the latter four books of the Pentateuch did not imply that the text was anything less than “excellent in itself” and “perfectly adapted”

\(^{68}\) The *Mosaic Harmony* was the last of Calvin’s commentaries published during his lifetime. His commentary on Joshua was published posthumously in 1564. De Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin*, 106-7, 241.

\(^{69}\) It does not necessarily follow from Calvin’s innovative approach to the *Mosaic Harmony* that he lacked sources of inspiration. Raymond Blacketer suggests that beyond the traditional notion that the moral, religious, and political content of the Pentateuch can be reduced to the Decalogue, Calvin may have been influenced by his largely secondhand knowledge of rabbinic attempts to categorize pentateuchal legislation. He also cites Philo of Alexandria’s use of the Decalogue as the organizational grid for the Pentateuch’s legal material and Philip Melanchthon’s use of the Ten Commandments as an interpretational guide for his exposition of Proverbs as possible influences for Calvin. Such possibilities are intriguing but seemingly unverifiable. Melanchthon appears to be the most probable influence suggested, yet even in that case, as Blacketer acknowledges, this discussion is in the realm of speculation. See Blacketer, *The School of God*, 127-38; idem, “Calvin as Commentator on the Mosaic Harmony and Joshua,” 42-44.

\(^{70}\) “Preface of John Calvin to the Four Last Books of Moses,” *CO* 24:5-6; CTS 3:xiv.
for the instruction of its original recipients during their forty-year sojourn from Egypt to Canaan. In Calvin’s estimation, any attempt to improve upon the substance of the divine address to Moses “would be an act of audacity akin to sacrilege.” But peaceable readers, said Calvin, would find him innocent of this charge. For his only purpose was to “collect and arrange” what Moses delivered into a form more perfectly adapted to the pedagogical needs of his own audience. Therefore, Calvin saw his Mosaic Harmony as a compendium designed to help readers “more easily, more commodiously, and more profitably” engage this potentially forbidding portion of Scripture. Not in an effort to lead readers away from the study of each of these biblical books, but to direct them to a “definite object” (certum scopum) in that study, lest they wander aimlessly for lack of any “regular plan” (methodi) for proceeding.71 The resemblance between the intent of the Mosaic Harmony and that of the Institutes from 1539 onward is hard to miss. For in the Institutes Calvin also set out to collect and arrange diffuse biblical material in a way that its reader may gain easy access to Scripture and “advance in it without stumbling,” so that “it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to what end (scopum) he ought to relate its contents.”72

Yet Calvin’s work on the latter four books of the Pentateuch was not his only, nor even his first, commentary to be written as a harmony. For in 1555 Calvin complemented his 1553 commentary on John’s Gospel with a harmony of the Synoptic Gospels, albeit in this case, Calvin “imitated” a long and distinguished tradition of harmonization, citing the

71 Ibid., CO 24:5-6; CTS 3:xiv-xv.
particular influence of Martin Bucer’s harmony.\textsuperscript{73} Calvin found that beyond their obvious similarities in order and arrangement, the Synoptics lend themselves to harmonization by virtue of their primarily historical content and purpose: narrating the life of Jesus to show that his manifestation in the flesh was in fulfillment of ancient messianic promise. Surely, the Synoptic Gospels interweave doctrine which relates to the office of Christ, contended Calvin, “but they deal particularly with...how in the person of Christ Jesus were fulfilled the things that God had promised from the beginning.” As such, Calvin’s harmonizing of these narratives gave literary form to his conviction that Matthew, Mark, and Luke were three writers of a single gospel history (\textit{tres evangelicae historiae scriptores}).\textsuperscript{74}

However, Calvin believed the content and purpose of John’s Gospel distinguished it from the Synoptics. That is because “the other three narrate the life and death of Christ more fully,” while John’s Gospel “emphasizes more the doctrine in which Christ’s office and the power of his death and resurrection are explained.” In other words, the Synoptic Gospels emphasize history, whereas John’s Gospel emphasizes doctrine. Calvin did not find in John’s Gospel a total lack of “historical narration,” but rather an unambiguously theological intent, as “the doctrine which points out to us the power and fruit of Christ’s coming appears far more clearly in him than in the others.”\textsuperscript{75} For Calvin, then, the issues of literary genre and authorial intent unified the Synoptic Gospels, and at the same time, differentiated them from the Gospel of John.

\textsuperscript{73} Comm. on the Harmony of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, \textit{argumentum}, \textit{CO} 45:4; \textit{CNTC} 1:xiv.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., \textit{CO} 45:3; \textit{CNTC} 1:xii.

On the other hand, the final four books of the Pentateuch presented Calvin with a situation that he deemed very different: namely, one literary unit, written almost entirely by one author, wherein the “two principal parts” of that literary unit—historical narrative and doctrine—are intermingled without either continuity or distinction. “This distinction Moses does not observe in his books, not even relating the history in a continuous form, and delivering the doctrine unconnectedly, as opportunity occurred,” remarked Calvin.76 This was the situation that prompted Calvin’s departure from his long-established method of biblical commentating, a departure resulting in the uniqueness of the Mosaic Harmony, which T. H. L. Parker describes as “a masterpiece of organization or systematization.”77

In keeping with his practice of distinguishing and dividing the different aspects of his labours, and of providing continuous, running commentary on the biblical text, Calvin brought together the narrative material dispersed throughout Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy to reconstruct a single pentateuchal history. His aim was to instruct and edify his readers by optimizing what he considered the twofold use and application of this episode in the sacred story of redemption, that use and application being: (1) to commend God’s incomparable might, immense goodness, and steadfast paternal care for his people; and (2) to engender filial awe and reverence for God, who meets the sins and infidelity of his people with the severe mercy of remedial judgement.78 Calvin’s pentateuchal history

76 “Preface of John Calvin to the Four Last Books of Moses,” CO 24:5-6; CTS 3:xv. Calvin omitted this comment from his 1564 French edition of the Mosaic Harmony. Blacketer (The School of God, 145-46) suggests that Calvin might have considered these words to be too bold for a work readily accessible to lay readers.

77 Parker, Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries, 94.

78 “Preface of John Calvin to the Four Last Books of Moses,” CO 24:5-6, 7-8; CTS 3:xv-xvi. Blacketer, The School of God, 146.
has two segments. For the first segment he took Exodus 1:1-20:21, omitted the Passover regulations (Ex. 12:1-20; 12:43-49; 13:1-16) and the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-17), and added Deuteronomy 1:9-18 and Deuteronomy 5:22-31, repetitions of Exodus 18:13-27 and Exodus 20:18-21, respectively. The result is a continuous narrative running up to the giving of the Decalogue.\(^79\)

But at this point Calvin suspended his exposition of historical narrative to launch upon a major treatment of the law—the doctrinal aspect of Exodus through Deuteronomy which, to Calvin, comprehends everything pertaining to the faith and obedience of God’s people. However, because Moses delivered this doctrine “unconnectedly,” Calvin feared that pastors and teachers of average ability would not discern the conceptual connections among these precepts, or “reduce the different precepts to their proper class,” and would not be able, therefore, to sufficiently understand or explicate the law. Thus Calvin’s aim, in keeping with his established convictions on biblical commenting, was to unfold the mind of Moses (sancti prophetae mente) in order that the law would be more accessible and profitable.\(^80\) To avoid intermittent interruptions in his exposition of history, however, Calvin confined his entire treatment of the law to one large segment set midway through that history, casting the whole segment into a series of \textit{loci communes}. By employing the \textit{loci communes} method in this situation, Calvin betrays a departure from his prior practice

\(^79\) Calvin’s first segment of his reconstruction of pentateuchal history left Exodus 1:1-20:21 relatively intact. His editing was far more extensive in the second section. For an outline of those edits see Parker, \textit{Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries}, 94-95.

\(^80\) “Preface of John Calvin to the Four Last Books of Moses,” \textit{CO} 24:5-6; CTS 3:xv. These comments are also among those Calvin omitted from the 1564 French edition of the \textit{Mosaic Harmony}, making clear that these comments were intended for pastors and teachers, not laypersons.
of biblical commentating, yet also exhibits his ongoing determination to keep the flow of continuous, running commentary unimpeded by doctrinal digressions.  

Together these *loci communes* embody what Calvin saw as “four principal heads” of doctrine, the first three of which he viewed as reflecting distinctions native to the final four books of the Pentateuch. For the first principal head of doctrine, that *locus* called the “Preface to the Law,” Calvin gathered together forty-one passages—three from Exodus, four from Leviticus, one from Numbers, and thirty-three from Deuteronomy—that speak to the authority and dignity of the law. Calvin sought to demonstrate that God’s free and gracious adoption of a people occasioned the giving of the law; and because the correlate of grace is faith, faith is the only disposition in which the law may be genuinely received, that is, as a vehicle for expressing filial gratitude and obedience, rather than a vehicle for achieving self-righteousness.

The second principal head of doctrine treats that which constitutes the heart of the *Mosaic Harmony*, the Decalogue. Despite the material brevity of its Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, wrote Calvin, is the people of God’s comprehensive summary, or rule, for faithful and righteous living (*pie iusteque vivendi regulam*). What is more, Calvin thought that, by way of inherent, conceptual connections, the Ten Commandments quite naturally embrace and organize numerous precepts scattered throughout the final four books of the Pentateuch. Though these precepts are located outside the two tables (*extra duas tabulas*) comprised by the Ten Commandments, remarked Calvin, these precepts “differ not at all


from them in sense,” that is, in substance or meaning. As such, Calvin saw these precepts as “interpretations” of the particular commandment in the Decalogue with which they are conceptually connected. Thus in an attempt to provide a holistic, pedagogically enhanced rendering of the Decalogue’s core doctrinal content, Calvin identified the commandment to which each of these precepts correspond, and then affixed them to it, creating ten loci, one for each of the Ten Commandments.83

Yet Calvin also thought that the Ten Commandments—again, by way of inherent, conceptual connections—quite naturally embrace and organize the many ceremonial and political regulations scattered throughout the final four books of the Pentateuch. As such, to the locus Calvin created for each of the Ten Commandments, he appended ceremonial and/or political “supplements,” that is, loci crafted from the cultic and/or civil regulations which correspond to that particular commandment. Collectively, these supplements make up the Mosaic Harmony’s third principal head of doctrine.

However, Calvin considered the Decalogue’s relationship to these ceremonial and political regulations fundamentally different from that of the precepts he referred to as the Decalogue’s “interpretations.” That is because the interpretations are “of the substance of the law,” whereas the regulations are not. In fact, Calvin maintained that the role of these regulations was originally, and remains still, one of subordination and subservience to the Decalogue and its so-called interpretations. For the Pentateuch’s ceremonial and political regulations had no other aim for their original recipients than to be temporary aids “in the observance of the moral law,” that is, the non-temporal substance of the law contained in

the Decalogue and the precepts which help interpret it. In other words, the “supplements” contained in the Mosaic Harmony’s third principal head of doctrine were meant to guide the ancient Jews, as if by the hand, “to the due worship of God, and to the promotion of justice towards men,” that aspect of the law contained in the Mosaic Harmony’s second principal head of doctrine. Insomuch that the ceremonial and political regulations found in these so-called supplements have been abrogated by the coming of Christ, Christians are not to practice them. Calvin deemed these regulations to have enduring instructional value, though, in that they amplify the core doctrinal content of the Ten Commandments. Accordingly, Calvin’s aim for the Mosaic Harmony’s third principal head of doctrine was to amplify the substance of the second principal head of doctrine.84

The fourth principal head of doctrine concludes the treatment of the law contained in the Mosaic Harmony. This head consists of three loci: the “Sum of the Law,” in which Calvin distilled the teaching of Moses on loving God and neighbor, the “Use of the Law,” and finally, the “Sanctions of the Law,” in which Calvin outlined the promises and threats associated with the due observance or transgression of Moses’ legal deliverances. Jointly, these three loci were purposed to make clear “the end and use of the law” (finem usumque legis ostendit).85

It is noteworthy, however, that the “Use of the Law” differs from the “Sum of the Law” and the “Sanctions of the Law,” and therefore, makes this fourth principal head of doctrine unique.


85 “Preface of John Calvin to the Four Last Books of Moses,” CO 24:7-8; CTS 3:xvii. Wright, “Calvin’s Pentateuchal Criticism,” 34. As Wright (Ibid., 34n6) observes, however, Calvin neither mentioned the “Sum of the Law,” nor distinguished the “Use of the Law” from the “Sanctions of the Law,” in his preface to this commentary.
doctrine markedly different than the previous three. That is because the “Use of the Law” was not generated from texts in the last four books of the Pentateuch. Rather, it is a brief *locus* on the functions of the law relative to the Christian life based entirely upon Pauline thought, and a *locus* which, in effect, is an abridged version of the material found in book two, chapter seven of the *Institutes*. In other words, the “Use of the Law” constitutes an essentially Pauline theological hermeneutic with which to interpret the principal heads of doctrine in the *Mosaic Harmony*, a theological hermeneutic that Calvin hoped would lead his readers to Christ. For according to Calvin, Paul taught that the entire doctrine of the law—every command, ceremony, promise, and threat—has its proper end, and so its true meaning, in Christ. Thus Calvin’s comments on Romans 10:4: “This remarkable passage declares that the law in all its parts has reference to Christ, and therefore no one will be able to understand it correctly who does not constantly strive to attain this mark.”

**The Second Commandment**

The concerns of this study, of course, pertain to the priestly office of Jesus Christ in the thought of Calvin. Therefore, Calvin’s handling of the second commandment is an appropriate, if not altogether typical, example of his approach to the Ten Commandments in the *Mosaic Harmony’s* doctrinal segment. In keeping with the consensus of Reformed thought, Calvin regarded the second commandment to be: “You shall not make yourself a

---


87 “Preface of John Calvin to the Four Last Books of Moses,” *CO* 24:7-8; *CTS* 3:xviii.

88 Comm. on Rom. 10:4, *OE* 13:216.9-11; *CNTC* 8:222.
graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the waters which are under the earth; you shall not adore or worship them.”89 In the *Mosaic Harmony’s* second principal head of doctrine, then, Calvin began his *locus* on the second commandment by discussing the commandment itself, as found in Exodus 20:4-6, and again in the repetition of that text, Deuteronomy 5:8-10. Affixed to this discussion of the second commandment’s two primary texts, and making up the remainder of this *locus* on the second commandment, is the “Exposition of the Second Commandment.” Therein, Calvin gathered together seventeen precepts—five from Exodus, two from Leviticus, and ten from Deuteronomy—that he saw as having the same essential meaning, or “sense,” as Exodus 20:4-6 and Deuteronomy 5:8-10. These precepts are to act as “interpretations” of the second commandment’s core doctrinal content, or non-temporal substance, by adding repetition and nuance to the commandment’s proscription against idolatry, and in turn, its prescription for legitimate worship.

If Calvin’s aim in the *Mosaic Harmony’s* second principal head of doctrine was to expound the essential, non-temporal meaning of the Ten Commandments, then his aim in the *Mosaic Harmony’s* third principal head of doctrine was to amplify the meaning of the Ten Commandments as presented in that exposition. Comprised of *loci* that Calvin called “supplements,” this third head of doctrine treats what he considered to be a non-essential, temporal component of the law—that puerile, elementary, and now abrogated preparation for later revelation found in the ceremonial and political regulations. To Calvin, however,

89 Inst. 2.8.17, OS 3:359.5-7; LCC 1:383. On the other hand, the Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions, following the division and numbering of the Decalogue that was conventional in the western medieval church, considered this prohibition against making and/or worshiping images to be part of the first commandment. This discrepancy will be discussed in chapter three of this study.
abrogation did not mean complete, unqualified obsolescence, as is particularly obvious in his handling of the ceremonial regulations. On the contrary, he maintained that putting an end to the practice of these ceremonies actually established and accentuated their ongoing didactic force and effect. Consequently, Calvin argued that the continued study of these ceremonies yields invaluable insights into the messianic intentions and accomplishments of Jesus Christ:

As regards the ceremonies, we must consider that an end was put upon them by Christ’s coming, in such a way as to establish their truth more firmly than as if they still remained in use: for we acknowledge that in them, as in a mirror, was formerly shown to the Fathers, what is now displayed to us in its reality. Whence it appears that they are greatly mistaken who altogether reject as useless that instruction which we read in the writings of Moses; and that the squeamishness of those who despise it is also intolerable.

Calvin brought together an extraordinarily large amount of material with which to supplement the second commandment in the Mosaic Harmony’s third head of doctrine. In fact, the second commandment’s “supplements” occupy 162 columns in the Opera omnia version of the Mosaic Harmony, and 266 pages in the Calvin Translation Society version; that accounts for well over one-third of the total space Calvin utilized to expound all Ten Commandments, together with their relative supplemental material. To be sure, then, the second commandment’s “supplements” provide a robust amplification of the meaning of both idolatry and legitimate worship. What is more, the main reason why Calvin was able to amplify the meaning of the second commandment in such an extraordinary way is that the ceremonial “supplements” for the second commandment comprehend ancient Israel’s


entire cultic system, that is, the tabernacle, its priesthood, and the sacrifices performed by that priesthood. 92

Conclusions and Implications

The Mosaic Harmony contains Calvin’s latest and by far his largest discussion on the priesthood. This discussion has immediate reference to the priesthood of Israel, yet its ultimate reference is the priesthood of Christ. Calvin set this discussion on the priesthood, in its entirety, within the context of his exposition of the second commandment, which is to say, within the context of idolatry and legitimate worship. Accordingly, Calvin’s locus on the second commandment in the Mosaic Harmony’s second principal head of doctrine is the subject of chapter three in this study. The real content of Calvin’s discussion on the priesthood, however, is located in the Mosaic Harmony’s third principal head of doctrine, namely, in the second commandment’s ceremonial “supplements.” Chapters four and five of this study unpack this content by examining Calvin’s exposition of the priesthood, and the sacrifices performed by that priesthood, respectively.

The primary source materials used in all the remaining chapters of this study are Calvin’s commentaries and Institutes. For the commentaries and Institutes: (1) are easily the most fruitful and important sources for gaining an understanding of Calvin’s thought on the priestly office of Christ; (2) share a common audience and objective; and (3) were intended to be used together. Calvin’s sermonic material has received greater attention as of late, and could prove valuable for learning how Calvin applied his thought on Christ’s

92 Wright, “Calvin’s Pentateuchal Criticism,” 35. For a textual and topical outline of the second commandment as adduced in the Mosaic Harmony see Parker, Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries, 165-69.
priestly office to lay persons and current events within a specific congregation. However, Calvin’s sermons are not used in this study. For aside from adding very little to the topic at hand regarding doctrinal content, they had a different audience and objective from that of the commentaries and Institutes. What is more, there are no sermons on several books of the Bible that were most influential to Calvin’s thought on the priestly office of Christ. Calvin appears to have never preached through Exodus, Leviticus, or Numbers—three of the four books in the Mosaic Harmony. And his sermons on Hebrews are not extant.⁹³

Finally, throughout the remaining chapters of this study, readers will find Calvin’s thought on the priestly office of Jesus Christ to be characterized by three rather prominent features. Those features are: (1) an effort to set forth a heartfelt confession of the biblical, apostolic faith, a confession for which the chief concern is not so much logical or rational unassailability as it is faithful witness to the truth revealed by God in Christ; (2) an attack upon idolatry, particularly the perceived idolatry of the sixteenth-century Roman church; and (3) an emphasis upon the people of God’s union with Christ.

Chapter Three

The Second Commandment as Rubric for Christ’s Priestly Office

Like his fellow architects of the Reformed tradition, Calvin identified the second commandment as such: “You shall not make yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the waters which are under the earth; you shall not adore or worship them.”\(^1\) In his *Mosaic Harmony* of 1563, Calvin employed this commandment as a heading under which to order his exposition of Israel’s cultic system. To Calvin, however, the primary significance of Israel’s cultic system was that it replicated, and in turn, typified, the person, accomplishments, and benefits of Jesus Christ relative to his priestly office. This exposition of Israel’s cultic system, therefore, is at once an exposition of Christ’s priestly office. In fact, it is Calvin’s latest and by far his largest exposition of Christ’s priestly office. Consequently, because Calvin employed the second commandment as a heading under which to order his latest and largest exposition of Christ’s priestly office, it can be said that Calvin viewed the second commandment as a rubric for Christ’s priestly office.

This chapter presents Calvin’s interpretation of the second commandment for the purpose of demonstrating how and why he used it to raise the issues and set the direction for his treatment of Christ’s priestly office in the *Mosaic Harmony*. Calvin’s own method of analyzing the second commandment shapes my approach to this undertaking, which is

\(^1\) *Inst.* 2.8.17, *OS* 3:359.5-7; LCC 1:383. On the other hand, the Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions, following the division and numbering of the Decalogue that was conventional in the western medieval church, considered this prohibition against making and/or adoring images to be part of the first commandment. This issue will be addressed later in this chapter.
carried out in three progressive stages. In the first stage I use Calvin’s 1559 *Institutes* as a propaedeutic guide to his biblical commentaries, briefly showing how Calvin determined what he considered to be the natural and intended contours of the second commandment, the contours wherein he constructed his *locus communis* on the second commandment in the *Mosaic Harmony*. The second and third stages of this chapter focus upon the *Mosaic Harmony* at length, examining, in turn, Calvin’s understanding of the basic meaning and full sense of the second commandment.²

**Determining the Contours of the Second Commandment**

One of the principal observations Calvin imparted in the *Institutes* for interpreting the Decalogue was that “the commandments and prohibitions always contain more than is

expressed in [their] words.” For it is so obvious that Moses used synecdoches “in almost all the commandments,” wrote Calvin, that whoever “would confine his understanding of the law within the narrowness of the words deserves to be laughed at.” But just as Calvin would not brook what he viewed as a wooden sort of literalism, he could no more readily countenance the arbitrariness of those who “twist Scripture without restraint, thus making anything we please out of anything.” The question at hand, then, is how far interpreters of the law may move beyond the actual words of the law to pursue “a sober interpretation of the law,” that is, to determine the law’s intended meaning. Calvin answered this question by offering what he saw as the “best rule” for proceeding “with straight, firm steps to the will of God,” so that the law’s “pure and authentic meaning (sensum)” may be rendered.

This procedure begins by ascertaining the concerns and the purpose (finis) of each commandment in what its words explicitly sanction or prohibit, for in those words God’s will is plainly revealed. Yet Calvin believed that once the stated purpose of a sanction or prohibition was ascertained, then whatever contradicts that purpose could be ascertained as well. Consequently, sober and faithful interpreters must go one step further. Using the explicit, stated purpose of each commandment as the major premise of a syllogism, these interpreters must deduce the tacit will of God, which is resident in each commandment’s implied purpose. For if God sanctions what pleases him, then its opposite must displease him. Likewise, if God prohibits what displeases him, then its opposite must please him.

3 Inst. 2.8.8, OS 3:350.5-6; LCC 1:374. For more on this observation see Kraus, “Calvin’s Exegetical Principles,” 16.

4 Inst. 2.8.8, OS 3:350.7-21; LCC 1:374. “Synecdoche” is the literary device for which a part represents the whole, or the specific encompasses the general.

5 Inst. 2.8.8, OS 3:350.33-351.3; LCC 1:375.
To Calvin, then, a commandment’s actual words constitute not only the basis from which to deduce the natural and intended sense of that commandment, but also the standard for determining the legitimacy of any such deduction. Yet the contours of a commandment’s meaning are always broader than its actual words.

Calvin’s comments on the second commandment in the *Institutes* provide a fitting example of his own use of this procedure. There he argued that God’s prohibition against making and/or adoring images openly relates “what sort of God he is, and with what kind of worship he should be honored, lest we dare attribute anything carnal to him.” That is to say, the second commandment has two basic concerns: (1) divine self-disclosure; and (2) the type of worship that God’s self-disclosure elicits. Because the second commandment plainly reveals that God does not will or like profane worship, its explicit purpose is that it withdraws people from the “petty, carnal observances, which our stupid minds, crassly conceiving of God, are wont to devise.” Deducing from this explicit, prohibitive purpose, then, Calvin said that the second commandment’s implicit, prescriptive purpose is that it “makes us conform to his [God’s] lawful worship, that is, a spiritual worship established by himself.”

Though concise, these comments from the *Institutes* give good preparatory instruction for the present topic, since it was with this procedure, and within the contours determined by it, that Calvin crafted his *locus* on the second commandment in the *Mosaic Harmony*.

**Establishing the Basic Meaning of the Second Commandment**

Calvin started his interpretation of each of the Ten Commandments in the *Mosaic* Harmony.

---

Harmony by treating each of the commandment’s two primary texts, that is, the two texts which supply that commandment’s basic meaning. In every case, the first text is from the initial giving of the Ten Commandments in Exodus chapter twenty, and the second text is from the reiteration of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy chapter five. In the case of the second commandment, the two texts are Exodus 20:4-6 and Deuteronomy 5:8-10.7

The “sum” of the second commandment, wrote Calvin, is that the worship of God must be spiritual in character, in order that it may correspond with the nature of God, who is incomprehensible. The words of this commandment prohibit only what Calvin deemed to be the most flagrant form of its transgression, the “outward idolatry” which attempts to subject the divine presence to visible, creaturely images.8 This particular transgression of the second commandment is highlighted due to the fact that it was “the evil custom which had everywhere prevailed” at the time when this commandment was given. What is more, “history especially recounts” how this evil custom prevailed in Egypt, where the religious sensibilities of the second commandment’s original recipients had been shaped.9

It must be stressed at the outset that Calvin did not equate “spiritual” worship with worship characterized by inwardness, invisibility, or immateriality. To Calvin, “spiritual” worship denoted a category of understanding, that is, a mode of knowing and accessing a

7 As we now begin to look in earnest at Calvin’s commentaries, it should be noted that his comments do not always correspond exactly to the text that he referenced. That is because Calvin often commented on several verses within a passage while only citing one of them. For example, he cited only Exodus 20:4 in his comments on Exodus 20:4-6, and only Deuteronomy 5:9 in his comments on Deuteronomy 5:8-10.


9 Comm. on Exod. 20:4, CO 24:376-77; CTS 4:107. For a discussion on Calvin’s use of extrabiblical histories to contextualize and confirm his interpretation of the Bible see Zachman, John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian, 117-22.
God who is transcendent, mysterious, and inscrutable, a God well beyond the grasp of all human imagining or philosophical speculation. Statements about imagery and God’s self-manifestation in Calvin’s commentary on Genesis are highly instructive on this issue. For there Calvin said that Moses recorded the previously oral tradition of the creation account with the intent “to render God, as it were, visible to us in his works.” The aim of Moses, being superintended by the Holy Spirit, was both to preserve and proclaim the notion that God, so as to “invite us to the knowledge of himself, places the fabric of heaven and earth before our eyes, rendering himself, in a certain manner, manifest in them.” Employing a richly visual metaphor, Calvin stated that the invisible God “clothes himself, so to speak, with the image of the world, in which he would present himself to our contemplation.” The scene Calvin depicted is of God descending to humanity in the works of creation, in order that the minds and hearts of those who look upon creation with faith might, in turn, ascend to God by the means of that same analogous representation.

Yet because few people “pursue the right method of knowing God,” wrote Calvin, the rest persist in one of two erroneous alternatives. Some, being “forgetful of God, apply the whole force of their mind to the consideration of nature,” while others “proudly soar above the world to seek God in his unveiled essence.” The writings of Moses, like the

10 Comm. on Genesis, *argumentum*, CO 23:5-6; CTS 1:58.


12 Comm. on Genesis, *argumentum*, CO 23:7-8; CTS 1:60.


14 Comm. on Genesis, *argumentum*, CO 23:7-8; CTS 1:60.
writings of Scripture in general, were intended to counter these errors, aiding benighted minds by giving voice to the “mute instruction” of heaven and earth.\textsuperscript{15} Or to express the thinking of Calvin in a slightly different manner, the writings of Moses were intended to give inspired and definitive voice to creation in its postlapsarian state, which now reflects the glory of God and the tragedy of evil with such simultaneity and ambiguity as to make the testimony of creation itself non-redemptive. Hence this comment:

[I]n describing the world as a mirror in which we ought to behold God, I would not be understood to assert, either that our eyes are sufficiently clear-sighted to discern what the fabric of heaven and earth represents, or that the knowledge to be hence attained is sufficient for salvation. And whereas the Lord invites us to himself by the means of created things, with no other effect than that of thereby rendering us inexcusable, he has added (as was necessary) a new remedy, or at least by a new aid, he has assisted the ignorance of our mind. For by the Scriptures as our guide and teacher, he not only makes those things plain which would otherwise escape our notice, but almost compels us to behold them; as if he had assisted our dull sight with spectacles. On this point…Moses insists.\textsuperscript{16}

These remarks from Calvin’s commentary on Genesis prove helpful when reading his work on the second commandment. For a return to Calvin’s treatment of Exodus 20:4 finds him declaring that even while the refulgent glory of God in creation invites humans to himself, their sin-induced blindness and ingratitude leads to the perversion of creation, and thus to manifold expressions of superstition and idolatry. Since fallen humans are so deluded as to use God’s handiwork to frame for themselves “materials of error,” claimed Calvin, the second commandment “elevates them above the whole fabric and elements of the world.”\textsuperscript{17} Of course, the second commandment is not an invitation to soar above the world seeking God in his unveiled essence. Rather, it is a counteraction of all misguided

\textsuperscript{15} Comm. on Genesis, \textit{argumentum}, \textit{CO} 23:9-10; CTS 1:62.

\textsuperscript{16} Comm. on Genesis, \textit{argumentum}, \textit{CO} 23:9-10; CTS 1:62.

\textsuperscript{17} Comm. on Exod. 20:4, \textit{CO} 24:377; CTS 4:107.
notions about subjecting God to the creaturely realm, so that God may be rightly known and worshipped. To be sure, Calvin’s commentary on Genesis clearly demonstrates that he regarded creation as an image of God, “as it were,” “in a certain manner,” and “so to speak.” Still, Calvin maintained that, in an unqualified, univocal sense, “a true image of God is not to be found in all the world.” Accordingly, Calvin believed that God’s “glory is defiled, and his truth corrupted by the lie,” with every humanly devised attempt to set God before the eyes in visible form.\(^{18}\) For every such attempt inverts the order of God’s self-revelatory design for creation, inevitably concealing and distorting who God is.

Moreover, Calvin thought that the second commandment, like the rest of the law, contains more than what is expressed in its words. He maintained that its forbiddance of only one specific form of idolatry is in fact a synecdoche, by which all products of human ingenuity, or “all fictitious services,” are encompassed and precluded from the worship of God.\(^{19}\) In Calvin’s view it was axiomatic that “God himself is the sole and proper witness of himself.”\(^{20}\) In other words, humans must let God tell them not only what he is like, but also how he is to be worshipped. This knowledge can never be conceived, only received. Thus Calvin found expressions of worship lacking biblical sanction to be fictitious in the sense that they are born of the arrogant and deluded desire to domesticate, transform, or metamorphose” God, as it were, according to the dictates of human reason, opinion, or


\(^{19}\) Comm. on Exod. 20:4, CO 24:376; CTS 4:107.

\(^{20}\) Inst. 1.11.1, OS 3:88.22-25; LCC 1:100.
whim. As the following remark indicates, then, Calvin juxtaposed the forging of idols—be they material, liturgical, or even mental—with the hearing and heeding of God’s word:

[T]o put it in a nutshell, the basic difference between proper worship and idolatry is that the godly undertake nothing except what is in conformity with the word of God; but others think that they are entitled to do anything that suits themselves, and so they have their own will in place of the law, when the fact is that God approves only what he himself has prescribed.

Finally, it was highly significant to Calvin that the second commandment consists of two parts: the first prohibits making any image or likeness of God, the second prohibits any transference of worship from God to them. Calvin readily granted that the two parts are indivisible. But at the same time, he insisted that the second commandment’s unified constitution does not blunt the force of its dual concern. Calvin felt that the indivisibility of the second commandment’s two parts exhibited the inextricable relationship between making and worshipping images; “for as soon as any one has permitted himself to devise an image of God, he immediately falls into false worship.” Consequently, the two parts of the second commandment should be held together with a keen awareness “that God is insulted, not only when his worship is transferred to idols, but when we try to represent him by any outward similitude.”

__________________________


22 Comm. on Acts 7:44, OE 12/1:213.6-10; CNTC 6:207.


The second commandment’s twofold nature was significant to Calvin because he thought it rendered untenable the “foolish cavils” of those who sought to extricate image usage from image worship so as to commend the former but disavow the latter. Idolaters have always endeavored to divorce image usage from image worship, maintained Calvin. In fact, he believed that this dichotomy had been a prevailing supposition of image cults throughout the ancient world. “For unbelievers have never been carried away to such an extent of folly as to adore mere statues or pictures; they have always alleged…that not the image itself was actually worshipped, but that which it represented,” wrote Calvin.26 In other words, Calvin did not presume the ancients so crude as to think that their images were themselves gods. For the ancients often changed, multiplied, and newly consecrated images, but the gods those images represented remained the same.27 Nonetheless, Calvin considered this dichotomy between image usage and image worship a distinction without difference, contending:

Men are so stupid that they fasten God wherever they fashion him; and hence they cannot but adore. And there is no difference whether they simply worship an idol, or God in the idol. It is always idolatry when divine honors are bestowed upon an idol, under whatever pretext this is done.28

Here Calvin discerned a circumstantial similarity between his context and that of the ancient world, a similarity which emboldened him to challenge the sixteenth-century Roman church’s adherence to the second commandment. For Calvin deemed the Roman church’s “trifling distinction” between dulia, the reverential honour required of a servant, and latria, the worship reserved for God alone, to be, at bottom, “the same pretext” used

26 Comm. on Deut. 5:9, CO 24:377-78; CTS 4:109.

27 Inst. 1.11.9, OS 3:98.19-25; LCC 1:109-10.

28 Inst. 1.11.9, OS 3:98.4-8; LCC 1:109.
by the ancients to corroborate idolatry. It was inconsequential to Calvin that the Roman church did not formally consider its images to be divine, or even that Rome’s images did not commonly depict God, but rather angels, saints, or Mary, the mother of Christ. That is because God’s power, honour, and worship were operatively bestowed upon these images in some measure, indicating that power, honour, and worship were necessarily transferred from God to images. In the Institutes, therefore, Calvin said this about Rome’s distinction between dulia and latria:

[The honor that they pay to their images they allege to be idol service, denying it to be idol worship. For they speak thus when they teach that the honor which they call dulia can be given to statues and pictures without wronging God. Therefore, they deem themselves innocent if they are only servants of idols, not worshippers of them too. As if, indeed, it were not something slighter to worship than to serve! …Yet however eloquent they may be, never will they succeed by their eloquence in proving to us that one and the same thing is really two things. Let them show, I say, the real difference that makes them unlike the ancient idolaters.]

Expounding the Full Sense of the Second Commandment

After Calvin established the basic meaning of each of the Ten Commandments in the Mosaic Harmony, he proceeded with that commandment’s “exposition.” Calvin found that, by way of inherent, conceptual connections, the Ten Commandments quite naturally embrace and organize numerous precepts scattered throughout the final four books of the Pentateuch. Though outside the Decalogue in terms of location, these precepts, to Calvin, “differ not at all” from the Ten Commandments in terms of “sense,” that is, in substance or meaning. In fact, Calvin thought of these precepts as “interpretations” of the particular commandment in the Decalogue with which they are conceptually connected. Therefore,

---

29 Comm. on Deut. 5:9, CO 24:377-78; CTS 4:109.

30 Inst. 1.11.11, OS 3:100.2-17; LCC 1:111.
in an attempt to produce a holistic, pedagogically enhanced rendering of the Decalogue’s core doctrinal content, Calvin brought these precepts together into ten “expositions,” one for each of the Ten Commandments.31

Seventeen “interpretations”—five from Exodus, two from Leviticus, and ten from Deuteronomy—make up the “Exposition of the Second Commandment.” Calvin had two basic aims here: (1) to exhibit the second commandment’s full sense of meaning; and (2) to demonstrate the conceptual link between the second commandment and Israel’s cultic system of tabernacle, priesthood, and sacrifices, a system Calvin treated comprehensively in his so-called ceremonial supplements to the second commandment. As Calvin pursued these aims, two sets of contrasts emerge: the first is between humanly devised images and the utterance of God, and the second is between fictitious rites and legitimate worship.32

*Humanly Devised Images and the Utterance of God*

Calvin claimed that when Moses “calls graven things, statues, and pictures by the name of gods” (Exod. 20:23; 34:17; Lev. 19:4), the indirect contradiction was intended to highlight the end and sum (*finem et summam*) of the second commandment, namely, that the incomprehensible God is insulted by humanly devised, corporeal effigies. Moreover, Calvin attributed this transference of a divine title to idols to Moses addressing the Jews “according to common parlance, and the corrupt opinion of the Gentiles.” To Calvin, the

31 “Preface of John Calvin to the Four Last Books of Moses,” *CO* 24:7-8; *CTS* 3:xvi.

32 Parker, *Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries*, 165. As Wright correctly notes (“Calvin’s Pentateuchal Criticism,” 35), Calvin departed from his normal practice in the *Mosaic Harmony* by not making an altogether clear demarcation between his exposition of and supplements to the second commandment.
corrupt opinion of the Gentiles was not that they equated their gods with images. Instead, it was that they considered a deity “nearer to them, if some earthly symbol of its presence were standing before their eyes.” In Calvin’s assessment, however, this was an opinion Moses would be loath for the people of God to imbibe, as any attempt to fix God’s power or presence to some “thing” is an attempt to objectify and control God, which is the basic error and underlying motive of idolatry.

Furthermore, “as the insane zeal of superstition is the more inflamed by the value of the material or the beauty of the workmanship,” maintained Calvin, “Moses especially condemned molten gods” (Exod. 34:17; Lev. 19:4). The fact that the Jews were expressly forbidden gods of silver or gold (Exod. 20:23) removed any doubt that “idolaters indulge themselves more fully in their worship of very precious idols, by the external splendour of which all their senses are ravished.” But idols were often made from more pedestrian materials like wood or stone (Lev. 26:1). As such, Calvin interpreted the condemnation of molten gods as a synecdoche, meant to categorically prohibit all humanly devised images from the worship of God. For the juxtaposition of the avowal ‘I am the Lord your God’ to images of both costly and common constitution (Lev. 19:4; 26:1) “teaches men that as soon as they imagine anything gross or terrestrial in the deity, they altogether depart from

33 Comm. on Exod. 34:17, CO 24:382; CTS 4:116.
34 Inst. 1.11.9, OS 3:99.1-10; LCC 1:110. Leith, “John Calvin’s Polemic Against Idolatry,” 113; Eire, War Against the Idols, 208, 217.
35 Comm. on Exod. 34:17, CO 24:382; CTS 4:116.
36 Comm. on Exod. 34:17, CO 24:382-83; CTS 4:116.
the true God.” Of particular significance to Calvin in this regard was the “antithesis” of Exodus 20:22-23, wherein “God forbids them [God’s people] to make gods of corruptible materials, since he has ‘spoken from heaven.’” For the contrast between humanly devised images and the utterance of God means “that all are doing wrong, who, when they ought to look up to heaven, tie down their own minds as well as him to earthly elements.”

Exodus 20:22-23 refers to God’s giving of the Decalogue at Mount Sinai. Calvin considered this event “a confirmation of the second commandment” insomuch that “God manifested himself to the Israelites by a voice, and not in a bodily form.” Yet of course, Calvin was keenly aware that on this occasion and several others God addressed not only the hearing of his people; he also made dramatic appeals to their sight. Such appeals raise the question as to why visual representations of God should be considered unlawful when God has used visible signs to testify of his presence.

Calvin’s answer was twofold. First, he contended that these visible testimonies of God’s presence characterized the economy of God’s self-disclosure to the patriarchs and prophets, thereby constituting “a peculiar circumstance,” not “a general rule.” To Calvin, these visible testimonies were not normative, self-sufficient, or ambiguous. Rather, they were temporary signs bound in sacramental fashion to God’s speech so as to authenticate

37 Comm. on Exod. 34:17, CO 24:383; CTS 4:117.
39 Comm. on Deut. 4:12, CO 24:384; CTS 4:119.
his word and strengthen the frail, fickle faith of its recipients.\textsuperscript{41} Thus Calvin’s remark on God’s giving of the Decalogue at Mount Sinai:

That there may be no doubt about the authority of the law, and that it may not be deprecated by the people, Moses recalls to their memory that the presence of God, as he spoke it, was manifested by sure tokens; for this was the object of the fire, the clouds, and the darkness, whereby God’s voice was signalized, lest its source might be obscure….The sum is, that there is no question as to who was the Lawgiver, whose majesty was then proclaimed by tremendous prodigies, and presented before the eyes of an immense multitude.\textsuperscript{42}

This remark suggests the second aspect of Calvin’s twofold answer regarding the legitimacy of God’s appeals to the sight of the patriarchs and prophets, namely, that God testified to his presence with tremendous prodigies like fire, clouds, and darkness to show “that his glory is incomprehensible,” and thus to “prevent men from idol-making.”\textsuperscript{43} That


\textsuperscript{42} Comm. on Deut. 5:22, \textit{CO} 24:204-5; CTS 3:332-33. Calvin made several more remarks on this matter. For example, on God’s visible testimony to Abram: “Moses says that God spoke to him ‘in a vision,’ by which he intimates that some visible symbol of God’s glory was added to the word, in order that greater authority might be given to the oracle” (Comm. on Gen. 15:1, \textit{CO} 23:207; CTS 1:399). On another visible testimony to Abram: “First, Moses says that the Lord appeared unto him, in order that we may know that the oracle was not pronounced by secret revelation, but that a vision at the same time was added to it. Besides, the vision was not speechless, but had the word annexed, from which word the faith of Abram might receive profit” (Comm. on Gen. 17:1, \textit{CO} 23:234; CTS 1:442). On God’s visible testimony to Isaac: “This vision…was to prepare him to listen more attentively to God, and to convince him that it was God with whom he had to deal; for a voice alone would have had less energy. Therefore, God appears, in order to produce confidence in and reverence towards his word. In short, visions were a kind of symbol of the divine presence, designed to remove all doubt from the minds of the holy fathers respecting him who was about to speak” (Comm. on Gen. 26:24, \textit{CO} 23:364-65; CTS 2:69). And on God’s visible testimony to Jacob: “[M]ute visions are cold; therefore the word of the Lord is as the soul which quickens them. The figure, therefore, of the ladder was the inferior appendage of this promise; just as God illustrates and adorns his word by external symbols, that both greater clearness and authority may be added to it” (Comm. on Gen. 28:13, \textit{CO} 23:392; CTS 2:114).

\textsuperscript{43} Comm. on Deut. 4:12, \textit{CO} 24:386; CTS 4:121.
is to say, these prodigies “were testimonies of his invisible glory, rather to elevate men’s minds to things above than to keep them entangled amongst earthly elements.” With the giving of the Decalogue at Mount Sinai, then, the invisible, incomprehensible God of the Israelites definitively distinguished himself from the silent, still idols of the Gentiles. For when God spoke forth this “inviolable rule for holy living, he had not invested himself in a bodily shape, but had exhibited the living image of his glory in the doctrine itself.”

According to Calvin, however, the final four books of the Pentateuch indicate that fallen humanity possesses an “insane lust” for idolatry, a lust which cannot be “repressed by ordinary means.” God thundering forth a prohibition amidst fire, clouds, and darkness at Mount Sinai certainly qualifies as an extraordinary means by which to prevent idolatry; and to Calvin, so do the numerous threats and denouncements which Moses issued to the makers and worshippers of idols (Exod. 34:14; Deut. 4:15-19, 23-24, 8:19-20, 11:16-17). These “anxious exhortations,” contended Calvin, attest to “how great is the leaning of the human soul to idolatry.” More to the point, Calvin believed the human soul’s idolatrous tendency should cause his contemporaries to conclude that idolatry was not only a given for ancient Gentiles or an abiding temptation for ancient Jews. Idolatry was also a present and readily-evident reality in sixteenth-century Christendom. Therefore, Calvin deemed advocates of Rome theologically ignorant for trying to relegate the prohibition of images to ancient Israel. “They pretend that the Jews were formerly prohibited from idolatry with greater strictness, because they were too much disposed to it,” he chided, “as if they were

44 Comm. on Deut. 4:12, CO 24:385; CTS 4:120.

45 Comm. on Deut. 4:12, CO 24:386; CTS 4:121.

46 Inst. 1.11.8-10, OS 3:96-99; LCC 1:107-11; Comm. on Deut. 4:12, CO 24:386; CTS 4:121-22. Eire, War Against the Idols, 209-12.
not themselves much worse in this respect.”

Calvin named no individual opponents. Yet the following words from Johannes Eck, a polemicist for the Roman church and professor of theology at Ingolstadt, exemplify the position with which Calvin took exception:

Thus God did not want the people [Israelites], who were otherwise prone to idolatry, to make frequent use of images, so that they would not fall into the vain practices of the pagans, as did happen on other occasions. But now, in the period under the Law of Grace, when men are no longer so inclined to idolatry, no such danger exists.

Moreover, Calvin considered the Roman church’s division and numbering of the Decalogue an attempt “to make away with one of the Ten Commandments, in order that they might rush into this foul and detestable extravagance [the making and worshipping of images] with impunity.”

The first-century Jew, Flavius Josephus, believed there are five commandments in each table of the Decalogue, rather than the four-six division that Calvin championed. Still, Calvin cited Josephus as a representative of the ancient Jewish tradition which rightly enumerated the Ten Commandments, counting the prohibition of images as the second among them. However, Calvin supported his own position with the third-century Christian, Origen. In that earlier and purer period of Christianity, contended Calvin, Origen not only taught a four-six division of the Decalogue, he also identified the prohibition of images as the second commandment. What is more, he taught this division

---

47 Comm. on Deut. 4:12, CO 24:386; CTS 4:122.


49 Comm. on Deut. 4:12, CO 24:386; CTS 4:122.
and numbering of the Decalogue without controversy, as if it was common knowledge.50

Later, however, Augustine argued for the didactic value of a three-seven division of the Decalogue based on its allusion to the Trinity. In other words, Augustine believed that because the first table of the Decalogue pertains to the worship of God, having three commandments in that table may prove helpful in teaching believers to worship one God in three persons. Based on this notion, which Calvin found overly subtle and exegetically unwarranted, Augustine subsumed the Decalogue’s prohibition of images under the first commandment and split the Decalogue’s prohibition of coveting into two parts, rendering those parts the ninth and tenth commandments, and thus arriving at a three-seven division of the Decalogue.51

Augustine’s division and numbering of the Decalogue was espoused by influential medieval thinkers like the schoolmen Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas, and became a convention of the theological tradition that Calvin inherited.52 Calvin’s primary objection to this convention was that those who assign “three precepts to the first table and relegate the remaining seven to the second, erase from the number the commandment concerning


52 Blacketer, The School of God, 149-51; Lombard, Sententiae in IV libris distinctae, 2 vols. (Rome: Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae ad Claras Aquas, 1981), 2:3, dist. 37, cap. 1-2, 206-9; Aquinas, 1a-2ae, Q. 100, art. 4, ST 29:66-71. Luther and Melanchthon also accepted this conventional division and numbering of the Decalogue, which eventually became the formal position of Lutheranism. At this point in Calvin’s polemic, however, his sights were set on the Roman church.
images, or at least hide it under the first.”\textsuperscript{53} In Calvin’s assessment, this subordination of the prohibition of images is altogether incongruous with fallen humanity’s proclivity for idolatry. “Until, therefore, men have laid aside their nature,” he wrote, “we infer that this commandment is necessary for them.”\textsuperscript{54}

In giving the law, God set “his voice against all the imaginations whereby heathen nations have always been deceived,” so as to “direct them [God’s people] to the heavenly greatness of God himself.” As such, “whatever holds down and confines our senses to the earth, is contrary to the covenant of God.” Consequently, “those who have been taught by God’s law” have been “forbidden to make to themselves likenesses, or images, whereby they would deface and pollute his glory.” On the other hand, those who will not heed this command “are justly accounted covenant-breakers.”\textsuperscript{55} Calvin deemed God’s prohibition of humanly devised images unavoidable and irreducible. And given the clarity of Moses on this point, Calvin cautioned evangelical pastors and teachers: “Let the papists dispute as they please, that images are not to be removed because they are useful for the people’s instruction; but let this be our wisdom, to acquiesce in what God has chosen to decree in this matter.”\textsuperscript{56}

Like most others, Calvin attributed the notion of images being useful for people’s instruction to Pope Gregory I. In a letter to bishop Serenus of Marseilles in the year 599, Gregory said the church provided images so that the illiterate could learn from them what

\textsuperscript{53} Inst. 2.8.12, OS 3:353.18-21; LCC 1:378.

\textsuperscript{54} Comm. on Deut. 4:12, CO 24:386; CTS 4:122.

\textsuperscript{55} Comm. on Deut. 4:23, CO 24:387-88; CTS 4:124.

\textsuperscript{56} Comm. on Deut. 4:23, CO 24:388; CTS 4:125.
they were unable to read in books. Whatever Gregory’s intentions may or may not have been, Calvin argued that it had since become an axiom for the Roman church that images were the *Biblia pauperum*, or the Bible of the unlearned; and that is because the medieval church had progressively abdicated its responsibility to proclaim biblical doctrine, having effectively “turned over to idols the office of teaching for no other reason than that they themselves were mute.” Once again, Calvin named no individual opponents. Yet once again, the words of Johannes Eck exemplify the position Calvin opposed:

And I do not know how the vast multitude of simple people can be better instructed in the sacred mysteries of our faith—nor how they can keep them more firmly in their minds—than through the use of images. This one reason ought to suffice and is why the holy Church adopted the use of images.

Calvin considered this position diametrically opposed to that of the apostle Paul, who, in Galatians 3:1, likened his own teaching and preaching to “the living and express image of Christ,” and “a picture which showed them [the Galatians] the portrait of Christ to the life.” From this apostolic example of teaching and preaching, Calvin argued that an authentic discharge of the church’s ministry demands communicating biblical doctrine with the clarity and force to penetrate consciences, “so that men may see Christ crucified and that his blood may flow.” “When the church has such painters as these,” concluded Calvin, “she no longer needs wood and stone, that is, dead images, she no longer requires

---


60 Comm. on Gal. 3:1, *OE* 16:59.27-60.7; *CNTC* 11:46-47; *Inst.* 1.11.7, *OS* 3:96.6-8; *LCC* 1:107.

61 Comm. on Gal. 3:1, *OE* 16:60.18-20; *CNTC* 11:47.
any pictures.”

To be sure, Calvin unambiguously regarded sculpture and painting as divine gifts intended for God’s glory and humanity’s benefit. Therefore, Calvin sought for these gifts to be restored to their “pure and legitimate use,” which in no case involved truly, vividly teaching the faith. His call for the removal of such images from worship, then, was not an effort to withdraw all visual contemplation from the faithful. Rather, it was an effort to focus the contemplation of the faithful upon “living and symbolical” images, images that had been consecrated by the word of God for the purpose of portraying to bodily eyes the same Christ that is set before spiritual eyes in and through the proclamation of the gospel. By these images, insisted Calvin, “our eyes must be too intensely gripped and too sharply affected to seek other images forged by human ingenuity.”

The refrain of Moses throughout the final four books of the Pentateuch is that the worship of God must be separated from the idolatry of the Gentiles, which encompassed and threatened to adversely influence God’s people. This refrain impressed upon Calvin that “this error has been everywhere rife, that unbelievers would rather draw down God to themselves on earth, than ascend above to seek for him.” Furthermore, the repeated warnings of Moses to be vigilant against idolatry served not only to arraign humanity’s proneness to it, but also to render the impudence of the papists even less excusable. For

---

62 Comm. on Gal. 3:1, *OE* 16:60.20-61.1; *CNTC* 11:47; *Inst.* 1.11.7, *OS* 3:96.8-16; *LCC* 1:107.

63 *Inst.* 1.11.12, *OS* 3:100-01; *LCC* 1:112.


they “intoxicate their own and others’ minds with security, when God constantly exhorts them to solicitude.”

Accordingly, Calvin once again cautioned evangelical pastors and teachers: “Let us learn, then, that since many impostures and deceits besiege us on every side, we shall in the vanity of our nature be liable immediately to fall into them, unless we carefully guard ourselves.”

_Fictitious Rites and Legitimate Worship_

Up to this point, Calvin has accentuated the circumstantial similitude between the ancient Israelites and his fellow sixteenth-century evangelicals, arguing that both peoples were besieged and imperiled by largely the same idolatrous impostures and deceits. Now, from this point on, Calvin develops this similitude by arguing that God gave both peoples largely the same means to counter the idolatry that surrounded and threatened to overtake them. What becomes clearer is Calvin’s understanding of the conceptual correspondences between: (1) the second commandment and the cultic system of Israel; and (2) the cultic system of Israel and the priestly office of Jesus Christ.

According to Calvin, “the principal distinction” between the legitimate worship of God and all the fictitious rites of the ancient Gentiles was Israel’s “one sanctuary and one altar,” that is, Israel’s cultic system, which was provisionally erected on the sojourn from Egypt to Canaan but eventually established in Jerusalem at the temple. Stated negatively, Israel’s cultic system was “a symbol” of the difference between the one, true God and all idols, as well as “a barrier” separating the ancient Israelites from the false worship which

---


67 Comm. on Deut. 11:16, _CO_ 24:388; CTS 4:126.
encompassed them. Stated positively, Israel’s cultic system facilitated unity of faith and purity of worship, acting “like a standard to gather together the people, lest their religion should be torn by divisions, and lest any diversities should insinuate themselves.” With the following statement, moreover, Calvin indicated not only how Israel’s cultic system corresponds to the second commandment, but also why he supplemented his exposition of the second commandment with appendices embracing Israel’s entire cultic system of tabernacle, priesthood, and sacrifices: “The whole external profession of God’s worship is fitly annexed to the second commandment, because upon that it depends, and has no other object than its due observation.”

Because Calvin maintained that Israel’s entire cultic system hung upon the second commandment and aimed at nothing aside from its proper observation, he felt that several clarifications were in order so as to further distinguish Israel’s worship from its idolatrous Gentile counterparts, beginning with the manner in which Moses spoke of God inhabiting Israel’s sanctuary. When Moses called the sanctuary God’s habitation, said Calvin, he did so without reference to the divine nature. Rather, Moses called the sanctuary God’s abode in deference to his immediate audience—a coarse (crassis) and unsophisticated (ruditate) people. It was also noteworthy to Calvin that Moses described God’s habituation of the

---

68 Comm. on Deut. 12:4, CO 24:390-91; CTS 4:129.
69 Comm. on Deut. 12:5, CO 24:391; CTS 4:130.
70 Comm. on Deut. 12:4, CO 24:391; CTS 4:129.
sanctuary as God having ‘put his name there.’ For Calvin contended that this description anticipated and disposed the notion that the transcendent and incomprehensible God was somehow enclosed within the walls of the sanctuary. Once again, this description made no reference to the essence or nature of God. Rather, Moses spoke of God having ‘put his name’ upon Israel’s sanctuary in the sense that there God promised to truly and uniquely disclose his character and will.

To Calvin, then, the sanctuary was a visible symbol of God’s presence among the people of Israel. And this visible symbol of God’s presence, like all others, was not mute. That is because God’s word was annexed to the sanctuary in the form of the teaching and preaching of Israel’s priesthood, as Calvin observed in the following comment:

For in Moses’ writings God repeats quite often, ‘I shall meet with you there’ (e.g. Exod. 29:42, 43; 30:6, 36). Therefore, the tabernacle was consecrated by the covenant and the word of the Lord, and his voice was continually resounding there, so that it was different from all common places.

Calvin’s point is that God’s habituation of the sanctuary was in no way inconsistent with God’s nature, because that was the place where the incomprehensible God deigned to be accessible to the Israelites without ceasing to be transcendent. There God accommodated the limitations of the Israelites, allowing them to obtain an intimate, albeit not exhaustive, knowledge of him. However, Israel’s worship at the sanctuary was unlike the worship of the Gentiles. For although God “allows himself to be invoked on earth, yet he would not

72 Comm. on Deut. 12:5, CO 24:392; CTS 4:131-32; Comm. on Exod. 25:8, CO 24:403; CTS 4:150.

have the minds of men rest there, but rather lifts them up on high as if by steps.”

Predicated on his certitude that true worship of God could never contradict God’s nature, Calvin would brook nothing that suggested Israel’s cultic system was “comprised in external pomp.” Two notions in particular summoned his derision for being sourced in this misconception. The first notion was that the goal of the sanctuary’s ornate beauty was to rival the resplendence of Gentile image cults; the second notion was that the great number and intricacy of Israel’s ceremonies were intended to so thoroughly encumber the people as to retard their seduction by foreign idols. Calvin did not oppose these notions because he found them wholly untrue, but because they totalized ancillary effects, and so reduced Israel’s ceremonies to mere “farces composed in imitation of the Gentiles.”

In other words, Calvin deemed these notions to be impious because they obscured the divinely intended use and end of Israel’s cultic system. For Calvin argued that, like all

74 Comm. on Deut. 12:5, CO 24:392; CTS 4:132; Comm. on Exod. 25:8, CO 24:403; CTS 4:150.
75 Comm. on Exod. 25:8, CO 24:403; CTS 4:151.
76 Comm. on Exod. 25:8, CO 24:403-4; CTS 4:152. And again: “The opinion of those, who think that the ceremonies were only enjoined, in order to be restraints to confine the lusts of the people, so that they would not hark after the foreign rites of the heathen, is utterly impious. This is part of the truth but not all. They omit what is much more important, that these practices were to hold the people to faith in the Mediator” (Comm. on Heb. 8:5, OE 19:126.9-14; CNTC 12:107). Calvin failed to name the person or persons with whom he took exception in both of these citations. Such is a typical trait of his biblical commentating. The Opera Exegetica edition of Calvin’s Commentarius in epistolam ad hebraeos (126n7) cites Aquinas as an advocate of the interpretation Calvin opposed. Calvin’s comments may be based on an intermediate source quoting numerous writers, but are most likely examples of Calvin loosely paraphrasing others from memory to create a foil for his own argument. On Calvin’s use of sources see Anthony N. S. Lane, John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker, 1999), especially Lane’s methodological theses, pp. 1-13.
77 Comm. on Exod. 25:8, CO 24:404; CTS 4:152-53.
aspects of the law, Israel’s cultic system was to kindle desire, strengthen expectation, and hold minds in readiness for the fulfillment of God’s messianic promise. More precisely, Calvin envisioned the perpetually efficacious aspect of the law, the law’s so-called moral aspect, as provisionally “clothed” in Israel’s ceremonies, with the ceremonies designated solely to facilitating the spiritual worship of God among those who had yet to witness the covenant’s fullness and clarity. Despite the superficial similarities that may have existed in the worship of the ancient Israelites and Gentiles, therefore, that worship was separated by the “greatest difference” in origin, function, and end.

In Calvin’s assessment, the “honour and dignity” of Israel’s rites are preserved by Exodus 25:40, which demands that these rites be meticulously replicated according to the heavenly pattern that God had revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai. Based upon the “very careful consideration” of Exodus 25:40 in Acts 7:44 and Hebrews 8:5, Calvin deemed the deacon Stephen and the author of Hebrews its “best expositors.” From Stephen’s use of Exodus 25:40 in his address to the Sanhedrin, Calvin contended that the entire legitimacy and utility of Israel’s rites depended upon their being divinely designed symbols, figures,
or types—terms he used interchangeably—of their heavenly archetype. In keeping with Calvin’s understanding of Old Testament types, then, these entities had genuine historical significance, as they were providentially placed catalysts of covenantal development. For Calvin, however, the primary significance of Old Testament types is that they foreshadow certain elements of the Christian revelation, like Christ, the Spirit, the gospel, the church, or the New Covenant. According to Calvin, Exodus 25:40 was used in Hebrews 8:5 for the purpose of showing that Israel’s entire cultic system “was nothing more than a picture which adumbrated [gave a sketchy outline of] the spiritual in Christ.” The implications of this comment are simply momentous. For if Jesus Christ is the object, or archetype, of Israel’s entire cultic system, then that system replicates the person, accomplishments, and benefits of Jesus Christ, and does so with exclusive respect to his priestly office.

Of course, Calvin believed the coming of Christ abrogated Israel’s rites by adding substance to their shadow and living image to their sketch-like outline. Even so, Calvin thought that by fulfilling and thus terminating the practice of Israel’s rites, Christ actually

---

83 Comm. on Acts 7:44, OE 12/1:213.17-24; CNTC 6:207; Comm. on Exod. 25:8, CO 24:404; CTS 4:153-54. This point Calvin made quite emphatically: “For what is more vain or absurd than for men to offer a loathsome stench from the fat of cattle in order to reconcile themselves to God? Or to have recourse to the sprinkling of water and blood to cleanse away their filth? In short, the whole cultus of the law, taken literally and not as shadows and figures corresponding to the truth, will be utterly ridiculous” (Inst. 2.7.1, OS 3:326.35-327.2; LCC 1:349).

84 Parker, Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries, 74-75; Hansen, John Calvin and the Non-Literal Interpretation of Scripture, 263-72.

85 Comm. on Heb. 8:5, OE 19:125.29-126.2; CNTC 12:107.

86 For more on the notions of shadow and sketch in Calvin’s understanding of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments see Parker, Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries, 56-62.
established their ongoing didactic force and effect. He explained:

As regards the ceremonies, we must consider that an end was put upon them by Christ’s coming, in such a way as to establish their truth more firmly than as if they still remained in use: for we acknowledge that in them, as in a mirror, was formerly shown to the fathers, what is now displayed to us in its reality. Whence it appears that they are greatly mistaken who altogether reject as useless that instruction which we read in the writings of Moses; and that the squeamishness of those who despise it is also intolerable.

Calvin commended the study of Israel’s cultic system to his readers on the basis that Christ’s fulfillment of it served to accentuate the contours and clarify the content of Christ’s priestly office. Yet Calvin’s goal was to help his fellow evangelical pastors and teachers grasp the meaning and contemporary implications of the second commandment. Such is clear from the fact that Calvin appended his treatment of Israel’s cultic system to his exposition of the second commandment. For doing so tangibly demonstrates Calvin’s belief that Christ’s priestly office has the same conceptual correspondence to the second commandment, the same aim of facilitating that commandment’s proper observation, the same ability to amplify its doctrinal substance, the same ability to promote unity of faith and purity of worship, and the same counteractive effect against religious impostures and deceits, as Israel’s cultic system. Undoubtedly, then, Calvin considered the knowledge of Christ’s priestly office to be necessary for evangelical pastors and teachers who sought to worship rightly and minister effectively while surrounded by the perceived idolatry of the sixteenth-century Roman church.

Calvin insisted that the study of Israel’s cultic system be characterized by restraint in the discernment and handling of Old Testament types, lest the potential profit from that

87 Inst. 2.7.16, OS 3:341; LCC 1:364-65; Comm. on Exod. 25:8, CO 24:405; CTS 4:154.

study be forfeit to allegory. However, he did not use the term allegory in this context as a technical reference to the *sensus allegoricus*, or allegorical sense—one constituent aspect of what medieval theologians commonly called the fourfold sense of Scripture, an aspect pertaining to one of Scripture’s three “spiritual” meanings, as distinct from its “plain” or “natural” meaning. To be sure, Calvin’s exegetical instincts were decidedly against the use of allegory. But he certainly was not opposed to drawing analogies between what he viewed as the earthly signs and spiritual realities of Scripture, nor was he reticent to make pastoral applications from “spiritual” readings of Scripture if he found them beneficial to the Christian life. Moreover, because Calvin composed commentaries with the interests of preachers in mind, he imaginatively developed biblical images, objects, and actions in them. His aim was to help preachers absorb the interconnections of Scripture, so that they might deliver living and useful sermons to their congregations. Consequently, Calvin’s protests against allegory were not intended as, and therefore ought not to be equated with, a principled opposition to spiritual meanings or readings of Scripture.

The sort of allegory that here roused Calvin’s contempt was, on the one hand, the speculative overworking of the correspondence between a type genuinely present within a text and its rightfully intended object. For example, Christ is the true object of Israel’s

---

89 Parker, *Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries*, 70.

90 Thompson, “Calvin as a Biblical Interpreter,” 67; Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian*, 221. Steinmetz does not note that Calvin’s distaste for allegory was sometimes imprecise, and not always synonymous with, or directed against, the allegory associated with the fourfold sense of Scripture. But Steinmetz does note that, unlike many earlier theologians, when Calvin identified a spiritual meaning in a text, he often deemed it the same as, rather than distinct from, the text’s plain or natural meaning (“John Calvin as an Interpreter of the Bible,” 285).

rites, though “it by no means follows from hence that there were mysteries hidden in all their details, since some, with mistaken acuteness, pass over no point, however trifling, without an allegorical exposition.” On the other hand, what Calvin seemed to consider a closely related but more egregious form of allegory is the arbitrary imposition of types on a text—as opposed to the careful discernment of types within a text—which could neither be justified textually or historically as its natural, intended sense, nor verified by the plain sense of another text.

Calvin’s objections seem to suggest that he conceived of typology and allegory as residing together on a continuum rather than being separated by a well-marked boundary. Thus the sort of allegory that Calvin opposed here may be more accurately described as a careless and unwarranted species of typology. Conversely, what he attempted to do in his treatment of Israel’s cultic system was prune such superficial extravagances with a skilled simplicity in singular service to the edification of faith. Because the next two chapters of this study focus, in turn, upon Calvin’s treatment of Israel’s priesthood and sacrifices, his self-described approach to them draws this chapter to a fitting close:

[W]hen I begin to speak of...the priesthood, and the sacrifices, I am entering on a deep and vast ocean, in which many interpreters, while indulging their curiosity, have pursued a wild and wandering course. Admonished, therefore, by their example, I will take in my sails, and only touch upon a few points which tend to edification in the faith. But my readers must now be requested, not only to pardon me for abstaining from subtle speculations, but also themselves willingly to keep within the bounds of simplicity. Many have itching ears; and in our natural vanity, most men are more delighted by foolish allegories, than by solid erudition. But let those who shall desire to profit in God’s school, learn to restrain this perverse desire of knowing more than is good for them, although it may tickle their minds.

---

92 Comm. on Exod. 25:8, CO 24:405; CTS 4:155.

Conclusions and Implications

Calvin used the second commandment as a heading under which to organize his exposition of Israel’s cultic system. And according to Calvin, the cultic system of Israel was intended to replicate, and in turn, typify, the person, accomplishments, and benefits of Jesus Christ relative to his priestly office. As such, the second commandment was, for Calvin, a rubric for Christ’s priestly office.

Calvin believed that the second commandment has two basic concerns, the proper knowledge and the proper worship of God. To be sure, Calvin understood God to be both transcendent and incomprehensible. But this does not mean that Calvin thought God to be absent, unknowable, or inaccessible. Rather, it means that God, though ever-present, may only be known and accessed if he wills and as he determines. Only God can make known what God is like and where God may be found. Worship that is born from and shaped by such revelation is what Calvin called “spiritual” worship, since it has an upward dynamic that raises the minds of worshippers to heaven, in order that they may know the character and will of the infinite God. Such worship is prescribed by the second commandment and reinforced by Israel’s cultic system, whose aim was to promote the due observance of the second commandment. The antithesis of “spiritual” worship is idolatry, which the second commandment prohibits. Calvin found the most flagrant sort of idolatry to be making and worshipping humanly devised images, as this is the most obvious and misguided effort to subject God to the creaturely realm, and so objectify and domesticate God’s presence and power. For Calvin, however, anyone is an idolater who takes his or her notions about who God is, what God is like, where God can be found, or how God is to be worshipped, from any source other than God himself.
Calvin’s belief that Israel’s cultic system reinforced and promoted the “spiritual” worship prescribed by the second commandment clearly shows he did not think that the proper worship of God is characterized by inwardness, invisibility, or immateriality. On the contrary, Calvin robustly affirmed that the proper worship of God—for ancient Jews and sixteenth-century Christians alike—entails signs or symbols. But Calvin insisted that earthly signs serve heavenly purposes only when the former have been appointed by God, and have God’s word appended to them. Calvin deemed both of these criteria imperative, because even divinely given signs or symbols need the accompaniment of God’s word to render them sensible, effectual, and therefore, beneficial. The sixteenth-century Roman church had largely failed to meet these criteria, contended Calvin. For not only did Rome multiply its rites, signs, and images, it had also left off the task of teaching and preaching God’s word. As a result, the worship of Rome was not the “spiritual” worship prescribed by the second commandment. Rather, the worship of Rome was an expression of idolatry similar to that of the ancient Gentiles. Much like the ancient Israelites betook themselves to their cultic system so as to be fortified against the idolatry of the Gentiles, then, Calvin desired sixteenth-century evangelicals to be fortified against the Roman church’s idolatry by betaking themselves to Christ’s priestly office.

---

Chapter Four
Israel’s Priesthood as Type of Christ’s Priestly Office

Calvin considered Israel’s priesthood to be the centerpiece, the very heart, of that programme of worship which God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai. Though conferred upon ordinary persons by extrinsic rites, Israel’s priesthood, said Calvin, was intended to draw minds upward and direct them forward to that object which Israel’s priests typified: the real mediator between God and humans, their true and eternal priest, Jesus Christ. As such, to examine Calvin’s thought on Israel’s priesthood is to examine the foundation for Calvin’s understanding of the person, accomplishments, and benefits of Christ relative to his priestly office. That, then, is the objective of this chapter.

The first section of this chapter focuses on Calvin’s exposition of Exodus chapter twenty-eight in the *Mosaic Harmony*, where the garments of Israel’s priesthood are used by Calvin to frame an overview of Israel’s priesthood as a type of Christ’s priestly office. With the *Mosaic Harmony’s* doctrinal *locus* on Israel’s priesthood remaining the primary resource, Calvin’s overview is then given substance and detail throughout the rest of this chapter. The concern of the second section is the qualifications for Israel’s priesthood—namely, calling and consecration—where Calvin’s thought on the sacrificial aspect of the priesthood is developed. The third and final section then develops what Calvin deemed to be the most basic aspect of the priesthood: its prophetic, or forth-telling, aspect.

**The Garments of Israel’s Priesthood**

Whenever one of Israel’s priests ministered at the sanctuary, the law required him to put off his ordinary garments and don the garments of Israel’s priesthood. By doing so,
explained Calvin, the priest stood forth as though he were “a new man,” in order that he might assume the role of “a fit peacemaker” between God and his people. Therefore, the garments of Israel’s priesthood “denoted the want of those [qualities] which are true and spiritual,” because if the priests of Israel had been “absolutely and entirely perfect, these typical accessories would have been superfluous.” Even more importantly, the garments of Israel’s priesthood symbolized “the more than angelical brightness” of those qualities which were “to be exhibited in Christ.”

Insomuch that these garments prefigured some qualities that any minister of God should possess, Calvin conceded that the study of these garments should be applied in a measured, ancillary fashion to the church’s pastors. Because the church’s pastoral office is not the referent that these garments were intended to typify, however, Calvin believed that “we must chiefly recollect…that in these garments the supreme purity and wondrous glory of Christ were represented; as if God should promise that the mediator would be far more august than the condition of man could produce.”

Calvin insisted that persons seeking fruitful contemplation of these garments must be content with “a sound knowledge of facts.” To those wishing to indulge in the “child’s play” of subtle speculation and plausible allegories, he recommended Jerome’s treatise on the garments of the priesthood, written in the year 396 or 397 for a Roman matron named Fabiola. In other words, intentional simplicity, selectivity, and moderation mark Calvin’s work on the garments of Israel’s priesthood. For instance, he chose to write

1 Comm. on Exod. 28:2, CO 24:428; CTS 4:194-95.
2 Comm. on Exod. 28:2, CO 24:429; CTS 4:195.
nothing about either the headdress or the belt—two of the six “principal parts” of the high
priest’s attire enumerated in Exodus 28:4—rather than “philosophize too subtly” on
them.4 Further, his remarks on the coat and breeches, items worn by the entire priesthood,
are relatively brief and devoid of overt christological content. The following discussion
will reveal, however, that every portion of Calvin’s work on the garments of Israel’s
priesthood served a larger, twofold goal. That goal was to help his readers contemplate
these garments in a way that would advance their understanding of Christ’s priesthood,
an understanding which might: (1) edify their faith; and (2) enhance their ability to
recognize and repudiate the perceived affront to Christ’s priesthood by the priesthood of
the sixteenth-century Roman church.

The Breastplate

Like most of the priestly garments that Calvin treated, the breastplate was peculiar
to the garments of Israel’s high priest, garments that betokened the singular dignity which
distinguished Israel’s high priest from other Israelites in general, and from other priests in
particular. The breastplate consisted of a piece of cloth made from gold, blue, purple, and
scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen. After being folded over to create an inner pocket, the
cloth formed a square of approximately twenty-two centimeters, or nine inches, in height
and width. Placed within gold settings on the outer side of the cloth were twelve precious
stones, arranged in four rows of three stones each, with the names of the twelve tribes of
Israel engraved upon them. Moreover, each corner of the breastplate was adorned with a

4 Comm. on Exod. 28:4, CO 24:429; CTS 4:196; Comm. on Exod. 28:36, CO
24:434; CTS 4:203.
gold ring, from which hung the gold chains and blue cords that bound the plate across the breast of the high priest, and at the same time, to his underlying ephod (Exod. 28:15-30).

What Calvin found “worthy of the utmost attention” regarding the breastplate was that with it, Israel’s high priest symbolically bore the children of Abraham upon his heart, meaning not only that the high priest presented these people on his very person before the face of God (*coram Deo*), but that the character of the priest’s mediation was such that he was mindful of God’s people, and solicitous for their welfare. Moreover, the breastplate’s precious stones did not depict any “dignity or excellence” inherent to the Israelites, wrote Calvin. Instead, these precious stones were to remind the offspring of Abraham that their dearness to God, in its entirety, was “derived from the sanctity of the priesthood.”

For Calvin, then, the breastplate typified an exceedingly important aspect of what believers have had actualized by virtue of their union with Christ, that is, participation in the unique, communal love that God the Father bestows upon God the Son, the true high priest. God’s people are “united with Christ by faith, as if we were one with him.” That is to say, through faith, the heirs of Abraham are so closely and thoroughly joined to Christ, and are so intimately cared for by Christ, that the Father considers them as being one with Christ; and in consequence of believers’ union with his only begotten, much beloved Son, the Father esteems them “above all the wealth and splendour of the world.”


ourselves, and so altogether worthless refuse, yet inasmuch as Christ deigned to ingraft us into his body, in him we are precious stones.”7

**The Urim and Thummim**

Scripture offers only a very brief physical description of the Urim and Thummim (Exod. 28:30; Lev. 8:8). Nonetheless, Calvin maintained that the mere fact (*res*) of these symbols was sufficient to quell any anxious speculation about their form (*qualis*).8 Some commentators inferred from Exodus 28:30, which commands the Urim and Thummim to be ‘put in the breastplate,’ that these symbols were distinct from the breastplate, perhaps being small objects that were tucked away into the inner pocket of the breastplate after it was fastened on the high priest. Other commentators argued that the Urim and Thummim were the breastplate’s precious stones themselves.9 Given that symbols are intended to be visible, Calvin thought it most likely that the Urim and Thummim were “two conspicuous marks” on the outside of the breastplate that were distinct from the breastplate’s precious stones, marks which corresponded to the names Urim and Thummim by symbolizing the light of doctrine and a condition of perfect purity, respectively.10 In Calvin’s assessment, then, the significance of the Urim and Thummim was not found in their precise physical composition or exact material relation to the breastplate, but in their representation of the

7 Comm. on Exod. 28:4, CO 24:429; CTS 4:196.
8 Comm. on Exod. 28:4, CO 24:430; CTS 4:197.
10 Comm. on Exod. 28:4, CO 24:430; CTS 4:197.
“certain and defined system,” the “absolutely perfect rule,” by which the Israelites were measured and judged, and to which they were “to direct and conform themselves.”

On the one hand, Calvin argued that the Hebrew name Urim, which he translated “splendours” (splendores), typified “the light of doctrine” with which the true high priest illumines believers. Referencing John 8:12 and Colossians 2:3 in turn, Calvin posited that the Urim typified the revelatory aspect of Christ’s priestly ministry “because he is the one ‘light of the world,’ without which all things are full of darkness; and because in him ‘are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.’”

Christ did not call himself the light of the world to exhibit what he has in common with other humans, but to identify that which is unique to himself, stated Calvin. As such, “it follows that outside him there is not even a spark of true light. There may be some semblance of brightness, but it is like lightning, which only dazzles the eyes.” Thus the apostle Paul’s declaration that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden in Christ are gained through knowledge of him means that, when it comes to true knowledge of God, namely, knowledge of God as both Father and Saviour, “it is madness to wish to know anything besides him [Christ]. For since the Father has manifested himself wholly in him, that man wishes to be wise apart from God who is not contented with Christ alone.”

In other words, Calvin contended that only the doctrine of Christ brings true knowledge of Christ, and that only through true knowledge of Christ do believers obtain true knowledge of God. That is because, through their faith

12 Comm. on Exod. 28:4, CO 24:430; CTS 4:197.
14 Comm. on Col. 2:3, OE 16:419.22-27; CNTC 11:326.
union with Christ, believers share in the benefits of Christ’s sonship, and thus, participate in the unique, communal relationship between God the Son and God the Father.

Consequently, whereas the Israelites were to look to their high priest, who was to lead them safely through the superstition and idolatry that surrounded them, “so now we must diligently remember what Christ himself teaches, that ‘he that follows him shall not walk in darkness.’”15 Because Calvin was sure that Christ sufficiently illumines believers, and that the darkness of superstition and idolatry rested thickly over the sixteenth-century landscape, so too was he eager for this promise of Christ to comfort and fortify his fellow evangelical pastors and teachers, to whom he wrote:

For when we hear that all who let themselves be ruled by Christ are out of danger of straying, we ought to be stirred up to follow him; and indeed, he draws us to him with outstretched hand, as it were. So great and magnificent a promise must also be full of power, so that those who look to Christ are certain that they will have a sure way even through the midst of darkness, and that not for a little while but until they have reached their goal.16

On the other hand, Calvin maintained that the Hebrew name Thummim, which he translated “perfections” (perfectiones), typified “the perfect and entire purity” that is only in Christ, the perfect rule of holiness incarnate. It could not be otherwise, insisted Calvin, given that Christ “would not have been a meet high priest unless he had been perfect, free from every spot, and deficient in nothing which is required unto complete holiness.”17 To be sure, Calvin believed the Urim and Thummim applied to the church’s pastors “in some measure,” because pastors “ought to shine both in sound doctrine and in integrity of life.” For Calvin, however, the chief lesson to be taken from the Urim and Thummim was that

16 Comm. on John 8:12, OE 11/1:266.2-8; CNTC 4:210.
17 Comm. on Exod. 28:4, CO 24:430; CTS 4:197-98.
true knowledge of God and true holiness of life must not be sought, and cannot be found, apart from Christ. From this conviction came the grave warning that those “who seek for the least spark of light or drop of purity out of Christ, plunge themselves into a labyrinth, where they wander in mortal darkness, and inhale the deadly fumes of false virtues unto their own destruction.”

*The Two Onyx Stones*

The ephod of the high priest consisted of two pieces of cloth, made from the same material and sewn in the same style as the cloth of the breastplate. One piece of the ephod covered the front and the other the back of the high priest’s torso, being fastened together atop each shoulder with a gold clasp. Set within each clasp was an onyx stone. The names of the twelve tribes of Israel were engraved upon these stones according to the birth order of the patriarch Jacob’s twelve sons, the first six tribes on one stone and the last six tribes on the other (Exod. 28:6-12).

The Israelites were commemorated with these two onyx stones, which, according to Calvin, were located atop the shoulders of the high priest so as to clarify and reinforce his connection with the people, the connection being depicted by the breastplate’s twelve precious stones, whereby the high priest symbolically carried the people of God upon his

---

18 Comm. on Exod. 28:4, CO 24:430; CTS 4:198. Calvin’s use of “labyrinth” here confirms Muller’s (*The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 81-85) findings on Calvin’s use of this same metaphor in the *Institutes*. For in both contexts, Calvin envisioned the alternative to the certain and sure way to God in Christ as an inextricable maze of confusion, present in the convolution of the fallen human mind, as well as the theology and piety of the Roman church. Therefore, Calvin’s overtly theological usage of “labyrinth” did something rather different than betray an abiding neurosis or deep psychological distress, as was suggested by William Bouwsma in his influential portrait of Calvin. See William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 9-109.
heart. Whereas the breastplate’s stones were to remind the Israelites that their dearness to God was derived from the sanctity of the priesthood, however, the onyx stones reminded the Israelites that their high priest had not been set apart from them for the purpose of his own private advantage. On the contrary, argued Calvin, the onyx stones signified that by virtue of their solidarity with the high priest, the people were made, “in his one person,” a kingdom of priests.\(^{19}\) Clearly, the Israelite’s solidarity with their high priest did not allow them to execute the distinctive ministries of the high priest’s office. Rather, it allowed the Israelites to participate in the benefits of that office. Calvin thus regarded the onyx stones as a visible sign concerning “the mutual agreement” that was sustained between God and the Israelites through the high priest, in whose person God “embraced” the Israelites and “received them into his sanctuary.”\(^{20}\)

In much the same way, said Calvin, Christians, who in themselves lack everything requisite for spiritual vitality or eternal life (\textit{coelestem vitam}), are borne into the heavenly sanctuary atop the high priestly shoulders of Christ. “Hence then arises our confidence of ascending to heaven,” related Calvin, “because Christ raises us up with him; as Paul says, we ‘sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus’” [Eph. 2:6].\(^{21}\) Expanding upon Paul’s discussion of the benefits that redound to believers as the result of Christ’s ascension into the heavenly sanctuary, Calvin continued:

\begin{quote}
And certainly, although, as respects ourselves, our salvation is still hidden in hope, yet in Christ we possess blessed immortality and glory. Therefore he adds, \textit{in Christ}, because what he speaks of does not yet appear in the members, but only
\end{quote}


in the head; yet, because of the secret union, it belongs truly to the members…. And from this we should gather the richest consolation—that of everything which we now lack, we have a sure pledge and firstfruits in the person of Christ.22

Consequently, Calvin concluded that the onyx stones worn by Israel’s high priest “prefigured what Paul teaches,” namely, “that the church is ‘his [Christ’s] body,’ and ‘the fullness of him.’”23 As the following exclamation demonstrates, then, Calvin thought that although Christ lacks nothing in himself, his sheer goodness compels him to be filled and, in some sense, made perfect, or complete, by bringing believers into union with himself:

This is the highest honour of the church, that, unless he is united to us, the Son of God reckons himself in some measure imperfect. What an encouragement it is for us to hear, that, not until he has us as one with himself, is he complete in all his parts, or does he wish to be regarded as whole!24

The Robe of the Ephod

The high priest’s robe was seamless and woven of blue yarn. It was worn directly beneath the ephod, and extended past the ephod to a point slightly below the knees. From the bottom hem of the robe hung small pomegranates made from blue, purple, and scarlet yarns, and between each pomegranate hung a small gold bell. Thus the pomegranates and bells formed an alternating pattern around the bottom of the robe (Exod. 28:31-35). Being made of yarn, the pomegranates obviously exuded no scent. Yet according to Calvin, God intended this type to suggest a fragrant smell, in order to teach the Israelites that whatever was united to the high priest smelled sweetly, and was acceptable to God. Moreover, God

22 Comm. on Eph. 2:6, OE 16:182.28-183.4; CNTC 11:143.


demanded that the fragrance suggested by the high priest’s robe be accompanied with the sound of its bells. The bells were so important, in fact, that “God denounces death against the priest if he should enter the sanctuary without the sound.”

Calvin thought the robe’s pomegranates should teach Christians that because they stink on account of their sins, they are only made a sweet smell to God by being covered, or clothed, with the garment of Christ’s righteousness. Yet the benefits of Christ can only be had as a consequence of apprehending the person of Christ through faith. And because faith comes through hearing, the robe’s bells denote that Christ’s righteousness “does not procure favour for us, except by the sound of the gospel, which diffuses the sweet savour of the head amongst all the members.” Calvin readily acknowledged his explanation to be an allegory. To his mind, however, it constituted a licit and edifying form of allegory. For it contains “nothing too subtle or far-fetched.” In fact, “the similitude of the smell and the sound naturally leads us to the honouring of grace, and to the preaching of the gospel.”

Given Calvin’s opinion that the metaphorical correspondences of Scripture should not be overworked, he was not concerned that the threat of death upon Israel’s high priest in Exodus 28:35 was inapplicable to Christ. To Calvin this injunction was provisional, so that the high priest might exercise proper care in performing the duties of his office until the coming of Christ. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that Calvin wrote in the hope that his fellow evangelicals would work to reform and restore biblical preaching, because with respect to preaching, he thought the medieval church had progressively abdicated its responsibility, and thus relinquished its voice to idols. It is little surprise, then, that Calvin

discerned a timely lesson for his fellow pastors in this threat issued to Israel’s priests. For enlisting the support of Pope Gregory I, Calvin remarked: “The ancients do not unwisely make a spiritual application of this to the ministers of the church; for the priest is worthy of death, says Gregory, from whom the voice of preaching is not heard.”27 There ought to be no question that Calvin considered Gregory’s support especially strategic, since Calvin believed that Gregory contributed to the church’s decline by advocating its use of images to instruct the illiterate.28 The point Calvin wished to establish was that even in Gregory’s time, when the early medieval church had already shown considerable deterioration from the relative purity of the ancient church, it still upheld the long-standing principle that the chief task of the church’s ministers was to preach the word of God to the people of God.29

*The Gold Plate of the Headdress*


29 *Inst*. 4.4.3, *OS* 5:60; LCC 2:1070-71. Calvin maintained that the terms pastor, minister, bishop, and presbyter, a shorter synonym for the latter being priest, were used interchangeably in the New Testament for those who govern and teach the church (*Inst*. 4.3.8, *OS* 5:50.3-12; LCC 2:1060). The ancient church, which Calvin commended for the sincere effort of its leaders to preserve this biblical institution, gave the title of bishop to one member of each city’s college of presbyters. This was done to meet the needs of the times, wrote Calvin, so as to promote the church’s organization and peace, and facilitate the leading, feeding ministry of the bishop and his fellow presbyters (*Inst*. 4.4.1-2, *OS* 5:57-59; LCC 2:1068-70). Thus Calvin’s contention in *Institutes* 4.4.3 was that Gregory, the early medieval bishop and presbyter, championed the ancient church’s understanding of this ministerial office insomuch that he considered the foremost concern of that office to be biblical proclamation. See Gregory the Great, *Registrum Epistolarum I*, 24, CCSL 140:26.157-70; *Homilies on Ezekiel*, 11.10, PL 76:910.
Although he passed the headdress of the high priest in silence, Calvin found great significance in the small gold plate fastened with a blue cord to the front of the headdress, the plate which bore the inscription “Holy to the Lord” (Exod. 28:36-38). Conspicuously located across the forehead of the high priest, noted Calvin, this plate bore testimony that Israel’s priesthood was approved of and acceptable to God because it was consecrated by God, testimony which thus clarified and reinforced that of the Thummim by helping the Israelites understand “that holiness was not to be sought elsewhere.”

Exodus 28:38 declares that, with this gold plate across the front of his headdress, Israel’s high priest might ‘bear the iniquity of the holy things’ consecrated to God by the Israelites. Calvin deemed Exodus 28:38 “a remarkable passage” because it does not refer to the “manifest and gross sins” of the Israelites, or even to “any error” the Israelites may have committed in the cultic ceremonies. Instead, Exodus 28:38 refers to “the iniquity of the holy oblations” themselves. The point of this passage, opined Calvin, is that as fallen people, the Israelites could offer nothing inherently acceptable or pleasing to God—even offerings prescribed by the law—since no offering could be altogether free from the guilt of those who offered it. Therefore, every oblation the Israelites offered to God required “the intervention of pardon, which none but the priest could obtain for them.”

According to Calvin, Christ essentially reiterated this same point with reference to

32 Comm. on Exod. 28:36, CO 24:434; CTS 4:203.
himself in John 17:19, where he spoke of consecrating himself, so that those who believe in him may be sanctified as well. On this text Calvin commented:

> It is because he [Christ] consecrated himself to the Father that his holiness might come to us. For as the blessing is spread to the whole harvest from the firstfruits, so God’s Spirit cleanses us by the holiness of Christ and makes us partakers of it. And not by imputation alone, for in that respect he is said to have been made to us righteousness; but he is also said to have been made to us sanctification, because he has, so to say, presented us to his Father in his own person that we may be renewed to true holiness by his Spirit.

And because Christians are accepted in Christ and made to partake of his holiness, maintained Calvin, God commends to them an oblation even more excellent than the now abrogated oblations prescribed to the Israelites. This oblation is in no sense an atonement for sin. Rather, it is “another form of sacrifice,” by which Christians, being laden with the benefits they received in Christ, offer the calves of their lips, so to speak, by invoking the name of God in adoration, supplication, and thanksgiving. Like the oblations formerly prescribed to the Israelites, however, this more excellent oblation is inevitably tainted by the arrears of yet-to-be-eradicated sin, for which reason it evokes God’s pleasure only as it is offered in and sanctified by Christ. Calvin commented on this “sacrifice of praise,” discussed in Hebrews 13:15, as follows:

> As it is the apostle’s plan to tell us what is the proper way of worshipping God under the New Testament he reminds us in passing that we cannot honestly call on God and glorify his name except through Christ as our mediator. It is he alone who hallows our lips which are otherwise defiled to sing praises to God, who

---


34 Comm. on John 17:19, OE 11/2:220.8-14; CNTC 5:146.


36 Comm. on Exod. 28:36, CO 24:434; CTS 4:203.
opens the way for our prayers, who in short performs the office of priest by standing before God in our name.\textsuperscript{37}

In other words, our adoration of God is acceptable only as it is gathered up in the Son’s adoration of the Father. For Calvin, then, the small gold plate on the headdress of Israel’s high priest should teach Christians two things of great significance:

[F]irst, that the priesthood of his own appointment is pleasing to God, and so, that all others, however magnificently they may be spoken of, are abominable to him, and rejected by him; and secondly, that out of Christ we are all corrupt, and all our worship faulty; and however excellent our actions may seem, that they are still unclean and polluted. Thus, therefore, let all our senses remain fixed on the forehead of our sole and perpetual priest, that we may know that from him alone purity flows throughout the whole church.\textsuperscript{38}

\textit{The Coat}

Each garment discussed thus far belonged exclusively to the vestments of Israel’s high priest. Yet the coat, an ankle-length garment made of finely woven linen, comprised the principal article of dress for Israel’s entire priesthood. Exodus 28:40 indicates that the coat was made ‘for glory and for beauty,’ attributes which Calvin saw as representing the “peculiar dignity” bestowed upon Aaron’s family, dignity which distinguished his family from fellow Israelites in general, and from fellow Levites in particular. For only Aaron’s sons and their offspring could lawfully occupy the office of Israel’s priesthood, and thus only persons of that lineage could succeed Aaron as high priest.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{37} Comm. on Heb. 13:15, \textit{OE} 19:242.8-14; \textit{CNTC} 12:211.

\textsuperscript{38} Comm. on Exod. 28:36, \textit{CO} 24:433; CTS 4:202. Here Calvin had a sacrificial, mediatorial priesthood in mind, like that of both Israel and Christ, and thus certainly not presbyters as he understood them in either the New Testament or the ancient church.

\textsuperscript{39} Comm. on Exod. 28:40, \textit{CO} 24:434; CTS 4:203.
The coat also differs from the garments discussed thus far with respect to Calvin’s treatment of it. That is because he made no mention of Christ, and so no overt, or at least no immediate, effort to help his readers contemplate this garment in a way that advanced their understanding of Christ’s priesthood. In fact, Calvin appeared interested in the coat only to the extent that Exodus 28:41 relates it to another issue: the rite of consecration to the priesthood. As such, it seems as though Calvin’s sole aim for discussing the coat was to draw attention to the fact that God had commanded Aaron’s brother Moses, not Aaron himself, to consecrate Aaron’s sons to the priesthood. Calvin suggested that by doing so, God spared Aaron from the charge of having unlawfully made the priesthood hereditary, and at the same time, put to rest any possible assumptions by the children of Moses that the priesthood was their entitlement by virtue of their privileged familial status. More to the point, however, was the fact that Moses had been commissioned to consecrate others to an office that he himself did not hold. In Calvin’s estimation, this observation showed that the power to consecrate to the priesthood, and thus the dignity and efficacy resulting from that consecration, came from God and remains with God, meaning that God did not transfer this power to his ministers in the sense of it being their possession to exercise at their discretion.40

The Breeches

Like the coat, the breeches were worn by the entire priesthood. This finely woven linen undergarment covered the naked flesh from the hips to the thighs, so Israel’s priests did not subject themselves to God’s judgement while ministering in the sanctuary (Exod. 40 Comm. on Exod. 28:40, CO 24:434; CTS 4:203-4).

Calvin considered the precept that the priests must cover their nakedness with breeches to be an ostensibly trivial matter in itself. Nevertheless, he believed this precept to be important because it transcended the immediate issue to warn the priests of a grave and pervasive danger: committing offenses that could cause the Israelites to disparage the holy things of God, thereby bringing Israel’s religion into contempt. For Calvin, then, the significance of the breeches was not so much that they reinforced the purity of the priests for the people. Rather, the breeches reinforced the purity of the sanctuary for the priests. Calvin drew no christological implications here, but merely stated what he believed to be the sum of this precept, namely, that the priests were to “conduct themselves chastely and modestly, lest, if anything improper or indecorous should appear in them, the majesty of holy things should be impaired.”

On the Priesthoods of Israel, Christ, and Rome

The account of the garments of Israel’s priesthood in Exodus chapter twenty-eight concludes with the statement: “This shall be a statute forever for him [Aaron] and for his offspring after him” (Exod. 28:43). Though the precept about the priests’ breeches is the nearest referent for this statement, Calvin deemed it improper to restrict this statement to the breeches alone, because “it has a natural reference” to the other ordinances of Israel’s priesthood as well. Further, he noted that whenever a form of the word גולא (gnolam), or forever, is found in connection with “the legal types,” as in this statement, it connotes the duration of an age, not eternity. Thus the concluding statement in Exodus chapter twenty-eight.


42 Comm. on Exod. 28:42, CO 24:435; CTS 4:204.
eight “declares generally” that the ordinances of Israel’s priesthood were to remain in use until Christ’s advent. For as should now be clear, Calvin conceived of Israel’s priesthood as having been earthly, shadow-like, and transitory by design, in order to lead the ancient Israelites onward and upward to Christ, the eternal, heavenly mediator between God and his people, the one true priest, whose priesthood fulfilled and thus terminated that which typified it. In other words, because Israel’s priesthood was intended to anticipate Christ’s priesthood, Israel’s priesthood could not harmoniously coexist beside Christ’s priesthood once the latter had been actualized. Therefore, Israel’s priesthood and its ordinances were to end with the manifestation of Christ’s priesthood. Due to the profound correspondence between these two priesthoods, however, the former attained its spiritual significance, its true substance, and its perpetuity in the latter.⁴³

But Calvin was convinced that the progressive decline of the medieval church had resulted in growing confusion over the relationship between the priesthoods of Israel and Christ, confusion which was eventually inherited by the sixteenth-century Roman church, as betrayed by “the twofold sacrilege of the papacy.”⁴⁴ For it was plain to Calvin that the institution of the church articulated by the apostles and largely preserved by their earliest heirs had since been corrupted, insomuch that Rome ordained “not presbyters to lead and

---

⁴³ Comm. on Exod. 28:42, CO 24:435; CTS 4:205. In Calvin’s view, “whenever the sacrifices of the law are mentioned, the word ‘forever’ is confined to the time of the law…. At the same time, however, it must be noticed, that the duration ‘forever’ is applied to the old sacrifices not in respect of the external rite so much as on account of its mystical significance” (Comm. on Heb. 7:17, OE 19:116.30-117.3; CNTC 12:98).

feed the people, but priests to perform sacrifices.” Therefore, the first aspect of Rome’s twofold sacrilege was that it had substituted its own sacrificial, mediatorial priesthood for that of Christ, as if Christ’s priesthood, like Israel’s, were transitory.

In response to the first aspect of Rome’s twofold sacrilege, Calvin marshalled two arguments at the very foundations of the Roman church’s priesthood. On the one hand, he argued that “if it was unlawful to change, or to innovate anything in the legal priesthood,” given that it had been divinely designed and appointed to typify Christ’s priesthood, then it must be an even greater transgression to change or innovate anything related to Christ’s priesthood. And because Calvin considered Rome’s priesthood to be self-styled and self-appointed, he maintained that Rome could neither exculpate itself from this latter, greater transgression, nor escape the indictment that its priesthood was illegitimate. On the other hand, Calvin argued that the garments of Israel’s priesthood typified something which no merely human sacrificer and mediator could possess, that is, the purity belonging only to the theanthropic Christ. Consequently, because there can be no priests of the sacrificing, mediating sort after Christ unless they, like Christ, have the superlative purity which the

---

45 Inst. 4.5.4, OS 5:76.28-77.2; LCC 2:1087-88. In Institutes 4.5.4-14 (OS 5:76-85; LCC 2:1087-97), Calvin discussed several of the issues that he deemed corruptive to the Roman priesthood, such as its deficiency in learning and morals, simony, benefices, absenteeism, and the ordination of monks who remained cloistered at their monasteries, and thus unable to carry out the public office of presbyter. He insisted that these issues hindered Rome’s priesthood from providing pastoral care and biblical instruction, and thus aided the deterioration of that priesthood into one perceived as primarily sacrificial and mediatorial in nature. Some reform-minded persons in the sixteenth-century Roman church also deemed these issues problematic, though these persons would reject much of what Calvin said about the origins and implications of these issues. For example, see the 1537 report (Consilium de emendanda ecclesia) from the reform commission assembled by Pope Paul III in The Catholic Reformation: Savonarola to Ignatius Loyola, by John C. Olin (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 182-97.

garments of Israel’s priesthood showed forth, “we shall be at liberty to repudiate all who are defiled by the very slightest stain.”

The second aspect of the Roman church’s twofold sacrilege, claimed Calvin, was that through its “foolish imitation of the Jews,” Rome’s priesthood had “heaped together ceremonies which are directly opposed to the nature of Christ’s priesthood.” That is to say, with respect to ceremonies, the Roman church had styled its priesthood after that of Israel, as if Israel’s priesthood, like Christ’s, were perpetual. Indeed, Calvin thought that Rome had accumulated ceremonies by way of innovation, thus enveloping its priesthood in “strange inventions.” Yet he observed that Rome had accumulated ceremonies by way of emulation as well, adopting ordinances formerly prescribed to Israel’s priesthood as its own. When emulated by Rome’s priesthood, however, Calvin deemed the divinely given ceremonies of Israel’s priesthood to be just as contradictory to the priesthood of Christ as ceremonies brought forth by human innovation. That is because the same ordinances that were intended to lead the ancient Israelites onward and upward to Christ until his coming function as concealing agents, and thus lead downward and away from Christ, when they continue to be practiced after his manifestation. For this reason, Calvin maintained that


49 Given that the ordinances of Israel’s priesthood typified the person, work, and benefits of Christ relative to his priestly office, Calvin commended the contemplation of those ordinances as a means to advance the instruction and edification of Christians. But at the same time, Calvin condemned the emulation of those ordinances for advancing the exact opposite outcomes, scorning: “So much the sillier is the superstition of the papacy, when in imitation of the Jews it anoints its priests, and altars, and other toys: as if they desired to bury Christ again with their ointments” (Comm. on Exod. 30:25, CO 24:447; CTS 4:225).
Rome had “dared to obscure the brightness of the gospel with a new Judaism.”\textsuperscript{50} Despite the language of his rhetoric, Calvin meant nothing pejorative toward Judaism as such. On the contrary, his point was that if the divinely designed and appointed priesthood of Israel could not harmoniously coexist alongside the priesthood of Christ, so much the less could the self-styled, self-appointed priesthood of Rome.

For Calvin, therefore, “the twofold sacrilege of the papacy” was that, in failing to understand the original purpose and contemporary significance of Israel’s priesthood, the priesthood of the sixteenth-century Roman church had, in effect, denied the truth, reality, sufficiency, and finality of Christ’s priesthood, and thereby repudiated Christ. Due to the perceived context in which his fellow evangelical pastors and teachers ministered, Calvin ended his work on the garments of Israel’s priesthood on this cautionary note: “So much the more diligently, then, must believers beware of departing from the pure institution of Christ, if they desire to have him for their one and eternal mediator.”\textsuperscript{51}

\textbf{The Qualifications for Israel’s Priesthood}

Calvin’s work on the sacerdotal garments provides a basic description of Israel’s priesthood, and in turn, a basic outline of that which Israel’s priesthood typifies, namely, Christ’s priestly office. Adding substance and detail is now in order. Therefore, the topic of this section is the qualifications for Israel’s priesthood, where Calvin’s thinking on the sacrificial, mediatorial aspect of the priesthood in particular is developed.

\textsuperscript{50} Comm. on Exod. 28:42, \textit{CO} 24:436; CTS 4:206.

\textsuperscript{51} Comm. on Exod. 28:42, \textit{CO} 24:436; CTS 4:206.
Calvin believed God’s calling to be that which, before all else, procured the value and dignity of the priesthood. Because God never surrenders his lordship, humankind has “no power to obtrude anyone on God, who should interpose himself to obtain pardon and peace.” That being the case, “God would only have those accounted lawful priests whom he had selected at his own sole will.” For Calvin, then, the calling of God constituted the sole reason why Aaron, his sons, and their offspring could properly and validly carry out their office. What is more, as the fundamental condition for all priests of God, the calling of God forms a common link between Israel’s priests and Christ, as Christ too, according to Hebrews 5:1-10, was divinely called to his priesthood. God’s calling is so important to the legitimacy of the priestly office, stressed Calvin, that “not even Christ himself would have been sufficient to propitiate God, unless he had undertaken the office by the decree and appointment of his Father.”

In fact, Calvin believed that Christ most clearly and brightly reflects the gracious, authoritative character of the Father’s calling to the priesthood. For Christ could not have succeeded and fulfilled Israel’s priesthood had not the Father, solely of his good pleasure, decreed the human nature of Christ to be assumed into hypostatic union with the eternally divine Son, and bestowed on him the task of obtaining salvation for his fellow humans.


53 Thus Calvin stated: “Now we confess that the mediator, who was born of the virgin, is properly the Son of God. And the man Christ would not be the mirror of God’s inestimable grace unless this dignity had been conferred upon him, that he should both be the only-begotten Son of God and be so called” (Inst. 2.14.5, OS 3:464.18-465.2; LCC 1:487-88).
Like Augustine, then, Calvin considered the incarnate Christ to be the very foundation of God’s grace—a grace that passes from Christ to all those united to him—because without any prior cause or deserving, Christ was elected to be the only-begotten Son of God.\footnote{Inst. 2.17.1, OS 3:508-9; LCC 1:528-29. But unlike Anselm, Calvin argued for the necessity of Christ’s theanthropic ontology not on the basis of what needed to obtain if God was to be reconciled to humans, but on the basis of God’s free, gracious choice as to the best way of saving sinners: “If someone asks why this is necessary, there has been no simple (to use the common expression) or absolute necessity. Rather, it has stemmed from a heavenly decree, on which men’s salvation depended. Our most merciful Father decreed what was best for us” (Inst. 2.12.1, OS 3:437.4-8; LCC 1:464). For more on this difference between Calvin and Anselm see Timothy George, Theology of the Reformers (Nashville, TN.: Broadman Press, 1988), 221; Zachman, John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian, 245-46; Davis, This Is My Body, 102n30.}

\textit{Consecration}

Calvin tirelessly drew attention to the fact that God commanded Moses, who was not called to the priesthood, to consecrate the first persons who were called to that office. For Calvin, this observation showed that God is the sole author of the priestly office, that the power to consecrate to the office, and thus the dignity and efficacy resulting from that consecration, comes from God and remains with God.\footnote{Comm. on Exod. 28:1, CO 24:428; CTS 4:194; Comm. on Exod. 28:40, CO 24:434; CTS 4:204; Comm. on Lev. 9:1, CO 25:136-37; CTS 5:426.} More to the point, it appears that Calvin thought this observation undermined the Roman church’s sacerdotalism, which he deplored. For the first consecration, which was a template for all others, Moses presented Aaron and his sons to the Israelites at the entrance of the sanctuary. Eight days later these first candidates for Israel’s priesthood would commence the execution of their office. But throughout the seven-day interim, which for Calvin denoted perfection due to the number of its days, these candidates were retained at the sanctuary in order “that they might learn
to subordinate all their domestic cares and worldly business to their sacred duties.”\textsuperscript{56} The rite by which they were consecrated to the priesthood took place during that time.

This rite of consecration entailed several ceremonies. In Calvin’s assessment, the first such ceremony, the ablution with water, demonstrated that those who were called to Israel’s priesthood “did not bring from their homes the purity which befitted the sanctity of their office, and, inasmuch as they were men, that they could not be clean before God, unless their impurity was washed off.”\textsuperscript{57} What is more, this first ceremony signified that the taint common to fallen humankind had been negated. This negation not only readied its recipients for the impartations of the sacerdotal garments and the anointing oil, it also translated these persons into a status that was separate from and higher than that of their fellow Israelites, in whose stead they were to approach God. Calvin remarked:

\begin{quote}
[S]ince the whole human race is corrupt and infected with many impurities, so that his uncleanness prevents every single individual from having access to God, Moses, before he consecrates the priests, washes them by the sprinkling of water, in order that they may be no longer deemed to be of ordinary rank. Hence we gather that true purity and innocence, which is but typical in the law, is found in Christ alone.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

For Calvin, in other words, the perfect purity, or holiness, that God requires of a priest is genuinely typified by Israel’s priests yet truly present only in the sinless person of Christ, who is “separated from us, not because he rejects us from his society, but because he has this exceptional attribute over us, that he is free from all uncleanness.”\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{56} Comm. on Lev. 8:31, CO 25:135; CTS 5:424.

\textsuperscript{57} Comm. on Lev. 8:4, CO 25:134; CTS 5:421.

\textsuperscript{58} Comm. on Exod. 29:1, CO 24:438; CTS 4:210.

\textsuperscript{59} Comm. on Heb. 7:26, OE 19:121.1-7; CNTC 12:102.
Once the ablution had been completed, the candidates for Israel’s priesthood were clothed in the garments of that office. Because the sacerdotal garments were examined at length earlier in this chapter, their significance need not be rehearsed here. Therefore, the present discussion will move directly to the next ceremony in the consecration of Israel’s priests, that is, their anointing with oil.

Due to his belief that the practice of ceremonial anointing throughout the Hebrew Scriptures served as a metaphor for commending the power, effects, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, Calvin deemed it beyond controversy that the oil used to consecrate Israel’s priests was a type of the Holy Spirit.60 For Calvin, this oil in itself had no ability to penetrate the human soul and no capacity to render anything holy in the sight of God. Thus it was of no avail unto the spiritual worship of God (spiritualem Dei cultum) prescribed by the second commandment, the commandment upon which Israel’s entire cultic system depended and aimed to observe.61 Yet Calvin contended that this particularly momentous anointing was carried out with costly, perfume-mixed oil to indicate that this type was far from empty or impotent. On the contrary, the exquisite composition of the oil was supposed to affect the senses of the Israelites, lifting them as if by steps, in order that they might understand that true spiritual sanctity was annexed to the oil, and therefore imparted through the oil to the priests, because the Spirit of God was present and active, if not empirically perceptible, in that which typified him.62


Calvin saw the ceremonies of ablation with water, investiture with the sacerdotal garments, and anointing with oil as progressive phases of preparation which collectively initiated the priests into their duty of offering sacrifices to God. Clearly, then, whereas Calvin saw the calling of God as the fundamental condition of the priesthood, he saw the holiness of the priests—viewed negatively as the removal of sin’s taint, and positively as endowment by the Spirit—as the essential quality of the priesthood. What Calvin chiefly wished his readers to grasp with respect to the ceremony of anointing, however, was that no one could successfully execute the duties of the priestly office without being endowed for it by the Spirit. That is because the capacity to bring about peace between a holy God and fallen humans would not otherwise belong to human nature, not even perfect, sinless human nature.

To be sure, Calvin maintained that the humanity of Christ constitutes a creaturely union with humankind, and that this union is the foundation of Christ’s redemptive work for humankind. For Calvin, however, Christ’s humanity in itself does not make his work redemptive, nor does it bring sinners into vital contact with his benefits. Instead, Calvin maintained that Christ’s humanity is life-giving as a result of the Father having endowed Christ with the fullness of the Spirit, the very same Spirit whose influence lent efficacy to Israel’s priesthood. As the bearer of the Spirit, Christ suffered by the Spirit. That is why Christ could vicariously appease God’s judicial wrath against sin. And as the bestower of the Spirit, Christ offers himself—and thus all his benefits—to humans in and through the

64 Comm. on Lev. 8:10, CO 25:134; CTS 5:422.
65 Comm. on Exod. 30:23, CO 24:446; CTS 4:223; Comm. on Lev. 8:10, CO 25:134; CTS 5:422.
Spirit, which Spirit, by working faith in Christ within the hearts of the elect, becomes the bond of their spiritual, or mystical, union with Christ. Calvin urged:

[W]e must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us. For this reason, he is called ‘our head’ [Eph. 4:15], and ‘the first-born among many brethren’ [Rom. 8:29]. We also, in turn, are said to be ‘engrafted into him’ [Rom. 11:17], and to ‘put on Christ’ [Gal. 3:27]; for, as I have said, all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him. It is true that we obtain this by faith. Yet since we see that not all indiscriminately embrace that communion with Christ which is offered through the gospel, reason itself teaches us to climb higher and to examine into the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits…. To sum up, the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.66

As he intimated repeatedly in his discussion of the sacerdotal garments, therefore, Calvin regarded Spirit-wrought, faith-appropriated union with the incarnate Christ to be the God-given means by which believers share in the benefits of Christ’s priesthood, benefits such as knowledge of God, holiness before God, right standing with God, access to God, and a certainty that, in Christ the Son, one is reckoned to be a beloved child by God.

The consecration of Israel’s priests culminated with a ceremony of sacrifice. This sacrifice included a bull for a sin offering, a ram for a burnt offering, another ram for the consecration, unleavened bread, unleavened cakes mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers sprinkled with oil (Exod. 29; Lev. 8). The candidates laid their hands upon these animals just before the animals were sacrificed. Calvin saw in this imposition of hands not only a symbol of presentation, but also, in the case of the sin offering, a testimony of guilt being transferred to the victim. Indeed, any ordinary Israelite would also place their hands upon the sacrifices that they brought to the sanctuary as a token of presentation and the transfer

66 Inst. 3.1.1, OS 4:1.10-2.6; LCC 1:537-38.
of guilt. But under the law no ordinary Israelite could effectively consecrate any sacrifice to God, because the consecration of sacrifices depended upon the interposition of Israel’s priesthood. This ceremony made such an interposition possible.\textsuperscript{67}

Some of the blood from the bull was applied to the horns of the altar, and the rest was poured out at the base of the altar. The blood from both rams was thrown against the sides of the altar. But before the blood from the second ram was thrown against the altar, some of that blood was applied to the candidates’ right ears, right thumbs, and great toes of their right feet. Shortly thereafter, some of the blood was retrieved from the altar and, together with the anointing oil, sprinkled upon the candidates and their priestly garments. “What we must first observe here,” said Calvin, “is that the priest must be sprinkled with blood, in order that he may conciliate the favour of God towards himself for the purpose of intercession.” Of course, Christ differed from Israel’s priests in that he did not need to conciliate the favour of God towards himself before undertaking his priestly office. Like Israel’s priesthood, however, “the priesthood of Christ was dedicated with blood, so that it might be efficacious to reconcile God with us.”\textsuperscript{68}

Calvin conjectured that blood may have been applied only to the candidates’ right ears, right thumbs, and right great toes because both ears, both hands, and both feet share the same function. Therefore, what was done to one ear, hand, or foot applies to the other as well.\textsuperscript{69} Furthermore, Calvin maintained that the candidates’ ears, hands, and feet were differentiated from other parts of their bodies because this ceremony concerned no other

\textsuperscript{67} Comm. on Lev. 8:10, \textit{CO} 25:134; CTS 5:422.

\textsuperscript{68} Comm. on Exod. 29:16, \textit{CO} 24:438; CTS 4:211.

\textsuperscript{69} Comm. on Exod. 29:16, \textit{CO} 24:438; CTS 4:211; Comm. on Lev. 8:10, \textit{CO} 25:135; CTS 5:423.
aspect of the priesthood except what “related to atonement.”\textsuperscript{70} As to the question of how these three parts of the body relate to atonement, Calvin explained that Scripture contains several metonymies in which the ears designate obedience, and the hands and feet denote all the actions, or the entire course, of life. Therefore, given that heeding God begins with hearing God, blood was first applied to the ears of the candidates, then to their hands and feet, so as to devote the candidates unto complete obedience to God. Calvin believed this was done “because the chief virtue, which obtains grace in the sacrifices, is obedience.”\textsuperscript{71}

To be sure, Israel’s priests were subject to a far more rigorous form of obedience than that of their fellow Israelites, an obedience determined by the regulations of Israel’s priesthood.\textsuperscript{72} According to Calvin, these regulations were instituted “that the priests may differ from the rest of the people by notable marks, as if separated from ordinary man; for special purity became those who represented the person of Christ.” Thus on the one hand, Calvin felt that the exceptional obedience required of Israel’s priests served to accentuate the purity of their office, and in turn, preserve the integrity of the sacrifices. On the other hand, however, he deemed these regulations, and the obedience rendered them, as strictly

\textsuperscript{70} Comm. on Exod. 29:16, \textit{CO} 24:439; CTS 4:212. 

\textsuperscript{71} Comm. on Exod. 29:16, \textit{CO} 24:438-39; CTS 4:211; Comm. on Lev. 8:10, \textit{CO} 25:135; CTS 5:423. With the term metonymies, Calvin referred to that literary device in which one word or phrase is substituted for another closely associated word or phrase.

penultimate in nature. For Calvin, the true significance of Israel’s priests being devoted unto complete obedience to God is found in Romans 5:19, where the apostle Paul speaks of God’s demand for complete obedience being fulfilled in Christ. Calvin commented:

When he [Paul]...states that we are made righteous by the obedience of Christ, we deduce from this that Christ, in satisfying the Father, has procured righteousness for us. It follows from this that righteousness exists in Christ as a property, but that that which belongs properly to Christ is imputed to us.

In other words, Calvin maintained that the content and character of Christ’s righteousness consists of obedience, and that this righteousness is imputed, or attributed, to believers as a consequence and benefit of their spiritual union with the incarnate Christ.

Using Pauline concepts from the fifth chapter of Romans, Calvin expanded upon how the obedience of Christ redresses the predicament of fallen humankind in Institutes 2.12.3, beginning with the premise “that man, who by his disobedience had become lost, should by way of remedy counter it with obedience, satisfy God’s judgment, and pay the penalties for sin.” Thus the only-begotten Son of God came forth as a true human, taking “the person and the name of Adam” so as to assume Adam’s place in obeying the Father. As the second Adam, that is, as the second vicarious representative of humankind, Christ rendered complete obedience to God, conquering sin and death as a human in order “that the victory and triumph might be ours.” That is to say, Christ’s life of absolute obedience to the Father culminated in Christ’s voluntary death, whereby he presented “as a sacrifice

73 Comm. on Lev. 21:1, CO 24:448; CTS 4:227.
75 Comm. on Rom. 5:19, OE 13:115.8-11; CNTC 8:118.
76 Comm. on Rom. 5:19, OE 13:115.11-12; CNTC 8:118; Comm. on John 17:19, OE 11/2:220.6-14; CNTC 5:146.
the flesh he received from us, that he might wipe out our guilt by his act of expiation and appease the Father’s righteous wrath.”77 Writing on the consecration of Israel’s priests in the *Mosaic Harmony*, Calvin said “the chief virtue, which obtains grace in the sacrifices, is obedience.”78 The intent of this claim becomes clearer with a view to Christ’s priestly ministrations. What Calvin meant is this: obedience is the chief virtue of sacrifice in that it is Christ’s complete and total obedience, even unto self-sacrificial death, that obtained, or merited, God’s grace for sinners.

Calvin’s understanding of the relationships between Christ’s obedience, sacrifice, and merit is made clearer still in book two, chapter seventeen of the *Institutes*. Originally, this chapter was Calvin’s 1555 response to Laelius Socinus, whose thought fits best with that subspecies of the Radical Reformation known as Evangelical Rationalism.79 Calvin incorporated his response, with minor alterations, into the final edition of the *Institutes* in 1559. The letter Socinus sent Calvin is not extant. But Socinus most likely argued that to confess salvation by Christ’s merit is to contradict, or at least to obscure, that salvation is by God’s sheer grace alone. For in his response to Socinus, Calvin declared that salvation is indeed by Christ’s merit, yet contended that the first cause of Christ’s merit is not to be attributed to Christ’s work, but rather to the Father’s ordination.

In other words, Calvin confessed that the Father, solely of his own good pleasure, appointed Christ to obtain salvation for humans prior to, and thus apart from, any and all merit that Christ won by his obedience. “For it is a common rule that a thing subordinate


78 Comm. on Lev. 8:10, *CO* 25:135; CTS 5:423.

to another is not in conflict with it,” noted Calvin. Thus “it is absurd to set Christ’s merit against God’s mercy.” In Calvin’s assessment, then, the dichotomy between God’s grace and Christ’s merit is a false one. The real dichotomy to be recognized and upheld here is between divine redemptive action—Christ’s meritorious obedience made possible by the Father’s gracious ordination—and all forms of human self-salvation.\textsuperscript{80} As such, the sum of Calvin’s response to Socinus was that God’s grace and Christ’s meritorious obedience converge at and are bound together by Christ’s sacrifice, a sacrifice which, of course, is a province of Christ’s priestly office. Calvin wrote:

Both God’s free favor and Christ’s obedience, each in its degree, are fitly opposed to our works. Apart from God’s good pleasure Christ could not merit anything; but did so because he had been appointed to appease God’s wrath with his sacrifice, and to blot out our transgressions with his obedience.\textsuperscript{81}

And again:

By his obedience…Christ truly acquired and merited grace for us with his Father. Many passages of Scripture surely and firmly attest this. I take it to be a commonplace that if Christ made satisfaction for our sins, if he paid the penalty owed by us, if he appeased God by his obedience—in short, if as a righteous man he suffered for unrighteous men—then he acquired salvation for us by his righteousness, which is tantamount to deserving it.\textsuperscript{82}

But on this issue Calvin deemed medieval theologians such as Lombard, Aquinas, Bonaventura, and Scotus to be no less absurd than Socinus. For in Calvin’s opinion, they posited temerarious and idle distinctions between what Christ merited for others and what


\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Inst.} 2.17.1, \textit{OS} 3:509.24-28; LCC 1:529.

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Inst.} 2.17.3, \textit{OS} 3:511.7-13; LCC 1:530-31.
he merited for himself. Calvin argued that Christ clearly testified to have merited nothing for himself in his high priestly prayer, especially in his statement in John 17:19, where he said, ‘For their sake I sanctify myself.’ Writing on the consecration of Israel’s priests in the Mosaic Harmony, in fact, Calvin cited John 17:19 to stress what he saw as the pro nobis, or substitutionary, character of Christ’s priesthood:

[W]e must remember that what is said of the consecration of Christ does not apply to his own person, but refers to the profit of the whole church; for neither was he anointed for his own sake, nor had he need to borrow grace from the blood; but he had regard to his members, and devoted himself altogether to their salvation, as he himself testifies, ‘For their sake I sanctify myself.’

Calvin did not equate Christ’s consecration with any single event. Instead, Calvin maintained that Christ’s consecration comprehended his whole life (totam Christi vitam), in which Christ devoted himself to being our substitute, our obedience, our exemplar for genuine human holiness, our merit, and our victor over sin and its consequences. Yet his consecration shone brightest when all its facets were gathered up and brought to fruition by his death, in which he devoted himself to being our sacrifice. For then, stated Calvin, Christ appeared as our true high priest.

The Prophetic Aspect of Israel’s Priesthood

83 Inst. 2.17.6, OS 3:514.18-36; LCC 1:534. Willis, “Influence of Socinus,” 235-37. This sixth paragraph in book two, chapter seventeen of the Institutes was not part of Calvin’s original response to Socinus.

84 Comm. on Exod. 29:16, CO 24:439; CTS 4:212. Substitution is a theme often present and always assumed in Calvin’s thought on Christ’s priestly office. Yet I do not endorse Paul Van Buren’s identification of substitution—or the identification of any one theme, for that matter—as the leitmotif, or central theme, of Calvin’s theology. See Paul Van Buren, Christ in Our Place: The Substitutionary Character of Calvin’s Doctrine of Reconciliation (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957), ix.

85 Comm. on John 17:19, OE 11/2:220.14-17; CNTC 5:146.
Like the second section of this chapter, this third and final section adds substance and detail to Calvin’s discussion on the sacerdotal garments, because Calvin’s discussion on the sacerdotal garments provides a basic description of Israel’s priesthood, and in turn, a basic outline of what Israel’s priesthood typifies, namely, Christ’s priestly office. In the previous section, Calvin’s thinking on the sacrificial, mediatorial aspect of the priesthood was developed. Here the focus turns to an aspect of the priesthood that Calvin believed to be even more basic to the office: its prophetic aspect. But to be clear at the outset, Calvin was not so much concerned with the foretelling, or predictive, function of prophecy with respect to the priesthood, a function of prophecy which Calvin deemed secondary even to Israel’s prophets, let alone its priests. Rather, Calvin was concerned with the forth-telling, or proclamatory, function of prophecy.

**Teachers of God’s Law**

Given the richly symbolic constitution of the garments, instruments, ceremonies, and regulations of Israel’s priesthood, the forth-telling of the priests was obviously not of the solely oral sort. Nonetheless, Calvin regarded it as a forth-telling of the primarily oral sort. He attributed this primacy of the oral not only to the fact “that the office of teaching was entrusted to the priests,” or that “the interpretation of the whole law was the peculiar province of the priests.” For even more importantly, he deemed it the “principal office of the priests…to be interpreters of the doctrine of the law.” In Calvin’s view, therefore, the priesthood’s most basic aspect was its prophetic aspect, and its primary task was “to keep
the people in sound and pure doctrine, and to expound what is right—in a word, to be the teachers of the church.”

Calvin considered Deuteronomy 31:9-13 especially instructive with respect to the prophetic aspect of Israel’s priesthood, because he felt that this text contains the essential features of what it meant for Israel’s priests to be teachers of God’s law. The event found in this text “took place thirty-nine years after God had spoken on Mount Sinai,” declared Calvin. At that time, the near-death Moses deposited the law into the custody of Israel’s priests. This deposit was attended by the command that every Sabbath Year, during the Feast of Booths, the priests were to proclaim the law to all Israel so that, hearing the law, men, women, and children may learn to fear and obey God. Calvin made four significant observations concerning this text, observations which now will be addressed in turn.

First, Calvin noted that Moses deposited the law into the custody of the priests “to enjoin upon them the duty of teaching.” Therefore, “we must remember,” he added, that the law was “given in trust” to the priests, so “the people might learn from them what was right.” That is to say, the priests were entrusted with a stewardship, not invested with “a tyrannical power.” To be sure, the Israelites were to heed the priests’ teaching, but for the express reason that the law was to supply the substance and delimit the boundaries of that

---

86 Comm. on Deut. 17:8, CO 24:470-71; CTS 4:262-64.

87 Comm. on Deut. 31:9, CO 24:451; CTS 4:231. Calvin discussed the entire text of Deuteronomy 31:9-13 in the Mosaic Harmony’s locus on the priesthood, but he did so under the heading of Deuteronomy 31:9 only. Calvin also discussed Deuteronomy 31:10-13 in “Preface to the Law” (CO 24:230-32; CTS 3:370-73), the Mosaic Harmony’s first main doctrinal section.

88 Comm. on Deut. 31:9, CO 24:450; CTS 4:230.

89 Comm. on Deut. 31:9, CO 24:450; CTS 4:231.
teaching.\textsuperscript{90} This feature of the priesthood’s teaching office shaped Calvin’s understanding of all subsequent teachers of God’s people, as the following remark indicates:

\begin{quote}
[W]hatever authority and dignity the Spirit in Scripture accords to either priests or prophets, or apostles, or successors of apostles, it is wholly given not to the men personally, but to the ministry to which they have been appointed…. For if we examine them all in order, we shall not find that they have been endowed with any authority to teach or to answer, except in the name and word of the Lord. For where they are called to office, it is at the same time enjoined upon them not to bring anything of themselves, but to speak from the Lord’s mouth.\textsuperscript{91}
\end{quote}

Second, Calvin noted that the priests were commanded to teach the law regularly. He thought the Sabbatical Year was chosen for the priests to recite the law in its entirety because the Sabbatical Year, being a mandated reprieve from labour, allowed the people to assemble before the priests with undivided attention.\textsuperscript{92} Deuteronomy 31:9-13 teaches only that the priests were to recite all the law to all Israel every Sabbatical Year, granted Calvin. Still, “it is easy to gather that they were appointed the constant proclaimers of its doctrine.”\textsuperscript{93} How Calvin gathered such a notion can be surmised by looking elsewhere in his \textit{locus} on the priesthood.

For example, consider the regulation that required priests to abstain from alcohol when ministering at the sanctuary. According to Leviticus 10:8-11, this regulation was to help the priests be keen in their discernment between the holy and profane, and the clean and unclean. Furthermore, this regulation was to help the priests be sound teachers of the law. Calvin commented that, as over-indulgence in strong drink clouds and enervates the

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{90} Comm. on Deut. 17:8, \textit{CO} 24:471; CTS 4:264.

\textsuperscript{91} \textit{Inst.} 4.8.2, \textit{OS} 5:134.13-22; LCC 2:1150-51.

\textsuperscript{92} Comm. on Deut. 31:9, \textit{CO} 24:451; CTS 4:231.

\textsuperscript{93} Comm. on Deut. 31:9, \textit{CO} 24:450; CTS 4:230.
\end{footnotes}
mind, the broader intention for this temporary abstinence was to help the priests cultivate a life of temperance away from the sanctuary as well. More to the point, however, Calvin believed that “it became them to be abstemious throughout their whole life, because they were always appointed to be masters [magistri, or teachers] to instruct the people.”

Now consider a second example, an example closely related to the first. It pertains to the so-called Levitical cities, that is, those cities priests and other Levites were given to dwell in as part of the inheritance that fell to the tribe of Levi. Situated throughout Israel, the Levitical cities afforded the priests, who, according to Calvin, were always appointed to be teachers of the people, easy and strategic access to the people. For Calvin, therefore, those cities were to be “so many schools,” in which priests “might better and more freely engage themselves in teaching the law, and prepare themselves for performing the office of teaching.” What is more, they were to be “like lamps,” shining the light of heavenly doctrine into the furthest corners of the land. Finally, those cities were to be “like watch towers,” guarding against the onset of impiety and superstition. It follows, then, that the priests’ recitation of the law every Sabbatical Year “cannot properly be taken as if, during the rest of the time, it should remain hidden among themselves; for God would have them to teach daily, and constantly to remind the people of their duty.”

The third observation Calvin made concerning Deuteronomy 31:9-13 was that the priests were expressly commanded to proclaim the law to the Israelites ‘in their hearing.’

95 Comm. on Num. 35:1, CO 24:462; CTS 4:249.
96 Comm. on Num. 35:1, CO 24:462; CTS 4:250.
97 Comm. on Deut. 31:10, CO 24:231; CTS 3:371.
God desired the law to be administered so “he might obtain disciples for himself,” noted Calvin. Any way of administering the law that failed to serve this end, therefore, was “a mere empty spectacle,” or “a sham and ludicrous parade.” Deuteronomy 31:12 indicates as much by stating that the priests were to proclaim the law so the Israelites may hear it, and hearing it, may learn ‘the fear of God,’ an expression which, to Calvin, speaks of an attitude that issues from informed faith and comprehends the whole course of a person’s piety and service of God.\(^98\) For Calvin, then, this text indicates “that true religion has its origin in knowledge.”\(^99\) As such, “the legitimate use of Scripture is perverted” whenever it is administered in an obscure and unintelligible manner that does not instruct and edify God’s people. Furthermore, religion that has its origin “in ignorance” cannot help but be “extravagant and illegitimate.” Thus “to restrain such audacity,” this text also shows that God “is not duly worshipped, except he shall first have been listened to.”\(^100\)

Finally, the fourth observation Calvin made about Deuteronomy 31:9-13 was that priests were commanded to administer the law not only to Israel’s men and women but to Israel’s children as well, so they too might learn the fear of God. The mention of children indicates that priests were charged with more than the task of proclaiming sound doctrine, contended Calvin. They were also given the task of propagating sound doctrine from one generation to the next, in order that Israel’s posterity might be retained in the knowledge

\(^{98}\) Comm. on Deut. 31:9, CO 24:451; CTS 4:232.

\(^{99}\) Comm. on Deut. 31:12, CO 24:232; CTS 3:373.

\(^{100}\) Comm. on Deut. 31:9, CO 24:451-52; CTS 4:232-33.
and pure worship of God.101

And just as Calvin found in Deuteronomy 31:9-13 the essential features of what it meant for Israel’s first priests to be teachers of God’s law, he found in Malachi 2:7 proof that these features were to remain essential to the priestly office. The latter text, which he explicitly cited or clearly alluded to in many of his discussions on the prophetic aspect of the priesthood, states that the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and that instruction should be sought from his mouth, because a priest is to be a messenger of the Lord.102 On this text, Calvin commented:

What the prophet has said of the first priests he extends now to the whole Levitical tribe, and shows that it was a perpetual and unchangeable law as to the priesthood…. He briefly defines here what the priesthood is, even an embassy which God commits to men, that they may be his interpreters in teaching and ruling the church. What then is a priest? A messenger of God, and his interpreter. It hence follows that the office of teaching cannot be separated from the priesthood; for it is a monstrous thing when anyone boasts himself to be a priest, when he is no teacher.103

For Calvin, of course, there had been a prevailing principle among God’s people from the start that they must teach nothing about God except what had been revealed by God. Due to “the diversity of the times” between the first believers and the successors to the apostles, however, this principle has been observed in different ways. To the time of their liberation from Egypt, recounted Calvin, the faith and religion of God’s people was based upon the orally transmitted record of God’s disclosure to certain ancestors through

101 Comm. on Deut. 31:9, CO 24:452; CTS 4:233; Comm. on Deut. 31:13, CO 24:232; CTS 3:373.

102 For citations of and allusions to Malachi 2:7 see Comm. on Lev. 10:9, CO 24:453; CTS 4:235; Comm. on Deut. 17:8, CO 24:470; CTS 4:263; Comm. on Deut. 31:10, CO 24:231; CTS 3:371; Inst. 4.1.5, OS 5:8.39-9.2; LCC 2:1017; Inst. 4.8.2, OS 5:135; LCC 2:1151; Inst. 4.8.6, OS 5:137; LCC 2:1153.

secret (arcanis), or private, revelations.\textsuperscript{104} But after the Exodus, at which time it pleased God to raise up and better establish his people, he appointed Moses, whom Calvin called “the prince of all the prophets,” to set down and seal the law in writing, so that thereafter God’s “priests might seek from it what to teach the people, and that every doctrine to be taught should conform to that rule.”\textsuperscript{105}

Later, “because the Lord was pleased to reveal a clearer and fuller doctrine” to the Israelites, prophets were commissioned to render pronouncements to the people under the superintendence of God’s Spirit. These pronouncements were often committed to writing and, together with the law, regarded as Scripture. Calvin maintained that the primary task of Israel’s prophets was to address contemporary events and circumstances with fresh yet faithful applications of the law, applications which thus “flow from the law and hark back to it.” Therefore, Israel’s prophets “were only interpreters of the law and added nothing to it except predictions of things to come. Apart from these, they brought nothing forth but a pure exposition of the law.” At the same time, the Spirit superintended the composition of histories and psalms, the latter, said Calvin, exhibit the same relationship to the law as the pronouncements of the prophets. Thus the law, prophecies, histories, and psalms together comprised the entire word of God for the people of God until the coming of Christ. It was “to this standard,” then, that Israel’s priests “had to conform their teaching.”\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{104} Inst. 4.8.5, OS 5:136-37; LCC 2:1152-53; Comm. on Deut. 31:10, CO 24:230; CTS 3:370-71.

\textsuperscript{105} Inst. 4.8.2, OS 5:134.25-29; LCC 2:1151; Inst. 4.8.6, OS 5:137.24-138.1; LCC 2:1153; Comm. on Deut. 31:10, CO 24:230-31; CTS 3:371.

\textsuperscript{106} Inst. 4.8.6, OS 5:138.1-20; LCC 2:1153-54.
But in the fullness of time, when Christ appeared in human flesh, he made known “all that can be comprehended and ought to be pondered concerning the heavenly Father by the human mind.” In other words, “the Sun of Righteousness” illumined the relatively “dim light” given in earlier times by “the perfect radiance of divine truth,” argued Calvin. Since the coming of Christ, therefore, God will not speak “as he did before, intermittently through some and through others; nor will he add prophecies to prophecies, or revelations to revelations.” Such disclosures would be anachronistic and superfluous. That is because the Father “so fulfilled all functions of teaching in his Son that we must regard this as the final and eternal testimony from him.”

Calvin resolved:

It was therefore with good reason that the Father by a singular privilege ordained the Son as our teacher, commanding him, and not any man, to be heard. He has, indeed, in few words commended Christ as our teacher when he says, ‘Hear him’ [Matt. 17:5]. But in these words there is more weight and force than is commonly thought. For it is as if, leading us away from all doctrines of men, he should conduct us to his Son alone; bid us seek all teaching of salvation from him alone; depend upon him, cleave to him; in short...hearken to his voice alone.

Accordingly, just as Christ was commissioned to declare not his own teaching but that of his Father who sent him, Christ prescribed the same rule to those he commissioned on his behalf. Regarding the apostles Calvin observed:

They show by their name how much is permitted to them in their office. That is, if they are ‘apostles,’ they are not to prate whatever they please, but are faithfully to report the commands of him by whom they have been sent. And Christ’s words, with which he has defined their mission, are plain enough: he commanded them to go and teach all nations everything he had enjoined [Matt. 28:19-20].

---

107 Inst. 4.8.7, OS 5:138.28-139.5; LCC 2:1154-55.
108 Inst. 4.8.7, OS 5:139.11-20; LCC 2:1155.
109 Inst. 4.8.4, OS 5:136.9-15; LCC 2:1152.
In Calvin’s estimation, then, the teaching authority given to Christ’s apostles was much like that granted to the prophets of old. For under the superintendence of the Spirit, the apostles’ primary task was to address current events and circumstances with fresh yet faithful expositions of the Hebrew Scriptures, that is, expositions that flow from and hark back to the Hebrew Scriptures. Only whereas the prophets were to add nothing to the law aside from predictions of things to come, the apostles were to add nothing to the Hebrew Scriptures aside from showing that those Scriptures are fulfilled by Christ.\textsuperscript{110} As such, it is “a firm principle” that:

No other word is to be held as the word of God, and given place as such in the church, than what is contained first in the law and the prophets, then in the writings of the apostles; and the only authorized way of teaching in the church is by the prescription and standard of his word.\textsuperscript{111}

Thus on the one hand, Calvin viewed the apostles, like Moses and the prophets, as “sure and genuine scribes of the Holy Spirit,” scribes whose writings are to be counted as “oracles of God.” But on the other hand, Calvin argued that the successors to the apostles, whether they are called pastors, ministers, bishops, or priests, have not been “permitted to coin any new doctrine.” Instead, they are to embrace and faithfully teach “that doctrine to which God has subjected all men without exception.”\textsuperscript{112} According to Calvin, then, there is “a universal rule” that applies “as much to the whole church as to individual believers.”

\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Inst.} 4.8.8, \textit{OS} 5:140.1-6; LCC 2:1155.

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Inst.} 4.8.8, \textit{OS} 5:139.29-140.1; LCC 2:1155.

\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Inst.} 4.8.9, \textit{OS} 5:141.11-21; LCC 2:1157. Again, Calvin thought that the terms pastor, minister, bishop, and presbyter, a shorter synonym for the latter being priest, were used interchangeably in the New Testament (\textit{Inst.} 4.3.8, \textit{OS} 5:50.3-12; LCC 2:1060). It is also to be remembered that Calvin believed the sacrificial, mediatorial ministry of Israel’s priesthood was fulfilled and thus terminated by Christ, meaning that this ministry is not a legitimate function of the church’s pastoral office, regardless of the name by which those pastors are called.
The rule is that God forbids the forging of new doctrine so that, through Christ, “he alone may be our schoolmaster [magister, or teacher] in spiritual doctrine.”\textsuperscript{113} In other words:

Since now one sole priest, who is also our master [magister], even Christ, is set over us, woe be unto us if we do not simply submit ourselves to his word, and are not ready to obey him, with all the modesty and teachableness that becomes us.\textsuperscript{114}

Clearly, Calvin was convinced that Christ’s priesthood is of the utmost import for the successors of the apostles if they are to uphold the principle that has always prevailed among God’s people, that is, that nothing is to be taught about God except what has been revealed by God. For in obedience to and emulation of Christ, their sole priest and God’s ultimate self-disclosure, the successors of the apostles must engage in the pure preaching of God’s word, stated Calvin, as that is the only means to preserve the doctrine entrusted to the church, and the primary means whereby God shows himself to be the Father of his people—feeding them with spiritual food and providing all that makes for their salvation in Christ alone. Remove the ministry of the word and God’s truth will fall. And if God’s truth falls the church will inevitably fall with it.\textsuperscript{115} Calvin maintained that the conditions under sixteenth-century “popery” exhibited this phenomenon all too well. “Instead of the ministry of the word, a perverse government compounded of lies rules there,” he insisted,  

\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Inst.} 4.8.9, \textit{OS} 5:142.10-15; LCC 2:1158.

\textsuperscript{114} Comm. on Deut. 17:8, \textit{CO} 24:471; CTS 4:264-65.

\textsuperscript{115} \textit{Inst.} 4.1.10, \textit{OS} 5:15.1-8; LCC 2:1024; \textit{Inst.} 4.2.1, \textit{OS} 5:31.9-19; LCC 2:1041-42; \textit{Inst.} 4.8.12, \textit{OS} 5:145.28-146.17; LCC 2:1161; Comm. on 1 Tim. 3:15, \textit{CO} 52:288; \textit{CNTC} 10:231-32. To be sure, Calvin thought that believers are informed and spiritually nourished by means other than the preaching of the word. The sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper would be the most obvious and important of these means (\textit{Inst.} 4.1.10, \textit{OS} 5:14-15; LCC 2:1024-25). Because he thought that the word must be purely preached in order for the sacraments to be rightly observed, however, Calvin deemed the former to be the primary means whereby God nourishes his people. In other words, Calvin thought the preached word constitutes the substance of the sacraments.
“which partly extinguishes the pure light, partly chokes it.” As a result, the true “worship of God” had been mutated into “a diverse and unbearable mass of superstitions.” Biblical doctrine had been “entirely buried and driven out.” Assemblies of the faithful, moreover, had come to function as “schools of idolatry and ungodliness.”

Calvin’s conception of the prophetic, or forth-telling, ministry typified by Israel’s priesthood and fulfilled by that of Christ helps explain why Calvin spoke as he did about the state of the sixteenth-century Roman church. As already observed, Calvin maintained that a priest was to consistently and clearly proclaim God’s word in the hearing of God’s people, so as to elicit informed faith and propagate sound doctrine and pure worship. Yet in Calvin’s view, Rome’s priests did nothing of the sort. On the contrary, Rome declared it “unlawful” for God’s people “to inquire into the mysteries of Scripture.” And when “the popish priests” became “a little ashamed of altogether driving the people away from hearing God’s word, they devised this foolish plan of shouting to the deaf,” as it were, by proclaiming Scripture in Latin to those who, in most cases, could not understand Latin. It was as if Rome’s priests believed that somehow “this silly formality would satisfy God’s command...that all should be taught from the least to the greatest.”

What is more, Calvin maintained that a priest was entrusted with the stewardship of God’s word, not invested with the power to proclaim any word of his own. According to Calvin, this stewardship was perhaps the most essential feature of the prophetic aspect of Israel’s and Christ’s priesthoods. But Calvin claimed that the sixteenth-century Roman

---


church’s priests, like its higher ranking clergy, were not so much stewards of God’s word as they were “spiritual tyrants” over God’s people.\textsuperscript{119} That is because they high-handedly “coin dogmas after their own whim, which…they afterward require to be subscribed to as articles of faith.”\textsuperscript{120} At bottom, therefore, Calvin attributed the conditions he perceived in the Roman church of his day to the fact that Rome had, in effect, denied the truth, reality, sufficiency, and finality of the prophetic aspect of Christ’s priestly office, much the same as Rome had done with the sacrificial, mediatorial aspect of that office. Thus a dearth of biblical proclamation coupled with a proliferation of extra-biblical dogma contributed to the appearance of “innumerable madnesses” in the sixteenth-century Roman church, with the result that Rome “outdid the superstitions of all the Gentiles.”\textsuperscript{121}

\textit{Heralds of God’s Grace}

According to Calvin, a part of the sacerdotal office that is “constantly” mentioned in the law is the priests’ duty “to bless the people.”\textsuperscript{122} This repetition serves to accentuate something “especially profitable” to the well-being of believers, namely, the doctrine that

\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Inst.} 4.8.10, \textit{OS} 5:142.16-20; LCC 2:1158.

\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Inst.} 4.8.10, \textit{OS} 5:143.2-3; LCC 2:1159. Papal and conciliar authority was an acute concern for Calvin. Concluding his disputation about the doctrinal province of the church with \textit{Institutes} 4.8.10-16 (\textit{OS} 5:142-50; LCC 2:1158-66), he rejected the idea that Rome could claim to be doctrinally infallible in any sense apart from Scripture. The next three chapters of the \textit{Institutes} consist of disputations about the proper and improper uses of church councils (\textit{Inst.} 4.9.1-14, \textit{OS} 5:150-63; LCC 2:1166-79), the abuses of ecclesial authority by popes and prelates and the pastoral damage they caused (\textit{Inst.} 4.10.1-32, \textit{OS} 5:164-94; LCC 2:1179-210), and the church’s jurisdiction regarding corrective discipline and its abuse by the papacy (\textit{Inst.} 4.11.1-16, \textit{OS} 5:195-212; LCC 2:1211-29).

\textsuperscript{121} Comm. on 2 Tim. 2:2, \textit{CO} 52:360; \textit{CNTC} 10:305-6.

\textsuperscript{122} Comm. on Num. 6:22, \textit{CO} 24:460; CTS 4:245.
God has been effectually reconciled (*propitium*) to them. Moreover, Calvin noted that the blessings of the priests did not take the form of “an obscure whisper.” Quite the opposite, as priests were commanded to pronounce their benedictions robustly and audibly. In fact, priests were “witnesses and heralds” of God’s paternal beneficence, observed Calvin. For in proclaiming the favour of God to the people of God, the priests “preached God’s grace, which the people might apprehend by faith.”\(^{123}\)

To find the theological content and pastoral objective of this immensely important sacerdotal duty, Calvin turned to what is surely the most paradigmatic example of priestly benediction in the Hebrew Scriptures, contained in Numbers 6:22-27. The opening words of this benediction, ‘The Lord bless thee,’ speak of God’s “genuine liberality,” suggested Calvin; and this liberality, this free favour, is the source from which all good things come to God’s people. The next clause, that God should ‘keep’ his people, indicates that God is their sole defender, protector, and guardian. Even so, “the main advantage of God’s grace consists in our sense of it,” mused Calvin. That is why ‘and make his face shine on you,’ immediately follows. For these words invite the people of God to “perceive and taste the sweetness of God’s goodness, which may cheer them like the brightness of the sun when it illumines the world in serene weather.”\(^{124}\)

This benediction then proceeds with the statement that God will be gracious to his people. These words identify the first and ultimate cause of God’s goodness to his people, and thus the first and ultimate cause of their happiness, said Calvin. That cause is “God’s gratuitous mercy, which alone reconciles him to us, when we should be otherwise by our

\(^{123}\) Comm. on Num. 6:22, *CO* 24:460; CTS 4:246.

\(^{124}\) Comm. on Num. 6:24, *CO* 24:460; CTS 4:246.
own deserts hated and detested by him.” Calvin noted that the next phrase, ‘The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee,’ is found often in Scripture. He viewed it as a promise that God would “remember his people.” And this promise carries great pastoral benefit, wrote Calvin, “because we suppose that he has cast away his care of us, unless he actually gives proof of his anxiety for our welfare.” The benediction then states God’s desire to give his people peace, peace which Calvin understood to include not only rest and tranquility, but also prosperity and success, or in other words, a mode of complete human flourishing. Finally, the entire benediction is punctuated with what Calvin believed to be an emphatic promise, namely, that with this benediction, God had deposited his name, or character, as it were, with Israel’s priests, “that they may daily bring it forward as a pledge of his good will, and of the salvation which proceeds from thence.”

For Calvin, therefore, Israel’s priests were appointed to be God’s ambassadors, or official emissaries (legatio), and charged to proclaim the blessed news that God had been effectually reconciled to his people. What is more, in this role as witnesses and heralds of God’s grace, Israel’s priests foreshadowed Christ, “the only sufficient surety [sponsor, or guarantor] of God’s grace and blessing.” In Calvin’s estimation, Luke 24:50 shows that this role, typified by Israel’s priests, was fulfilled in Christ. For according to Calvin, Luke 24:50 relates that after Christ had shown himself to be Israel’s true high priest by his self-sacrifice, and was about to ascend to his heavenly session as the eternal mediator between God and humans, he lifted his hands and, in keeping with the rite given to

---

125 Comm. on Num. 6:24, CO 24:460-61; CTS 4:246-47.

126 Comm. on Num. 6:27, CO 24:461; CTS 4:247.

127 Comm. on Num. 6:22, CO 24:460; CTS 4:246.
Israel’s priests, blessed the apostles. This event showed that the sacerdotal duty to pronounce blessing on God’s people belongs “truly and properly” to Christ, and was at length assumed by Christ so “the faithful may go straight to himself if they wish a share in the grace of God.”

Clearly, Calvin considered Christ’s blessing of the apostles momentous. However, Calvin did not view this event as Christ’s only, or even as his greatest, pronouncement of sacerdotal blessing. For Calvin maintained that the ascended Christ continues to proclaim his sacerdotal blessing by way of the gospel as it is preached far beyond the ethnic, cultic, geographical, and chronological confines of the event related in Luke 24:50. Just as Paul said in Ephesians 2:17, argued Calvin, Christ “came to ‘preach peace to them which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.’” Thus Christ shows himself to be the high priest of all humankind by calling people across the globe to the peace and fellowship of God’s grace, albeit:

Not indeed by his own lips, but through the apostles…. Therefore he proclaimed the gospel to the Gentiles through his apostles as by trumpets. What they did, not only in his name, and by his command, but as it were in his own person, is justly ascribed to him alone. We too speak as if Christ himself exhorted you by us. The faith of the gospel would be weak indeed, were we to look only to men. Its whole authority comes from recognizing men as God’s instruments, and hearing Christ speak to us by their mouth. Observe also, that the gospel is the message of peace, by which God declares himself favourable to us, and brings down to us his fatherly love. Take away the gospel, and war and enmity remain between God and men; and, on the other hand, the proper effect of the gospel is to give peace and calmness to the conscience, which would otherwise be tormented by wretched disquiet.

---

As these words from Calvin suggest, he conceived of Christ’s sacerdotal blessing, its greater clarity and fullness notwithstanding, as having essentially the same purpose as did that of Israel’s priests. For in either case, Calvin thought of the sacerdotal blessing as a pronouncement of peace, as a proclamation of divine favour, as an invitation to receive and experience the fatherly love of God. In other words, whether it was formerly uttered by Israel’s priests, or is now issued by the crucified, living Christ, sacerdotal blessing, to Calvin, is “a kind of application of the sacrifice, in order that the people might know that God was reconciled to them through the priest as their mediator and surety.”

Conclusions and Implications

Calvin saw Israel’s priesthood as the centrepiece, the very heart, of Israel’s cultic system because he was convinced that Israel’s priests typified the real mediator between God and humans, their true and eternal priest, Jesus Christ. As such, to examine Calvin’s thought on Israel’s priesthood is to examine the foundation for Calvin’s understanding of the person, accomplishments, and benefits of Christ relative to his priestly office. Such an examination was conducted in this chapter. Thus it should now be clear that Calvin found the priesthoods of Israel and Christ to be comprised by two distinguishable but indivisible aspects: a sacrificial, mediatorial aspect and a prophetic, forth-telling aspect. Together, he claimed, these two aspects of the sacerdotal office serve to protect and perpetuate the true knowledge and pure worship of God. Put another way, Calvin thought that the sacerdotal office, rightly conceived, retains the people of God in their due observance of the second commandment. Of course, this conceptual connection between the priestly office and the

second commandment is exhibited in Calvin’s *Mosaic Harmony*, where he appended his exposition of Israel’s priesthood to that of the second commandment. To Calvin’s mind, however, the sixteenth-century Roman church did not possess a proper conception of the priestly office, and so could not duly observe the second commandment. For in effect, he argued, the sixteenth-century Roman priesthood denied the truth, reality, sufficiency, and finality of Christ’s priesthood. By so doing, Rome’s priesthood rendered itself idolatrous, and in turn, perpetuated idolatry.
Chapter Five
Sacrifice as the Infrastructure of Christ’s Priestly Work of Reconciliation

The final section of the previous chapter is devoted to what Calvin believed was most basic to Israel’s priesthood: its forth-telling function. There it was established that, for Calvin, teaching God’s law was not just the “peculiar province” of Israel’s priests; it was their “principal” duty.\(^1\) Even so, Calvin considered the alienation between God and fallen humans to involve far more than the latter’s ignorance, and thus the reconciliation of God and fallen humans to necessitate far more than the latter’s instruction. Therefore, while Calvin believed that forth-telling was the function most basic to the priesthood, he believed that offering sacrifices was the function most important to the priesthood.

According to Calvin, sacrificing was practiced by virtually all peoples from early times, and its origin is to be traced to the most ancient of God’s people.\(^2\) Commenting on the sacrifices of Abel and Noah recorded in Genesis, Calvin noted several characteristics that he considered constitutional to them. First, the original sacrifices were divinely, not humanly, devised. Second, having been founded upon the command and promise of God, these sacrifices were offered in the obedience of faith, and as expressions of gratitude for God’s goodness and generosity, and as such, were pleasing to him. Third, these sacrifices were to make the hope of salvation and the exercise of piety common to all. Fourth, these sacrifices were to be admonishments that no access to God could be had except through a

\(^1\) Comm. on Deut. 17:8, CO 24:470-71; CTS 4:262-64.

\(^2\) Preface to Comm. on Exod. 29:38, CO 24:489; CTS 4:293.
mediator, and that no reconciliation with God could be had without the expiation of sin.  

But virtually all peoples from the earliest of times had succumbed to superstition, wrote Calvin. Whatever resemblance remained between the sacrifices originally devised by God and those of the ancient Gentiles was thus absurd and blind “mimicry,” since the latter “no longer retained their proper end and use.” Bereft of the command and promise of God, and the inspiration of the Spirit, explained Calvin, the Gentiles were ignorant of the true nature of their sin and guilt, and ignorant of the true meaning of sacrifice. Hence the Gentiles “looked no higher” than the sacrifices offered to their gods, though God had intended the sacrifices he devised to direct the minds of his people upward and onward to Christ, the true mediator and sacrifice.

Calvin maintained that the law, contained in the last four books of the Pentateuch, was given in part to counter the spread of such idolatrous superstition and ignorance. The sacrifices of God’s ancient people were thus codified in the law, and the offering of those sacrifices was made the peculiar province of Israel’s priesthood. The Mosaic Harmony’s doctrinal locus on Israel’s sacrifices is the last ceremonial supplement Calvin appended to his exposition of the second commandment, as well as the primary focus of this chapter.

The first section of this chapter deals with Calvin’s exposition of Israel’s so-called continual sacrifice, the sacrifice which bestowed a hope-filled rhythm to Israel’s liturgical life. Sections two and three both concern Israel’s sacrifices for sin and guilt. According to Calvin, these particular sacrifices pertained to two distinct but indivisible issues, namely,

---


the expiation of sin and the propitiation of God’s wrath. The fourth section is devoted to Calvin’s treatment of Israel’s non-expiatory sacrifices, those sacrifices which regard the consecration to God and fellowship with God which result from being pardoned by God. Finally, the fifth section consists of a concluding excursus concerning Robert Peterson’s monograph on Calvin and the atonement. There I contend that the *Mosaic Harmony* is a neglected albeit indispensable resource for Calvin’s thought on priesthood, sacrifice, and the nature of the relationship between them, and a resource which shows that Calvin saw sacrifice as the infrastructure of Christ’s priestly work of reconciliation.

**The Continual Sacrifice**

Calvin gave first place in his discussion of Israel’s cultic oblations to the so-called continual sacrifice, those burnt offerings that Israel’s priests presented to God twice daily, every morning and evening, on behalf of the entire nation of Israel. The primacy of place that Calvin allotted to the continual sacrifice reflected his understanding that this sacrifice corresponded to the most formative feature of Israel’s existence and identity, namely, that Israel had been delivered from Egyptian bondage and brought into an altogether unique, covenantal relationship with God, who deigned to be both Father and Lord to its people. Generally speaking, then, the purpose of the Israelites’ worship was to

---

5 The word “atonement” is English in origin, and did not become a common term in theological parlance until long after Calvin’s passing. The word refers to the “at-one-ment” brought about between God and sinners by the sacrificial death of Christ. Calvin’s writings show that he used a number of approximate synonyms to refer to the atonement, such as grammatically appropriate forms of the Latin terms *satisfactio, expiatio, propitio, redemptio,* and *reconciliatio.* I have no problem employing the word “atonement” where and when it accurately conveys Calvin’s thought.

express gratitude to the God who graciously redeemed them, the God to whom they belonged. According to Calvin, the continual sacrifice was instituted to consecrate that worship.7 Because he deemed God’s redemption of the ancient Israelites to be ultimately the accomplishment of Christ, however, Calvin saw that redemption as something of a proleptic reality. The continual sacrifice, in keeping with the already-but-not-yet character of that redemption, was to prompt worship that was reflective as well as anticipatory, “that the people might perpetually exercise themselves in the recollection of the future reconciliation.”8 Though this sacrifice was not meant to atone for sin, moreover, it required the shedding of blood. The Israelites could thus see, said Calvin, “that not even their gratitude was acceptable to him [God], except through the sacrifice of the mediator; in a word, that nothing pure can proceed from men unless purged by blood.”9

For both the morning and evening presentations of the continual sacrifice, a single lamb, spotless and in its first year of life, was to be offered. The age of the lamb signified perfection or entireness (integritas), claimed Calvin. Its freedom from blemish, moreover, was necessary for two reasons: first, in order that these offerings would fittingly prefigure the complete perfection of Christ; and second, in order that the pristine condition of these offerings could provide ever-present testimony to the Israelites that their God, on account

---

of his irreducible holiness, abhorred and repudiated all impurity. After these lambs were led to the sanctuary, consecrated, and slain, their blood was poured on the bronze altar—the altar used for burnt offerings. They were then skinned, dressed, and wholly consumed by the fire of the altar, fire which, for Calvin, represented the Spirit, upon whose efficacy all the profit of the sacrifices depended. As mentioned already, Calvin did not think the continual sacrifice—at least in this, its most basic form—made reparation for sin. He did think that the continual sacrifice subserved Israel’s expiatory oblations, however. That is because the continual sacrifice constituted a constant and vivid object lesson on the stark realities of condemnation and death. Consequently, the continual sacrifice acquainted the Israelites with their guilt and impending judgement, and thus their constant need of being reconciled to God, doing so that the Israelites “might learn to fly to God’s mercy.”

What is more, every time the continual sacrifice was offered, the sacrificial lamb was placed on the bronze altar together with a cake made from finely-ground flour mixed with beaten oil, and a libation of wine. These concomitants ensured that as the victim was consumed by flames and rose in smoke toward heaven, it produced a pleasant aroma. The

10 Comm. on Exod. 29:38, CO 24:490; CTS 4:296; Comm. on Lev. 1:1, CO 24:507; CTS 4:324.

11 Comm. on Lev. 1:5, CO 24:508; CTS 4:326; Comm. on Heb. 9:14, OE 19:141.23-142.6; CNTC 12:121.

12 Comm. on Exod. 29:38, CO 24:490; CTS 4:295-96. The first complete sentence of CTS 4:296 reads: “Propitiation was, therefore, daily made with two lambs, that the Israelites, being reminded of their guilt and condemnation, from the beginning to the end of the day, might learn to fly to God’s mercy.” Here Calvin used the Latin word litatum, which simply means to give or make an acceptable offering. Yet the CTS has rendered litatum as “propitiation,” a much more theologically precise term, which, in this context, would mean the appeasement of God’s judicial wrath militated against human sin. In this instance, then, the CTS edition has imported Calvin’s understanding of Israel’s expiatory sacrifices into his comment on the continual sacrifice, obscuring the way in which Calvin understood the latter.
objective of this sweet savour was not to gratify God, observed Calvin, but rather to help the Israelites acknowledge that “better and more excellent” things were signified by these otherwise bare and empty figures, so that no one might erroneously rest in them. As such, Calvin maintained that the wine and oil betokened “the spiritual truth” that God’s people were to bring faith and repentance to the sacrifices, because these concomitants ascended to God like a gratifying aroma, rendering the sacrifices beneficial to the Israelites.13

Each Sabbath the continual sacrifice was doubled, as not one but two lambs were offered for both the morning and evening oblations. Calvin accounted for this one-day-per-week doubling of victims by stating, “it was reasonable that, as the seventh day was peculiarly dedicated to God, it should be exalted above other days by some extraordinary and distinctive mark.” The first day of every month was also elevated above the status of ordinary days—though with the exception of the first day of the seventh month, these so-called new moons, like Sabbaths, were not quite as momentous as festivals. New moons were consecrated to God so the Israelites “might more frequently have the remembrance of their religious duties renewed,” posited Calvin. As such, God commanded that greater sacrifices be offered on those occasions. In conjunction with the continual sacrifice, then, the beginning of each month was marked with a burnt offering which included two young bulls, one ram, seven lambs, and a goat (Num. 28:11-15).14 The only sorts of animals that could be used for this or any other of Israel’s sacrifices were those which God considered “clean.” Nevertheless, God did not admit all such animals to Israel’s altar. Only domestic


14 Comm. on Num. 28:9, CO 24:494; CTS 4:301.
animals were sacrificed, noted Calvin, animals which allowed themselves to be peaceably led to slaughter. Calvin undoubtedly thought such victims prefigured Christ’s unremitting obedience and patience, his unresisting self-abandonment even to death. However, new moons did not only add more and different animals to the continual sacrifice; new moons added an oblation of another kind, possessed of a different purpose. For the goat that was added to the continual sacrifice on new moons was to atone for any sins which may have been overlooked in the previous month, so that, with God’s wrath being deprecated by it, the Israelites could enter each month renewed in their surrender and devotion to him.

The first day of the seventh month was preeminent among new moons, since that was the day the Israelites celebrated the start of each new year. This celebration featured the sounding of trumpets to memorialize the Israelites before the God who so graciously claimed them. Calvin numbered the seventh new moon, known as the Feast of Trumpets, among Israel’s minor festivals. In keeping with the momentousness of this occasion, and in conjunction with the continual and other new moon sacrifices, a special burnt offering was presented to God on the seventh new moon. The offering included one bull, one ram, seven lambs, and one goat—here too, the goat was to atone for sin (Num. 29:1-6).

By this point, then, it becomes clear that Calvin envisioned the continual sacrifice as an encompassing framework for Israel’s corporate life, a framework which lent a sense of hope-filled rhythm not just to the Israelites’ days, but to their weeks, their months, and even their years. This becomes more obvious still by the fact that Calvin spoke of Israel’s

16 Comm. on Num. 28:9, CO 24:494; CTS 4:301.
three most important yearly festivals as having been added to the continual sacrifice as its concomitants, or parts, and that Calvin included these same festivals in his exposition of the continual sacrifice. These festivals are: (1) the Passover, commemorating the night in which the Israelites were protected from the last plague visited upon Egypt and delivered from bondage to a life of freedom and fellowship with God; (2) the Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths, commemorating the forty years in which God unswervingly preserved Israel’s patriarchs and matriarchs while they sojourned through the desert after their exodus from Egypt; and (3) that great, yearly provision for sin known as the Day of Atonement, which is examined at length later in this chapter. Therefore, Calvin’s following words as to the meaning and function of the Passover’s burnt offerings are applicable not just to the Feast of Tabernacle’s and the Day of Atonement’s burnt offerings, but to the continual sacrifice as well, since he viewed the burnt offerings of these festivals as additions to the continual sacrifice:

In order, then, that the reverence paid to the Passover should be increased, this extraordinary sacrifice was added to the continual one, partly that they [the Israelites] might thus be more and more stimulated to devote themselves to God; partly that they might acknowledge how familiarly he had embraced them with his favour, inasmuch as he took these offerings from their flocks and herds, and required the sacred feast to be prepared for him out of their cellars and granaries also; partly, too, that professing themselves to be worthy of eternal death, they should fly to him to ask for pardon, and at the same time should understand that there was but one way of reconciliation,…[that is] God should be propitiated by sacrifice.

For the ancient Israelites, the “use and object” of the continual sacrifice was that “the minds of the people were directed to Christ,” gathered Calvin. As such, “the profit”

---

18 Comm. on Num. 28:16, CO 24:494-95; Comm. on Num. 29:7, CO 24:497-98; CTS 4:303; Comm. on Num. 29:12, CO 24:498; CTS 4:308-9.

19 Comm. on Num. 28:16, CO 24:495; CTS 4:303.
of this since abrogated sacrifice redounds to Christians in the knowledge “that whatever was then shown under the figure [the continual sacrifice] was fulfilled in Christ.” Calvin was quite clear, however, that the continual sacrifice, in itself, was not meant to atone for sin. And if that is the case, then the continual sacrifice, in itself, was not meant to address the fact that or the manner in which Christ’s sacrifice reconciled believers to God. What, then, did Calvin think the continual sacrifice prefigured? In his view, “this daily sacrifice under the law” teaches Christians that, on account of Christ’s sacrifice, “pardon is always ready” for them. In other words, Calvin thought that the continual sacrifice prefigured the primary means by which the continuing benefits of Christ’s sacrifice are obtained, that is, the gospel.\(^\text{20}\) For Calvin believed that, like the continual sacrifice, the gospel must always be set before God’s people. Moreover, the basis for the gospel, like the continual sacrifice before it, is a deliverance and reclamation—a redemption—that has already occurred. Yet the continual sacrifice and the gospel both hearken back to a redemption which supplies a context for ongoing reconciliation between God and his people, thus calling God’s people to a posture of gratitude, devotion, and hope.

**The Sin and Guilt Sacrifices**

Calvin gave first place in his treatment on Israel’s cultic oblations to the continual sacrifice, which brought release from fear and sin by attesting to the constant preservation and ever-available pardon enjoyed by God’s people. Nevertheless, Calvin maintained that the most fundamental and formidable problems of humankind are its fallen condition and

\(^{20}\) Comm. on Exod. 29:38, *CO* 24:491; *CTS* 4:297; Comm. on 2 Cor. 5:18, *OE* 15:100-01; *CNTC* 10:76-78. When Calvin alluded to the apostle Paul while commenting on Exodus 29:38, he almost certainly had in mind 2 Corinthians 5:18, as cited by the *CO* edition (24:491n2), not 2 Corinthians 6:2, as suggested in the *CTS* edition (4:297n3).
its consequent predicament of alienation from God. With respect to the logic of salvation, therefore, the sin offering (expiationem) “held the chief place” among Israel’s sacrifices. For God “deservedly abominates the whole human race” insofar as the corruption of sin has profoundly defaced—but not utterly erased—the beloved handiwork of God in each human creature. What is more, the manifestation of this corruption continually provokes God’s wrath, understood by Calvin as the shape God’s holiness takes when that holiness is violated by and mobilized against human sin. As such, no peaceable intercourse could ever have existed between God and the Israelites had God not provided those “remedies” known as sin offerings. It ought to be grasped at the outset of this discussion that Calvin saw sin offerings as a twofold solution to a twofold problem, countering not only sin but also God’s holy hostility toward sinners. In other words, these were “expiatory sacrifices which propitiate God to men by the removal of their guilt.” That is, Israel’s sin offerings were both expiatory and propitiatory, with the former being the basis for the latter. They were expiatory in that they covered, or blotted out, sin and guilt, and propitiatory in that they appeased, or placated, God’s judicial wrath toward the person or persons for whom they were presented, thereby removing all impediments to the relationship between God and his people.\footnote{Preface to Comm. on Lev. 4:3, CO 24:516; CTS 4:340.}

As seen in the previous section of this chapter, sin offerings were a part of Israel’s regular cycle of worship, in that a sin offering was made for all Israelites in general every new moon, Passover, Feast of Tabernacles, and Day of Atonement. But this section looks beyond the regular and the general to examine Calvin’s treatment of the sin offerings that were made for specified and usually personal transgressions, beginning with the offerings
made by those who “sinned through ignorance or inconsiderateness.” Calvin gathered that the author of this text was not referring to sins resulting from just any sort of ignorance. Instead, the author was referring to sins in which sinners took no heed of, or felt no compunction for, wrongdoing, “to those sudden falls, wherein the infirmity of the flesh so stifles the reason and judgment as to blind the sinner.” Sins of this sort are what Paul spoke of in Galatians 6:1, posited Calvin. They occur when one is ‘overtaken in a fault’ due to the lack of consideration for the weakness of fallen human nature or the strength of temptation. The relative inadvertency of these sins allowed the psalmist David to contrast them with סדים (zedim), or sins of presumption, since the latter betray something more overtly criminal: a deliberate, obstinate pride before God. Yet the lack of flagrancy in the former betrayed a different danger, a danger which accentuates a crucial insight into fallen human nature, that is, God’s people are capable of abandoning, even opposing, God’s perfect righteousness under a cloak of self-deception, and are thus incapable of easily or accurately quantifying sins of the more subtle and insidious sort.

The rite of presentation and the kind of animal that was presented for sins of error differed somewhat depending on whether the sacrifice was atoning for a priest (Lev. 4:3-21).

---

22 Preface to Comm. on Lev. 4:3, CO 24:516; CTS 4:340.

23 Preface to Comm. on Lev. 4:3, CO 24:517; CTS 4:341.

24 Preface to Comm. on Lev. 4:3, CO 24:517; CTS 4:341; Comm. on Gal. 6:1, OE 17:137.11-20; CNTC 11:108.

25 Preface to Comm. on Lev. 4:3, CO 24:517; CTS 4:341; Comm. on Ps. 19:12-13, CO 31:204-6; CTS 8:327-32.
12), the whole congregation of Israel (Lev. 4:13-21), a ruler (Lev. 4:22-26), or a common person (Lev. 4:27-35). In every instance, however, the person or persons who presented the victim laid hands upon its head right before it was slain. This imposition of hands was not just a sign of the animal’s consecration, but also an indication of its being appointed a sin offering (piaculum). In other words, the victim was thereby made a legal substitute for the person or persons for whom it was presented, being burdened with the guilt from their transgression of the law for the very purpose of incurring God’s judgement in accordance with the curse of the law. Thus Calvin remarked:

There is not, then, the least doubt but that they transferred their guilt and whatever penalties they had deserved to the victims, in order that they might be reconciled to God. Now, since this promise [of God’s acceptance of the sacrifices] could not have been at all delusive, it must be concluded that in the ancient sacrifices there was a price of satisfaction which should release them from guilt and blame in the judgement of God.

And again:

Now, the imposition of hands in the sacrifices was not only a symbol of presentation, but also a testimony of guilt transferred to the victim…. Hence the name of piaculum; because it sustained the curse of God, and was substituted in the sinner’s stead, who disburdens himself upon it of whatever exposed him to the judgment of God.

An oft-repeated phrase can be found in Leviticus chapter four’s description of the various rites, animals, and persons presenting offerings for sins of error, observed Calvin. That phrase says, ‘the priest shall make an atonement (expiabit) for him [the presenter of the offering], and his iniquity shall be forgiven him’ (cf. vv. 20, 26, 31, and 35). The aim

26 Calvin briefly commented on these differences and the reasons for them under the headings of Leviticus 4:3, 5, 13, and 22, CO 24:517-19; CTS 4:342-45.

27 Comm. on Lev. 1:1, CO 24:507; CTS 4:324.

28 Comm. on Lev. 8:10, CO 25:134; CTS 5:422.
of this refrain was to assure these transgressors that God would be favourable (*propitium*) to them. Calvin considered such assurance essential to true piety, as without it diffidence and doubt may hinder God’s people from freely and confidently calling upon him. But Calvin insisted that while it was good and right for the ancient Israelites to be assured of having been reconciled to God, the proper basis for such assurance was not that their sin offerings were inherently or necessarily efficacious. To be sure, Calvin believed that the promise of reconciliation was annexed to these sacrifices, and that the promise rendered these sacrifices “certain and infallible” symbols, symbols which pictured and confirmed, or signed and sealed, God’s gracious pardon and acceptance. This intimate association between Israel’s sacrifices and the reality to which they pointed, though, did not suggest of an absolute identification, or transmutation, of symbol and reality. It thus follows that the promise annexed to these sacrifices could be apprehended only as the sacrifices were exercises of faith and repentance. For Calvin, then, the sins of the ancient Israelites were expiated in a sacramental manner through their sin offerings, in largely the same manner as the sins of Christians are now “sacramentally washed away” through baptism.

---


31 Comm. on Lev. 4:22, *CO* 24:519; CTS 4:345; Comm. on Lev. 1:1, *CO* 24:507; CTS 4:324-25. These comments accord well with Calvin’s more formal descriptions of a sacrament in the *Institutes*: “It seems to me that a simple and proper definition would be to say that it is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men. Here is another briefer definition: one may call it a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of piety toward him” (*Inst.* 4.14.1, *OS* 5:259.2-10; LCC 2:1277). Calvin maintained that the sacraments neither contain more nor add anything to these promises, since the substance or reality of the promises, like the sacraments, is nothing less or other than Christ himself. Instead, Christ is offered in these
The nature of the relationship between Israel’s sacrifices and the reality to which they pointed is also evident in the fact that the sin offering required of a common person under ordinary circumstances—one female goat, unblemished and in its first year of life (Lev. 4:27-28)—could be substituted with two turtledoves or pigeons, or even with one-tenth of an ephah—approximately 2 ½ dry quarts—of fine flour (Lev. 5:7, 11). God will make no concessions that mitigate his holiness or its demand for retributive justice upon human sin and guilt. However, God will make concessions to ameliorate the burden of a repentant commoner’s poverty. And as God deigned in the circumstance of poverty to be propitiated with so meager an oblation—provided that this oblation was properly offered through a priest—Calvin argued “that God’s only design was to show the one true means of reconciliation to the people, that they might have recourse to the mediator [Christ] and his sacrifice.”32 In other words, Calvin believed that while each different kind of offering was invested with a relatively unique and profoundly beneficial didactic purpose, not one of those offerings possessed any inherent redemptive value. He stressed:

We must remember, then, that the victims of themselves were of no importance, and yet that the ancient people were exercised in these ceremonies to teach them promises and received by the faith they elicit, while the sacraments, in turn, deepen and strengthen that faith by sharpening and amplifying the promises to which it corresponds. Therefore, to discourage the notion that sacraments are valid or effectual without respect to the promise of divine grace or the faith it elicits, a notion Calvin saw as quasi-magical, he chided: “But what is a sacrament received apart from faith but the most certain ruin of the church?” (Inst. 4.14.14, OS 5:271.28-30; LCC 2:1289). However, it is rather difficult to conclude that the relationship Calvin envisioned among promise, faith, and sacrament is not seriously compromised by his espousal of infant baptism. For in infant baptism, as he understood it, a sacrament is indeed received apart from faith. A penetrating analysis of this apparent non sequitur in Calvin’s thought may be found in Victor A. Shepherd, The Nature and Function of Faith in the Theology of John Calvin. Macon, GA.: Mercer University Press, 1983; repr. Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004, pp. 207-18.

32 Comm. on Lev. 5:6, CO 24:523; CTS 4:351.
that God can only be appeased by the payment of a ransom.\textsuperscript{33}

Some sense of the didactic purpose behind the different ransoms which comprised Israel’s sin offerings can be discerned from Calvin’s remarks on the sacrifice required for what may be called sins of trespass. According to Leviticus 5:14-19, offenses of this kind included inadvertently withholding that which rightfully belonged to God—such as vows, tithes, and firstfruits—or carelessly transgressing a command of the law. Calvin observed that persons committing such trespasses were to present a male goat for their offering, not a female goat, which was the normal offering for sins of error. That sins of trespass called for greater sacrifices suggests that “punishment” was “awarded to a heavier offense,” said Calvin.\textsuperscript{34} He believed that this observation was substantiated by Leviticus 6:1-7, in which a male goat was also the required sacrifice for sins of trespass. But unlike Leviticus 5:14-19, Leviticus 6:1-7 is not concerned with trespasses caused by mere heedlessness. Rather, this text “prescribes the mode of reconciliation” for much graver trespasses, trespasses in which someone “willfully and designedly offended God.”\textsuperscript{35} The trespass Leviticus 6:1-7 explicitly cites is that of thievery. Yet while this text cites only flagrant transgressions of the Decalogue’s prohibition against stealing, argued Calvin, Moses “teaches according to his usual manner, by synecdoche what must be done in the case of other [similarly grave] offences also.”\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{33} Comm. on Lev. 5:6, \textit{CO} 24:523; CTS 4:352.
\textsuperscript{34} Comm. on Lev. 5:14, \textit{CO} 24:524; CTS 4:353.
\textsuperscript{35} Comm. on Lev. 6:1, \textit{CO} 24:525-26; CTS 4:356.
\textsuperscript{36} Comm. on Lev. 6:1, \textit{CO} 24:527; CTS 4:358.
Calvin deemed Israel’s sin offerings to be a field of inquiry rich in theological and pastoral significance. What is more, he felt that Israel’s sin offerings were highly relevant to several sixteenth-century concerns. First, Christians who had willfully and designedly offended God need not doubt that God would be propitious to them, provided they make application to the sacrifice of Christ. To think or teach otherwise would, in effect, imply that Israel’s sin offerings were “more than delusive,” contended Calvin. That is because Israel’s sin offerings, which, of course, had a provision for such offenses, “had no other object than to be testimonies and mirrors of the grace which was finally manifested to us in Christ.”\textsuperscript{37} To be sure, Calvin deemed using God’s clemency as a license for sin to be a hazardous presumption, and warned against it accordingly. At the same time he called for prudence, because if Christians should become so unduly rigorous as to imagine that God is impervious when it comes to forgiving voluntary sins, then the hope of salvation would be overthrown for even the choicest of them. The Novatianists and the Donatists troubled the early church with immoderate severity, and many sixteenth-century Anabaptists were emulating that severity, observed Calvin.\textsuperscript{38} This severity, under the guise of true holiness, feeds pride, blunts consciences, and dissuades honest self-examination, he explained. It is therefore an “imposture of the devil,” which produces “the grossest hypocrites.” The truth of the matter, counseled Calvin, is that the greater the gains one makes in purity, the more

\textsuperscript{37} Comm. on Lev. 6:1, CO 24:526; CTS 4:356-57.

\textsuperscript{38} Comm. on Lev. 6:1, CO 24:526; CTS 4:356-57. For more on the similarities Calvin perceived between the Novatianists, Donatists, and at least certain Anabaptists, see \textit{Inst.} 4.1.13, \textit{OS} 5:16-18; LCC 2:1026-28; \textit{Inst.} 4.1.23, \textit{OS} 5:26; LCC 2:1036-37.
one realizes that this goal is still far from being reached. Directing this issue back to the sacrifice of Christ, and the sacrifices of Israel that prefigured it, Calvin declared:

[U]nless we would purposely close the gate of salvation against us, we must hold that God is placable towards all who trust that their sin is forgiven them by the sacrifice of Christ; for God is neither changed, nor is our condition worse than that of the fathers, whereas under the law God appointed sacrifices for the expiation even of voluntary offences.

Second, Calvin maintained that Israel’s sin offerings refuted the sixteenth-century Roman church’s teachings on penitential satisfactions. Based on the “diabolical figment” that Christ’s sacrifice fully remits the guilt of sin yet not the temporal punishment for sin demanded by divine justice, said Calvin, Rome claimed that penitent sinners must satisfy their debt to God with meritorious works. To help penitents in this task, he added, Rome had “invented works of supererogation, to be meritorious in redeeming from punishment; hence, too, [the doctrine of] purgatory has come into existence.” The sixteenth-century Roman church’s official, unequivocal affirmation of such penitential satisfactions can be found in Canon Thirty from the sixth session of the Council of Trent, which reads:

If any one saith, that, after the grace of justification has been received, to every penitent sinner the guilt is remitted, and the debt of eternal punishment is blotted out in such wise, that there remains not any debt of temporal punishment to be discharged either in this world, or in the next in purgatory, before the entrance to the kingdom of heaven can be opened; let him be anathema.

39 Comm. on Lev. 6:1, CO 24:526; CTS 4:357.
40 Comm. on Lev. 6:1, CO 24:526; CTS 4:357.
41 Comm. on Lev. 6:1, CO 24:528; CTS 4:360-1.
Moreover, Canon Twelve from the fourteenth session of the Council of Trent asserts:

If any one saith, that God always remits the whole punishment together with the guilt, and that the satisfaction of penitents is no other than the faith whereby they apprehend that Christ has satisfied for them; let him be anathema.43

The sin offerings of the ancient Israelites, countered Calvin, not only expiated all guilt and uncleanness, they also fully propitiated God’s wrath by satisfying the demands of divine justice, cleansing the consciences of offenders so they need not be troubled by the unsettling prospect of incurring further punishment or the impossibility of delivering themselves from such punishment. As signs of both God’s favour upon the Israelites and their faith and repentance toward God, these sin offerings were not intended to call forth supplementation by human achievement. Rather, they were intended to incite confidence in and gratitude for God’s grace. And because Calvin considered Israel’s sin offerings to have had no other object than to be testimonials and mirrors of the grace manifested to us in Christ, he deemed Rome’s teaching on penitential satisfactions to be nothing less than a biblically untenable, pastorally cruel, impugning of Christ’s all-sufficient self-offering, concluding that:

[When you have studied all the writings of Moses, and diligently weighed whatsoever is revealed in the law as to the means of appeasing God, you will find that the Jews were everywhere brought back to sacrifices. Now, it is certain that whatever is attributed to sacrifices is so much taken away from men’s own works. But if it were not God’s intention to tie down his ancient people to outward ceremonies, it follows that it is only by the one mediator, through the outpouring of his blood, that men are absolved from all liability either to guilt or punishment, so as to be restored to favour by God.]44

43 The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Ecumenical Council of Trent, 110. For more on this issue read Chapter Eight and Nine, as well as Canons Thirteen through Fifteen of Trent’s fourteenth session, 102-4, 110.

44 Comm. on Lev. 6:1, CO 24:529; CTS 4:361.
The third way in which Calvin saw Israel’s sin offerings bearing upon sixteenth-century concerns is closely connected to the second. It was derived from the promise in Leviticus 6:7, which says that ‘the priest shall make an atonement [expiabit]’ to God on behalf of the offender, and his or her trespass shall be forgiven.\(^{45}\) As previously observed, this same promise is found several times in Leviticus chapter four, though in that context, with regard to sins of error (Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, and 35). In Leviticus chapter four, thought Calvin, this refrain was meant to assure the Israelites that God had been made favourable (propitium) to them on account of the sacrifice rendered by the priest, lest diffidence and doubt should prevent them from freely and confidently calling upon God.\(^{46}\) According to Calvin, Leviticus 6:7 highlighted another facet in the meaning of this promise. From this frequently recurring expression, he said, “we must learn…that expiation was founded on the priesthood.” To keep the Israelites from imagining that they brought “from their own stores (domo) the price of their redemption,” he continued, “Moses constantly inculcates that it is the peculiar office of the priest to appease God, and to blot out sin by expiation.” In other words, Israel’s priesthood and sacrifices were inextricably bound together, with the efficacy of the sacrifices grounded upon the God-given legitimacy of the priesthood. The same is undoubtedly true of Christ’s priesthood and sacrifice, thought Calvin. What was true for God’s people before Christ’s coming, therefore, remains true after it. That is, the gracious pardon of God is always and ever attributed to priestly sacrifice, and in turn, is never attributable to the works of its beneficiaries. In short, God’s pardon can never be achieved, only received. Consequently, Calvin claimed that the Roman church “foolishly

\(^{45}\) Comm. on Lev. 6:7, CO 24:529; CTS 4:361.

\(^{46}\) Comm. on Lev. 4:22, CO 24:519; CTS 4:344.
and falsely invented the notion” that its people might—in some sense or measure—merit what God gives freely in Christ.47

The Great Yearly Sacrifice

When Moses gave instruction in Numbers 29:7-11 as to the burnt offerings which were rendered to God on the Day of Atonement as an especial addendum to the continual sacrifice, he made only cursory mention of that yearly, singularly significant expiation of sin from which the Day of Atonement derives its name.48 Leviticus chapter sixteen holds a separate exposition of that expiatory sacrifice, however, an exposition Calvin described as copious, clear, and distinctive. To Calvin’s mind there was good reason for this sort of exposition. Whereas sacrifices for sin were offered throughout the year, he explained, the sacrifice made at the end of the year on the Day of Atonement was an even “more solemn rite.” That is because the purpose of this expiatory sacrifice was to “ratify” all others, and to “arouse the people’s minds,” that they might diligently seek God’s pardon of their sins throughout the coming year.49 What is more, Calvin thought the great yearly sacrifice for sin that took place on the Day of Atonement received relatively privileged treatment from Moses because it gave God’s people “a most unmistakable sign of that atonement [that is, the atonement of Christ], whereby, in the fullness of time, they were to be [ultimately and definitively] reconciled to God.”50

47 Comm. on Lev. 6:7, CO 24:529; CTS 4:361.
48 Comm. on Num. 29:7, CO 24:497-98; CTS 4:308.
49 Comm. on Lev. 16:1, CO 24:500; CTS 4:313-14.
50 Comm. on Lev. 16:29, CO 24:505; CTS 4:321.
One of the most unique and significant features of the Day of Atonement was that it afforded the only occasion when Israel’s high priest was bidden to pass through the veil in the tabernacle and enter that most holy of places, the holy of holies, where he sprinkled blood upon the lid of the ark of the covenant, the so-called mercy seat. That Israel’s high priest was permitted to enter the holy of holies just once each year, in order to preserve a reverence proportionate to the event, was so terrifically important to Calvin that he called it “the sum of the law.” For any other expiation of sin, he argued, sprinkling blood on the bronze altar in the court outside the tabernacle gave sufficient testimony of reconciliation. The expiation that occurred on the Day of Atonement, however, “more greatly influenced the people’s minds.” For Calvin, the heightened influence was due to the fact that in “this sacrifice, which they saw only once at the end of the year, the one and perpetual sacrifice offered by God’s Son was more clearly represented.” The entrance of Israel’s high priest into the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement is “elegantly” alluded to by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, instructed Calvin, so that by this ancient type, believers might understand that Christ’s high-priestly sacrifice, whereby God was definitively propitiated, “was not to be often repeated.”

Commenting on Hebrews 9:11, Calvin wrote:

We must carefully note the particulars in which he compares Christ with the ancient high priest. He had said that the high priest alone went into the sanctuary once a year with blood to make atonement for sins. In this respect Christ is like that old high priest because he alone has the dignity and the office of priest. There is, however, this difference that he brings with him eternal benefits which bring about perpetuity for his priesthood. There is this second likeness between the old high priest and ours that both go into the holy of holies through the sanctuary; but they differ in this that Christ alone has entered heaven by the temple of his body. The fact that the holy of holies was opened only once a year to the high priest to make solemn atonement was a vague prefiguring of the unique sacrifice of Christ. That single entrance was common to both but to the earthly it was every year but to the heavenly it is forever to the end of the world. The offering of blood is

51 Comm. on Lev. 16:2, CO 24:501; CTS 4:314.
common to both but there is a great difference in the blood because Christ did not offer the blood of beasts but of himself. Atonement is common to both but the old legal atonement, because it was ineffective, was repeated every year while the atonement made by Christ is valid forever and is the ground of our eternal salvation.\textsuperscript{52}

In preparation for the performance of his duties on the Day of Atonement, Israel’s high priest was required first to bathe with water, and then to don the distinctive garments of that office (Lev. 16:4). To fulfill the office of mediator between God and humans, one must be completely free from impurity and sin, maintained Calvin. And because no fallen human could meet this qualification, Israel’s priests were types, provisionally set in place of, in order to point ahead to, an anticipated reality, the “true and substantial” mediator to come. Therefore, this ablution with water exhibited that neither Aaron nor any of his sons was “the genuine propitiator,” since one who needed purification could not purify others. Furthermore, every time a priest laid aside “his own garments, and assumed those which were holy and separated from common use, it was equivalent to declaring openly that he represented another person.”\textsuperscript{53}

The high priest’s preparation for expiating the sins of the Israelites on the Day of Atonement involved still “a third symbol.” Before rendering a sacrifice for the sins of the people, he was commanded to sacrifice a bull for his own sins. Then, the high priest was to pass through the veil in the tabernacle into the holy of holies, where he would sprinkle the bull’s blood upon the mercy seat, and on the ground before the mercy seat (Lev. 16:6, 11-14). Unlike the aforementioned preparations, this “symbol” was unique to the Day of Atonement. Yet together with the aforementioned preparations, thought Calvin, it was to

\textsuperscript{52} Comm. on Heb. 9:11, \textit{OE} 19:138.26-139.10; \textit{CNTC} 12:119.

\textsuperscript{53} Comm. on Lev. 16:3, \textit{CO} 24:501; CTS 4:315.
direct the Israelites then, and should continue directing Christians now, to the priesthood of Christ:

Thus then the holy fathers were reminded, that under the image of a mortal man, another mediator was promised, who, for the reconciliation of the human race, should present himself before God with perfect and more than angelical purity…. [F]or if the priest, both chosen by God, and graced with the sacred unction, was still unworthy on the score of his uncleanness to come near the altar, what dignity could be discoverable in the people? And hence to us nowadays also very useful instruction is derived; viz., that when the question arises how God is to be propitiated, we are not to look this way and that way; since out of Christ there is no purity and innocence which can satisfy the justice of God.54

The sacrifice made for the sins of the people was unique to the Day of Atonement as well. It was, in fact, the raison d’être for this festival, and the climax of Israel’s annual expiatory rites. For this sacrifice the high priest was to take from the community of Israel two goats and present them to God at the entrance of the sanctuary. One goat was brought into the sanctuary, slain, and offered on the altar as an expiatory sacrifice according to the normal provisions of the law, except in this case the high priest carried some of the goat’s blood into the holy of holies, as he did with that of the bull, and sprinkled it on and before the mercy seat. When he exited the holy of holies, however, the high priest did something not simply exceptional but unprecedented. Placing his hands upon the head of the second, living goat, the high priest confessed over the goat all of Israel’s sins, iniquities, and acts of rebellion against God. This living goat was then driven out of the community of Israel and into the desolate wilderness (Lev. 16:7-10, 15-22). What is presented here, remarked Calvin, is “a twofold mode of expiation,” and the fulfillment of both its aspects has been manifested in Christ. For Christ was at once the lamb of God, whose self-sacrifice on the

54 Comm. on Lev. 16:3, CO 24:502; CTS 4:315-16.
altar of the cross “blotted out the sins of the world,” and an “offscouring,” being rejected and cast out by his own as a guilt-laden, unclean thing.\textsuperscript{55}

Because Calvin considered the latter aspect of this twofold mode of expiation able to shed more light upon Christ’s sacrifice, he was primarily interested at this point in the second goat. If the first goat testifies that “satisfaction for sins” was in fact accomplished by Christ’s death, granted Calvin, then a rather subtle, speculative interpretation could be advanced concerning the second goat, namely, that departing alive, it prefigured Christ’s resurrection. Calvin, however, espoused an interpretation he deemed to be “more simple and certain.” The second goat, like the first, was an atonement for sin, he argued. Having been burdened with the guilt of the Israelites and then cast from their presence, however, the second goat was meant to help the Israelites grasp “that their sins were put away and vanished.”\textsuperscript{56} In other words, the second goat assured the Israelites that their sin and guilt had not only been borne, but had also been borne away.

Based upon this interpretation suggested by Calvin, the second goat was the only expiatory sacrifice contained in the law that did not involve shedding the victim’s blood. He was quick to add, however, that this interpretation does not “contradict the statement of the Apostle,” presumably in Hebrews 9:22, which says that according to the law there can be no forgiveness of sins without the shedding of blood. That is because the efficacy to expiate sins, and thus propitiate God, depended on the shed blood of the first goat; but since these two goats were offered together as one sacrifice, argued Calvin, that efficacy

\textsuperscript{55} Comm. on Lev. 16:7, CO 24:502; CTS 4:316.

\textsuperscript{56} Comm. on Lev. 16:7, CO 24:502; CTS 4:316.
was by no means separated from the second goat. Consequently, if there was anything problematic to be found here, it was not with the “bloodless sacrifice” of the second goat, but in the ostensible absurdity “that an innocent animal should be substituted in the place of men” for the purpose of being “exposed to the curse of God.” Even so, Calvin thought this was exactly what God had prescribed in the law, in order that “believers might learn that they were in no wise competent to bear his judgment, nor could be delivered from it otherwise than by the transfer of their guilt and crime.” For insofar as sinners feel within themselves the sense of being overwhelmed by this judgement, or more precisely, by the judicial “wrath of God,” they vainly search for ways to lighten or jettison this burden. To Calvin’s mind, then, the second goat offered on the Day of Atonement served to forestall this futile and spiritually fatal search by providing a powerful testimony to the fact that:

[N]o absolution is to be hoped for save by the interposition of a satisfaction; and it is not lawful to obtrude this according to man’s fancy, or, in their foolish arrogance, to seek in themselves for the price whereby their sins may be compensated for.

To be sure, Calvin found in the second goat, the so-called scapegoat, an extremely stark and unsettling object lesson. For by being made “the outcast of God’s wrath,” so as to be “devoted to his curse,” the second goat ought to remind God’s people of “how very detestable” their iniquity is to God, “so that they might be affected with increasing dread, whenever they considered what they deserved.” Calvin was convinced that the sin-vexed consciences of fallen humans cannot be given true and lasting consolation by diluting the gravity of sin or the reality that sin necessarily grieves and offends a holy God. However,

57 Comm. on Lev. 16:7, CO 24:502; CTS 4:316-17; Comm. on Lev. 16:20, CO 24:504; CTS 4:319.

Calvin was also convinced that here, where God’s holy hostility was militated against sin with such great intensity, “Christ’s inestimable love towards us shines more brightly, who did not disdain to go out of the city that he might be made an outcast (rejectamentum) for us, and might undergo the curse due to us.”

In short, Calvin deemed the Day of Atonement’s twofold mode of expiation to be chief among the law’s offerings for sin in terms of the clarity and poignancy with which it foreshadowed the sacrifice of Christ, the sacrifice whose meaning was later elucidated in key texts of the New Testament, such as 2 Corinthians 5:19 and Galatians 3:13. The first of these Pauline texts, 2 Corinthians 5:19, was thought to possess descriptive import because it addresses the *that* and the *why* of Christ’s sacrifice. This text’s opening phrase, which declares that “God was in Christ,” leaves no room for suspicions of a dichotomous attitude or intention in the Godhead concerning the reconciliation of sinners, as if Christ’s sacrifice were the attempt of a loving and merciful Son to mollify a cold, cruel, or distant Father. Rather, Calvin understood this phrase to mean that there is nothing contrary to the will of the Father in the ministrations of his Son, and perhaps more profound still, that in the person of his Son, the Father deigned to be not only with but for needy and rebellious sinners. Calvin elaborated:

Paul expresses himself in this way so that we may learn to be satisfied with Christ because in him we find God the Father also, as he communicates himself to us by his Son. Thus what he is saying in this phrase really amounts to this, ‘Whereas God had been before far distant from us, he has drawn near to us in Christ, and so Christ has been made to us the true Immanuel and his advent is the drawing near of God to men.’

---


60 Comm. on Lev. 16:20, CO 24:504; CTS 4:320.

61 Comm. on 2 Cor. 5:19, OE 15:101.20-25; CNTC 10:78.
What is more, Paul promptly declared in the second phrase of 2 Corinthians 5:19 that the reconciliation of the world is the end, the purpose, for God being in Christ. Thus Calvin said that this text’s second phrase deals with the work of Christ (officium Christi), that work which ultimately was to be “our propitiation” before God. In other words, Paul moved beyond the fact that the Father was in the Son to the reason why the Father was in the Son. In Ephesians 1:4, Paul taught that the elect have been loved by God from before the foundation of the world. Yet according to Calvin, the reconciliation Paul wrote about in 2 Corinthians 5:19 presupposes God’s alienation from and hostility towards sinners—even elect sinners—apart from, and therefore prior to, the remission of their sins. Acutely aware that cause must precede effect, Calvin gave this response as to why, in Christ, God had drawn near to a world with which he was embattled:

My answer is that we were loved from before the foundation of the world, but not apart from Christ. But I do agree that the love of God was first in time and in order also as regards God; but, as regards us, his love has its foundation in the sacrifice of Christ. For when we think of God apart from a mediator, we can only conceive of him as being angry with us, but when a mediator is interposed between us, we know that he is pacified towards us. But since it is also needful for us to know that Christ came forth to us from the fountain of God’s free mercy, Scripture explicitly teaches both; the Father’s wrath has been placated by the Son’s sacrifice and thus the Son was offered for the expiation of men’s sins, because God has had mercy upon them and has made this sacrifice the pledge of his receiving them into his favour.62

Calvin’s concern at this point was to explicate the relationship he saw in Scripture between the holy love and holy wrath of God as revealed in the sacrifice of Christ. Calvin maintained that reconciliation is grounded in God’s love for the elect in Christ even prior to their subsequent fall into sin, love resulting in and unambiguously demonstrated by the incarnation of Christ. Yet Christ’s sacrificial death demonstrates not only the love of God

for elect sinners but also God’s hostility towards them. That God should exhibit both love and wrath simultaneously was not at all problematic to Calvin. On the contrary, he stated:

[T]he love with which God embraced us ‘before the creation of the world’ was established and grounded in Christ [Eph. 1:4-5]. These things are plain and in agreement with Scripture, and beautifully harmonize those passages in which it is said that God declared his love toward us in giving his only begotten Son to die [John 3:16]; and, conversely, that God was our enemy before he was again made favorable to us by Christ’s death [Rom. 5:10].

In other words, Calvin believed that elect sinners are at once the objects of God’s love and wrath until their sin is atoned for and they are at length united to Christ through faith. That being said, Christ’s atoning sacrifice did not bring about God’s love for them. Rather, God’s love for them brought about Christ’s atoning sacrifice. Quoting Augustine, Calvin wrote:

The fact that we were reconciled through Christ’s death must not be understood as if his Son reconciled us to him that he might now begin to love those whom he had hated. Rather, we have already been reconciled to him who loves us, with whom we were enemies on account of sin…. 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, he knew how, at the same time, to hate in each one of us what we had made, and to love what he had made.

Finally, just as Calvin found 2 Corinthians 5:19 possessed of descriptive import as to the that and the why of Christ’s sacrifice, he deemed Galatians 3:13 similarly equipped to elucidate the still more profound how of Christ’s sacrifice—that is, how the atonement of Christ is able to render repentant, believing sinners justified, or rightly related, to God. In Galatians 3:13, Paul declared that Christ redeemed God’s people from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for them. According to Calvin, Paul meant that Christ, by virtue

---

63 Inst. 2.16.4, OS 3:485.8-15; LCC 1:506.

of his union with God’s people, kept in their place God’s will and command as expressed in the law, and then, in that same vicarious manner, Christ sustained the penalty due them for their transgression of the law—with Christ’s keeping of the law and suffering its curse being but two facets of one perfect, all-encompassing act of obedience. Stated negatively, this union between Christ and believers affords the purging or remitting—the expiation—of their sins, and thus the propitiation of God. Stated positively, it affords the imputation of all Christ’s benefits. Stated plainly, therefore, this union with Christ provides the basis for believers’ acceptance by God. It seems quite fitting, then, that a section on Calvin and the Day of Atonement should end with this, a rhetorical flourish from his commentary on Galatians 3:13 concerning the glorious enigma that is the cross of Christ:

But how does it happen, someone may object, that a beloved Son is cursed by his Father? I reply, there are two things to be considered, not only in the person of Christ, but even in his human nature. The one is that he was the unspotted Lamb of God, full of blessing and grace. The other is that he took our place and thus became a sinner and subject to the curse, not in himself indeed, but in us; yet in such a way that it was necessary for him to act in our name. He could not be outside God’s grace, and yet he endured his wrath. For how could he reconcile him to us if he regarded the Father as an enemy and was hated by him? Therefore the will of the Father always reposed in him. Again, how could he have freed us from the wrath of God if he had not transferred it from us to himself? Therefore he was smitten for our sins and knew God as an angry judge. This is the foolishness of the cross and the wonder of angels, which not only exceeds but swallows up all the wisdom of the world.65

The Sacrifices of Gratitude and Piety

Numerous “theories of the atonement” have been produced throughout the history of Christian thought, each tending to emphasize one particular aspect of Christ’s work of reconciliation while downplaying or even denying others. Stephen Edmondson maintains

65 Comm. on Gal. 3:13, OE 16:70.36-71.14; CNTC 11:55.
that scholars of Christian thought have commonly discerned one of two basic orientations in each of these theories, and thus found that each theory comports with one of two broad models. The first model consists of “objective” theories of the atonement, that is, theories in which Christ’s work of reconciliation is directed first and foremost at God. The classic representative of this model is Anselm’s “satisfaction” theory. The second model consists of “subjective” theories of the atonement, which is to say, theories wherein Christ’s work of reconciliation is directed first and foremost at humankind. The classic representative of this model is Peter Abelard’s “moral influence” theory.66

Edmondson’s claim that scholars of Christian thought have traditionally classified theories of the atonement into two basic types is perhaps somewhat tenuous. In his classic study, Gustaf Aulén says that theories of the atonement in the history of Christian thought are of three main types.67 Benjamin Warfield observes that these various theories fit most naturally into five types.68 John McIntyre adduces twelve types, and H. D. McDonald still more.69 However, Edmondson is absolutely right to claim there is no evidence that Calvin saw the atonement’s objective and subjective aspects in “stark, oppositional terms.” Quite the opposite, argues Edmondson:

[T]he subjective and objective effectiveness of Christ’s priestly work are intertwined in Calvin’s dealings with this subject. It is from the objective efficacy of Christ’s atoning death that its subjective power to move believers arises. Because Christ, and Christ alone, could and did accomplish our reconciliation to God, the chosen are drawn to him in faith; but the power of Christ’s death to turn away God’s wrath and open the way for relationship with God is empty unless it is coupled with an effect on the chosen, taking away their fear of God’s anger and leading them into God’s parental embrace. We must remember that the context for Christ’s work as Mediator is the covenant relationship that God desires with the elect, and this relationship cannot be enacted simply by Christ’s accomplishment of it, for it also must include the participation of God’s covenant partners within it.  

Here Edmondson supplies a generally accurate description of Calvin’s thought on Christ’s priestly work, albeit with one important proviso. Although Calvin may have seen God’s covenant with the elect as the context for Christ’s priestly work, a covenant, which is a structural entity by definition, does not get to the heart of the reason as to why Calvin viewed the objective and subjective dimensions of that work as being intertwined: Spirit-wrought, faith-appropriated, union with Christ. In other words, Edmondson misses the central issue at hand by saying only that the subjective elements of Christ’s priestly work are enacted by the elect participating in God’s covenant with them. In Calvin’s view, the subjective dimension of Christ’s priestly work is enacted by the elect participating in the person and life of Christ, as the elect can only receive, experience, and respond to God’s covenant with them as they do so in, through, and with the high priestly mediator of that covenant.

To be sure, Calvin regarded sin as the initial cause of alienation between God and humankind. However, Calvin did not see the primary impediment to God’s reconciliation

---

70 Edmondson, Calvin’s Christology, 111.

71 One preeminent Calvin scholar charges Edmondson, along with several others, of “denigrating the importance of union with Christ” for Calvin. See Charles Partee, The Theology of John Calvin (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 162.
with sinners as their sin, but as God’s judgement, or holy wrath, upon that sin. Therefore, as the nature of this alienation required something greater and more basic than the merely subjective, Calvin considered the first and foremost effects of Israel’s sacrifices, and thus of Christ’s sacrifice, to be objective in that they were directed primarily toward God. Yet Calvin believed the objective effects of these sacrifices to be intimately and inextricably joined to their subjective effects upon the elect, who have been loved, judged, pardoned, and accepted by God due to their union with Christ, so that through faith they participate by grace in Christ’s filial relationship with the Father. With respect to the objective and subjective dimensions of the priestly work of reconciliation, then, Calvin’s thought is far more integrative than dichotomous. That is why Calvin considered true piety impossible apart from, or without being informed by, atonement. Both the integrative impulse in his thought and the subjective dimension of sacrifice will become clearer still by examining the second aspect of what Calvin called the “twofold division” in Israel’s sacrifices, that is, by turning from Israel’s expiatory sacrifices to those sacrifices that Calvin referred to as testimonies of gratitude and piety.72

**The Grain Offerings**

Belonging to this second aspect of Calvin’s twofold division in Israel’s sacrifices were the grain offerings. These “were not bloody sacrifices, nor offerings of animals, but

72 Preface to Comm. on Exod. 29:38, CO 24:490; CTS 4:295; Comm. on Lev. 1:1, CO 24:507; CTS 4:323; Preface to Comm. on Lev. 4:3, CO 24:516; CTS 4:340. Speaking of the second aspect of Israel’s sacrifices in the three texts cited here, Calvin declared, in turn, that they were “testimonies of gratitude,” that they were “to testify their piety,” and that they were “testimonies of gratitude and exercises of piety.”
only of cakes and oil,” he noted. Grain offerings were presented on behalf of the whole nation with every continual sacrifice and public peace offering. They were also rendered on behalf of individuals, either by themselves or with private, voluntary peace offerings. Grain offerings, however, were not expiatory. Rather, they were testimonies of a person’s or a people’s total consecration to God in response to the expiation of sin and guilt. Such being the case, grain offerings were not rendered in conjunction with sacrifices for sin.

Regardless of the occasion and the person or persons on whose behalf the grain offerings were rendered, grain offerings could be rendered only through Israel’s priests. Of course, this was true of all Israel’s sacrifices, and Calvin never tired of pointing that out, as doing so allowed him to underscore the implications of the relationship between priesthood and sacrifice, and thus between priesthood and worship in general. Only the hands of Israel’s priests had been consecrated so as to be made full, as it were, with the worship of God’s people. And it is only Christ, the one, eternal high priest of God, who now gathers up and presents the worship of God’s people in and with his own adoration of the Father. In Calvin’s view, then, Christ incorporates and even embodies the worship of the redeemed, as God receives their worship only because they are members of Christ, and thus share in the benefits of Christ’s sole priesthood. Calvin commented:

Moses…commands that whatever is consecrated to God should be delivered into the hand of the priest, as we have before seen that private persons were excluded from this honour, so that Christ’s peculiar dignity should remain to him, [namely] that by him alone access should be sought to God, and that all men might know that no worship pleases God except what he sanctifies.

73 Comm. on Lev. 2:1, CO 24:509; CTS 4:328.
74 Comm. on Lev. 2:1, CO 24:509; CTS 4:328.
As previously seen in this chapter, Calvin briefly mentioned grain offerings in the context of the continual sacrifice. There he was content to say only that grain offerings—presented in the form of flour cakes and accompanied by libations of wine—were placed on the bronze altar with the victims of the continual sacrifice to ensure that those victims produced a pleasant aroma as they were consumed by flames and rose in smoke towards heaven, betokening “the spiritual truth” that Israel’s sacrifices had to be accompanied by faith and repentance if they were to please God.\(^75\) But when discussing grain offerings in themselves in Leviticus chapter two, Calvin expanded on the premise that grain offerings betokened faith and repentance by explaining what grain offerings should teach believers about the characteristics of faith and repentance, characteristics which ought to be seen in their consecrated service to God in gratitude for having been reconciled with God.

Grain offerings could either take the form of fine flour or the form of cakes made in one of three ways: baked in an oven, fried in a pan, or cooked on a gridiron (Lev. 2:1-2, 4-8). Calvin’s interest, however, was not so much in the form of the grain offerings as in the ingredients both required for and prohibited from them. For regardless of the form in which grain offerings were delivered into the hands of the priest, the law required that they be made of the same fine flour, so “that the oblation may not be defiled by the bran.” The law also required that the flour be seasoned with oil and frankincense. Calvin saw in these requirements a rule (\textit{regula}) that ought to inform all service of God (\textit{toto Dei cultu}), namely, that God’s people must only offer God devotion that is pure and fragrant.\(^76\)


\(^76\) Comm. on Lev. 2:1, \textit{CO} 24:509; CTS 4:328.
What is more, Calvin thought that the law’s prohibition of leaven and honey from the grain offerings helped to clarify what pure and fragrant worship entails. Unconvinced by “the subtle disquisitions” of some commentators, he candidly acknowledged a level of obscurity as to why honey was prohibited from grain offerings. Furthermore, he observed that leaven was forbidden from the Passover for a manifestly different reason. Yet Calvin was convinced that the ambiguities which surrounded the law’s prohibition of leaven and honey from grain offerings are not able to becloud the obvious lesson “that God’s service is corrupted if any strange invention be mingled with it.” Thus the grain offerings have an enduring relevance for Christians, as these offerings teach that pure and fragrant devotion is the antithesis of self-styled devotion. Put another way, when the word of God regulates their worship of God, the people of God display the character of faith and repentance. On this point, Calvin remarked:

It is clear…that in this general rule all adventitious corruptions are condemned, whereby pure religion is polluted, as if it were said that no offerings would be approved by God except such as were genuine and free from all strange savour…. But let us, since the use of the ceremony is abolished, learn not to intrude our own imaginations or inventions in God’s service, but to follow obediently the rule which he prescribes.77

Finally, the law required all grain offerings to be seasoned with salt. Calvin noted that salt was added to the grain offerings for a reason “very similar” to that of the oil and frankincense, namely, “that God’s service might not be without savour.” Yet Calvin held that Christ further illumined the significance of the salt by declaring that, ‘Every one [of his followers] shall be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt.’78


78 Comm. on Lev. 2:13, CO 24:510; CTS 4:330. Mark 9:49 is perhaps one of the most difficult verses in that Gospel. The better manuscripts and many modern renderings
the discourse leading up to these words, Christ told his disciples that, if necessary, one’s own members—the hand, foot, and eye—must be sacrificed, as it were, in order to enter the kingdom of God (Mark 9:43-48). Therefore, Christ’s declaration in Mark 9:49 brings this discourse to its climactic conclusion, as Christ goes beyond certain parts of the body to indicate that each of his followers is to be a total sacrifice unto God.

Over and above the cumulative thrust of Calvin’s thought regarding sacrifice, the present context of non-expiatory grain offerings should leave no doubt that, while Calvin considered Christ’s sacrifice to be an example for the sacrifices of Christ’s followers, the former is qualitatively different from the latter. That is because the sacrifices undertaken by Christ’s followers are grateful responses for reconciliation received, whereas Christ’s sacrifice achieved their reconciliation. By his words in Mark 9:49, argued Calvin, Christ meant that when believers “are searched and tried by fire,” they “should patiently endure to be refined and purified.” According to Calvin, the fire of which Christ spoke are those trials, sufferings, and afflictions which are natural and necessary rather than accidental or occasional for believers, given their union with Christ, the suffering, crucified, servant of God. Patient endurance amidst these trials manifests the character of faith and repentance of Mark 9:49 simply read, “For everyone will be salted with fire.” The less likely reading of this verse espoused by Calvin is also found in early manuscripts, and it was later made popular among English speakers by its inclusion in the Authorized (King James) Version of 1611. As for this latter reading, one prominent New Testament textual critic suggests that an early scribe may have viewed Leviticus 2:13 as a clue to Jesus’ cryptic words and wrote that text in the margin of his copy of Mark. And then, in subsequent copyings, that marginal gloss was placed in the actual text of Mark 9:49. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 87. In any event, Calvin stood in a well-established exegetical tradition of reading Mark 9:49 in light of Leviticus 2:13.
as the trials, like salt, macerate the flesh and its lusts (cupiditabus), in order that “we shall be acceptable sacrifices to God.” 79

The Sacrifice of Prosperities

The other sacrifice belonging to this second aspect of Calvin’s twofold division in Israel’s sacrifices had the same basic purpose as the grain offerings, because it was not an expiation of sin but rather a testimony of gratitude and piety. Even so, Calvin deemed this oblation to be of “a different class” from the grain offerings in that it entailed the sacrifice of an animal. One part of this animal “was burnt with fire, [another] part was claimed by the priests, and the rest remained to the offerers themselves.” 80 Called שלמים (shelomim) in Leviticus 3:1, these oblations were always rendered with a grain offering and after an expiatory offering, meaning they presupposed both reconciliation with and consecration to God, and signified that fellowship between God and the offerers which followed as a result. As such, these oblations are usually rendered from Hebrew as “peace offerings.”

Though Calvin granted the basic premise for this rendering, he saw the rendering itself as being too narrow, and thus unsuitable. To be sure, this sacrifice was intended to acknowledge the peace that resulted from God being reconciled to his people. However, this sacrifice was also offered on other occasions, such as when recognizing a new king, when marking a momentous event, and when pleading for God’s protection against—or celebrating God’s deliverance from—dangers or adversaries. What is more, the Hebraic notion of peace, or shalom, connotes safely, happiness, and all good success, which is to


80 Comm. on Lev. 3:1, CO 24:512; CTS 4:332.
say, an all-encompassing mode of human flourishing. Consequently, Calvin maintained that a more fitting name for this sacrifice would be the sacrifice of prosperities.  

As with all the law’s oblations, observed Calvin, the priest carried out “the main duties” of this sacrifice. Those duties included sprinkling the victim’s blood against the altar, and, prior to separating the portions of the animal’s flesh that were to be eaten by the priest and its offerers, placing the choicest part of the animal upon the altar for a so-called food offering. Here again, stressed Calvin, the law states that only Israel’s priests could make an acceptable offering (litandum) to God. Calvin thought a food offering was a rather “harsh metaphor” insomuch that God gives and sustains all life while standing in need of nothing, let alone the flesh of cattle. Yet he thought this metaphor admirably and effectively showed the intimate, affectionate nature of God’s communion with his people. God’s “incomparable kindness could not be better shown forth, than by deigning to make himself, as it were, the messmate of his worshippers,” remarked Calvin. In other words, Calvin felt this offering powerfully depicted the fellowship that existed between God and his people in, through, and with their priest—three parties joined together in the bonds of peace, celebrating and enjoying the manifold blessings of reconciliation.

Furthermore, Calvin maintained that even now, after Christ’s coming has fulfilled and thus abrogated Israel’s cultic oblations, the sacrifice of prosperities conveys four key

---

81 Comm. on Lev. 3:1, CO 24:512; CTS 4:333; Comm. on Lev. 7:11, CO 24:534; CTS 4:369-70; Comm. on Exod. 20:24, CO 24:397; CTS 4:139. Calvin’s comments on Exodus 20:24 have been mistakenly cited as Deuteronomy 27:5 in the CO edition.

82 Comm. on Lev. 3:16, CO 24:513; CTS 4:334. The CTS edition here translated the Latin word litandum, which simply means to give or make an acceptable offering, as “to make atonement.” Therefore, like Calvin’s comments on Exodus 29:38 (CO 24:490; CTS 4:296), where the word litatum was rendered “propitiation,” the CTS edition has yet again imported Calvin’s understanding of Israel’s expiatory sacrifices into his remarks on a sacrifice he viewed as non-expiatory.
lessons, each pertaining to the subjective dimension of reconciliation. First, the blessings of God in Christ are profaned unless believers diligently manifest the piety which God’s immense and steadfast liberality toward them deserves. Second, believers defraud Christ of his exclusive right to their devotion if that devotion is mixed with human invention or rendered to other, alien mediators. Third, believers must present their gratitude and piety to God in the name, or by the hand, as it were, of Christ. And finally, God’s beneficence must not be responded to in a negligent or perfunctory way, but with a zeal and attention that befits a matter of supreme importance.83

Concluding Excursus: Peterson on Calvin and the Atonement

Robert A. Peterson’s 1983 monograph titled Calvin’s Doctrine of the Atonement was born of the conviction that, although the twentieth century witnessed something of a renaissance in Calvin research, Calvin’s thought on the work of Christ had not received the attention it deserves.84 Peterson’s conviction was indeed well-founded. For one need look no further to discern the relative lack of attention given the atonement by twentieth-century Calvin scholars than the magisterial, mid-century surveys of Calvin’s thought by Wilhelm Niesel and François Wendel, as both authors treated the subject so cursorily that “atonement” does not appear in either book’s index.85 This tendency to overlook Calvin’s

thought on the atonement was, to some extent, the result of two intimately related factors. First, Calvin’s theologizing about the atonement, like that of sixteenth-century Protestant reform generally, is more diffused than concentrated, meaning the Institutes is a relatively modest avenue for accessing this aspect of his thought. And second, until the latter part of the twentieth century, scholars looked primarily to the Institutes to understand Calvin’s thought. As T. H. L. Parker warned in 1944, the trend of sundering Calvin the theologian from Calvin the biblical exegete helped create the common misunderstanding that Calvin was a system builder—that is, a logician rationally extrapolating theological principles or concepts—rather than one who sought to teach Scripture systematically. As recently as 1966, Parker lamented that scholars still tended to treat Calvin’s biblical commentaries as being merely illustrative of or incidental to the Institutes, though Calvin’s theological and exegetical labours were really two equal, interconnected aspects of one activity. In fact, Parker’s 1971 monograph titled Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries helped stimulate interest in Calvin the biblical exegete, interest clearly reflected in the work of Peterson, who, relying heavily on Calvin’s New Testament commentaries, sought “to fill a gap in the Calvin literature,” and in doing so, to show that “Calvin’s teaching [on the atonement]
can be appreciated as one of the most comprehensive presentations of the work of Christ in the history of Christian doctrine."\textsuperscript{89}

To be sure, Peterson’s 1983 monograph made a significant contribution to modern Calvin scholarship, so much so, in fact, that sixteen years later, in 1999, a revised edition was published titled \textit{Calvin and the Atonement}.\textsuperscript{90} One reason behind the staying power of Peterson’s comprehensive presentation of Calvin’s thought on the atonement is that, since the early 1980s, the subject of Calvin on the atonement has been largely dominated by the comparatively narrow question of Calvin’s position on the design of the atonement—that is, whether Calvin viewed the death of Christ to be universal or particular in the scope, or extent, of its redemptive efficacy. In the 1999 edition of his book, Peterson observes that half of the sources added to his updated bibliography deal with the question of whether or not Calvin espoused the doctrine of so-called “limited atonement.”\textsuperscript{91} This preoccupation


\textsuperscript{90} Peterson, \textit{Calvin and the Atonement}, rev. ed. (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 1999). All subsequent references to Peterson are from this edition.

with whether Calvin espoused either limited or unlimited atonement, however, is not only myopic; it is also fundamentally misguided. Accordingly, Peterson has wisely and rightly refrained from forcing Calvin to champion either position.\footnote{Peterson, \textit{Calvin and the Atonement}, 115-20.} For attempts to cull together dispersed and indirect comments from Calvin prove insubstantial, and attempts to deduce Calvin’s position by logical extrapolation from other features of his thought indulges the very type of theological speculation Calvin vigorously opposed.\footnote{Tony Lane, “The Quest for the Historical Calvin,” \textit{Evangelical Quarterly} 55 (1983): 99-101.} The inexorable fact of the matter is that the extent of the atonement’s redemptive efficacy is not an issue Calvin debated. That many of his interpreters have long debated it for him suggests a movement away from Calvin’s own context and concerns. Thus Richard Muller correctly views this debate as a “superb example” of a subsequent thought world—in this instance that of the seventeenth-century Synod of Dort—being anachronistically foisted upon Calvin so as to conscript his support for a contemporary issue.\footnote{Muller, \textit{The Unaccommodated Calvin}, 6. Yet Muller incorrectly lists Peterson among the scholars engaged in this debate (Ibid., 190n13).}

With the first three chapters of his monograph, Peterson lays the groundwork for Calvin’s thought on the atonement by examining, in turn, Calvin’s understanding of the free love of God in Christ, the incarnation, and Christ’s threefold office of prophet, king, and priest. With the next six chapters, Peterson aims to demonstrate that Calvin’s thought on the atonement was as full-orbed and comprehensive as Scripture itself by examining, in turn, Calvin’s treatment of six themes found in Scripture that describe the atonement,
namely, Jesus Christ as obedient second Adam, victor, legal substitute, sacrifice, merit, and example. Here, however, Peterson’s work becomes problematic. For insomuch that Scripture contains numerous themes descriptive of Christ’s atoning work—to the above list one might just as easily add Christ as physician, scapegoat, satisfaction, redeemer, or ransom—Peterson’s choice of only these six is necessarily limited, and in some measure arbitrary. More troubling, at least for this study, is that while Peterson does an admirable job of capturing something of Calvin’s comprehensiveness with respect to the atonement, he seems largely unable to find coherence in this aspect of Calvin’s thought. For instance, Peterson thinks the “sacrificial theme is one of Calvin’s most important ways of viewing Christ’s death.” But at the same time he considers Robert Culpepper’s claim that sacrifice constitutes ‘the heart of Calvin’s explication of the atonement’ to be “an exaggeration.”

To Peterson’s mind, sacrifice constitutes “one of three key atonement themes in Calvin’s theology, along with the Christus Victor and legal themes.” Given the outline and chapter content of Peterson’s work, he presumably means by “legal themes” those of substitution, obedience, and merit.

Still more, Peterson affirms that there “is substantial overlapping between Christ’s priestly office and the sacrificial theme of the atonement.” But at the same time he asserts that there exist “significant differences too, which justify including sacrifice as a separate

---

95 Peterson, Calvin and the Atonement, 91; Robert H. Culpepper, Interpreting the Atonement (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1966), 97. Culpepper’s work is a biblical and historical survey of the doctrine of the atonement. Noteworthy is the fact that, throughout his discussion on Calvin (Ibid., 96-103), Culpepper cites the Institutes exclusively. For an opinion similar to Culpepper’s regarding the centrality of sacrifice in Calvin’s view of the atonement see George H. Kehm, “Calvin on Defilement and Sacrifice,” Interpretation 31 (1977): 39-52.

96 Peterson, Calvin and the Atonement, 91.
theme of the atonement.” In fact, Peterson contends that, “It is important to realize that Calvin nowhere attempts to relate the threefold office of Christ to the biblical pictures of the atonement. Rather, he is content to allow them to exist side-by-side.” Peterson sees in this “an example of Calvin’s refusing to overly systematize doctrine…. He tries earnestly to be a biblical theologian. As a result, he sometimes leaves rough edges in his doctrinal formulations. So it is with his doctrine of the atonement.”

These comments by Peterson bring to mind those of Paul Van Buren in his 1957 book titled *Christ in Our Place: The Substitutionary Character of Calvin’s Doctrine of Reconciliation*. The scope of Van Buren’s study is broader than Calvin’s understanding of the atonement, yet it bears directly on the atonement. Of especial interest here is Van Buren’s claim that “the main line of Calvin’s thought” on the atonement was couched in “a forensic setting.” Nevertheless, Van Buren promptly added that “there is a secondary setting [for Christ’s atonement] which Calvin finds in the Bible, the setting of sacrifice, priest and sacrificial victim.” The implications of Van Buren’s thesis about the alleged primary and secondary settings for Calvin’s understanding of the atonement are obvious in the study by Timothy Palmer titled *John Calvin’s View of the Kingdom of God*. In the chapter *Christ’s Priestly Work on Earth*, where Van Buren’s influence is clearly evident, Palmer declares:

Christ’s death seen as a fulfillment of the Levitical sacrifices is a parallel way of understanding his work of reconciliation. In a different way than in the legal

---

97 Peterson, *Calvin and the Atonement*, 91.

98 Peterson, *Calvin and the Atonement*, 127.

99 Van Buren, *Christ in Our Place*, 65.
context, God’s wrath is appeased through the death of a sacrificial victim.\footnote{100}

Of course, parallel entities are equidistant by definition. They neither do nor can have genuine intercourse. And so, as Palmer plainly states, parallel entities are ultimately different entities. The question is therefore raised as to whether Calvin did in fact see the Levitical sacrifices in such a manner as to abstract them from a forensic, or legal, setting. Van Buren and Palmer think he did, which suggests that Calvin’s conception of Christ’s atonement was inherently disjointed.

For very similar reasons, then, Peterson also seems to find Calvin’s understanding of the atonement inherently disjointed. These similarities among Van Buren, Palmer, and Peterson become even more interesting, and more vulnerable to criticism, when one takes into account yet another, more basic commonality among them: their almost total lack of recourse to Calvin’s \textit{Mosaic Harmony}. Van Buren’s treatment of the so-called secondary and supposedly other-than-forensic setting of sacrifice, priest, and sacrificial victim holds but a solitary reference to the \textit{Mosaic Harmony}.\footnote{101} Likewise, Palmer looks but once to the \textit{Mosaic Harmony}.\footnote{102} And Peterson’s oversight is even more egregious. For in the process of explaining Calvin’s thought on the sacrificial theme of the atonement, Peterson made a provocative reference to Robert Paul, who, in the 1960 monograph called \textit{The Atonement and the Sacraments}, suggested “that not sufficient attention has been given to the things Calvin said about the Old Testament sacrifices and the

\footnotesize{\ \footnote{100} Timothy P. Palmer, \textit{John Calvin’s View of the Kingdom of God} (Ph.D. diss., University of Aberdeen, 1988), 149-50. \footnote{101} Van Buren, \textit{Christ in Our Place}, 70n3. \footnote{102} Palmer, \textit{John Calvin’s View of the Kingdom of God}, 149n37.}
significant light they throw upon his idea of the atonement.”103 Peterson concurred with Paul that insufficient attention has been given to Calvin’s treatment of the Old Testament sacrifices, a subject that remained largely neglected during the years separating Paul’s work from his own.104 But Peterson did not himself heed Paul’s suggestion. For the Scripture Index in Peterson’s book yields not a single reference to the Mosaic Harmony, the latest, largest, and most indispensable resource in Calvin’s entire literary corpus with respect to his understanding of priesthood, sacrifice, and the nature of the relationship between them.105

Calvin’s exposition of the Hebrew Scriptures has generally attracted less attention than his exposition of the New Testament. David Wright made note of this trend in 1986, three years after the first edition of Peterson’s book, and just weeks before the publication of Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries, T. H. L. Parker’s follow up to his 1971 volume Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries.106 In 2006, however, Raymond Blacketer rightly observed that the tendency to undervalue and overlook Calvin’s exposition of the Hebrew Scriptures...
Scriptures remains an ongoing reality. This phenomenon is of great significance for the present study. For as previously discussed, the *Mosaic Harmony* first appeared in July of 1563. It is the last of Calvin’s commentaries to be published during his lifetime. Thus the *Mosaic Harmony* not only postdates the final edition of the *Institutes*, but also constitutes Calvin’s biblical commentating in its most seasoned, mature form. The *Mosaic Harmony* also constitutes Calvin’s biblical commentating in its most unique, enterprising form. For Calvin’s aim throughout his career as a biblical commentator, at least until the time of the *Mosaic Harmony*, was to produce running, or verse-by-verse, commentaries on the books of Scripture, commentaries characterized by lucid brevity. Because of this aim, Calvin made a studied effort to reserve discussions of doctrinal disputations and *loqui communes*, or theological commonplaces, for the *Institutes*. The last four books of the Pentateuch, however, presented Calvin the biblical commentator with a situation quite different from what he had encountered to that point, namely, one literary unit, written primarily by one author, in which history and doctrine are found together without continuity or distinction. This was the situation that led to Calvin’s departure from his long-established method of biblical commentating, a departure resulting in the uniqueness of the *Mosaic Harmony*.

In keeping with his ongoing desire to produce running commentary on Scripture, Calvin gathered together the narrative material from Exodus through Deuteronomy and reconstructed a single historical record. This commentary on post-Genesis pentateuchal history takes place in two acts; the intermission between these acts consists of a massive

block of doctrine, which too was culled from Exodus through Deuteronomy. Calvin cast this doctrinal material into a series of *loci communes*, divided into four principal sections: (1) *The Preface to the Law*, intended to establish the dignity of the law in order that God may be duly reverenced; (2) *The Ten Commandments*, consisting of “expositions” of each commandment so as to establish its core doctrinal content; (3) *Supplements*, consisting of ceremonial and political precepts that amplify the doctrinal content of that commandment to which they were appended; and (4) *The End and Use of the Law*, intended to show that each part of the law—each doctrine, rite, command, promise, and threat—finds its proper and ultimate end in Christ.110

Indeed, the *Mosaic Harmony’s* doctrinal content on the second commandment is itself massive. Its supplements alone constitute 162 of the 459 total columns that contain Calvin’s treatment of all Ten Commandments and their supplements in the *Opera omnia* edition of the *Mosaic Harmony*, and 266 of the 736 total pages in the Calvin Translation Society edition. This amplitude is attributable to the fact that the ceremonial supplements Calvin appended to his exposition of the second commandment account for Israel’s entire cultic system, including large doctrinal *loci* found nowhere else in Calvin’s writings, such as those on the priesthood and sacrifice. Calvin’s treatment of the doctrinal content on the second commandment in the *Mosaic Harmony* has been examined at length in the present chapter of this study, as well as in the two chapters that immediately precede it. Potential conclusions abound, but the following conclusions simply must not be missed:

1) To abstract Calvin’s understanding of sacrifice from a forensic setting, or legal context, as do Van Buren, Palmer, and, albeit to an arguably lesser degree, Peterson, is to

misunderstand and misrepresent Calvin. As is evident from the *Mosaic Harmony*, Calvin considered the law to be the most natural and appropriate setting, or context, in which to gain an understanding of sacrifice. In fact, by making his *locus* on sacrifice a supplement to his exposition of the second commandment, Calvin showed that, to his mind, sacrifice serves to amplify the law. To be sure, this conceptual relation between law and sacrifice does not mean Calvin’s understanding of the atonement was merely forensic. For Calvin, the theme of sacrifice—along with all other themes pertaining to the atonement, legal or otherwise—was informed by his understanding of the people of God’s union with Christ. What this conceptual relation between law and sacrifice does mean, though, is that Calvin found sacrifice to be thoroughly complementary to the legal aspect of the atonement.

2) Maintaining that there are differences between Christ’s priestly office and the sacrificial theme of the atonement so significant as to justify separating that theme from the priestly office, as does Peterson, is to contradict rather than clarify Calvin’s thought. For not only did Calvin incessantly stress the intimate, inextricable relationship between priesthood and sacrifice in the *Mosaic Harmony*, he also demonstrated the bond between them by joining his *locus* on priesthood with his *locus* on sacrifice as a supplement to his exposition of the second commandment.

3) Peterson’s claim that Calvin nowhere attempted to relate the threefold office of Christ to the biblical themes of the atonement is correct but misleading, as Peterson uses his observation to support category confusions on two important points. First, contrary to Peterson’s claim, Calvin did not attempt to relate Christ’s threefold office to the biblical themes of the atonement simply because he was content to allow the themes to exist side-by-side. For although the atonement is a terrifically important category of God’s saving
activity in Christ, the atonement is but one aspect of the broader theological category of soteriology. Calvin devoted book two of the *Institutes* to this latter theological category, and there he did indeed relate soteriology, broadly speaking, to Christ’s threefold office. The subject of book two, chapter fifteen of the *Institutes* is, in fact, the threefold saving activity of Christ as prophet, king, and priest. Yet where Calvin addressed the narrower category of atonement in the *Mosaic Harmony*, he related it only to the priestly aspect of Christ’s threefold office. Of course, given the subject matter of the *Mosaic Harmony*, one would not expect Calvin to relate the atonement to any office but the priestly office. Then again, why would anyone expect Calvin to relate the atonement to the prophetic or kingly offices anywhere, as neither office was given the duty of making atonement? At any rate, the relations which Calvin made and refrained from making show that, in his assessment, Christ’s saving activity in general relates to his threefold office in general, while Christ’s atonement in particular—namely, the expiation of sin and propitiation of God—is proper to his priestly office alone.

Second, the fact that Calvin nowhere attempted to relate Christ’s threefold office to the biblical themes of the atonement is not, as Peterson claims, simply an example of Calvin trying earnestly to be a biblical theologian, and so refusing to overly systematize doctrine. For although Calvin’s division of labours between biblical commentaries and the *Institutes* attests to the fact that he did not see systematizing doctrine as proper to the task of the biblical exegete, he clearly saw systematizing doctrine as proper to the task of the biblical theologian. Calvin maintained that he was undertaking the task of the biblical theologian when writing the *Institutes* and the doctrinal segment of the *Mosaic Harmony*. Consider first Calvin’s authorial intent for the *Institutes*:
It has been my purpose in this labor to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine word, in order that they may be able both to have easy access to it and to advance in it without stumbling. For I believe I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts, and have arranged it in such an order, that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to what end he ought to relate its contents.111

Now compare Calvin’s intent for the Institutes with his intent for the Mosaic Harmony:

For I have had no other intention than, by this arrangement, to assist unpractised readers, so that they might more easily, more commodiously, and more profitably acquaint themselves with the writings of Moses; and whosoever would derive benefit from my labours should understand that I would by no means withdraw him from the study of each separate book [Exodus through Deuteronomy], but simply direct him by this compendium to a definite object; lest he should, as often happens, be led astray through ignorance of any regular plan.112

The similarities between these two statements are striking. That is because Calvin sought in both instances to produce a systematized interpretation of scriptural doctrine—not in spite of his desire to be a biblical theologian, but precisely because of it. Therefore, had Calvin ever wished to relate the threefold office of Christ to the biblical themes of the atonement, the Institutes and Mosaic Harmony offered most fitting opportunities to do so. He did not do it. Peterson attributes the fact that Calvin nowhere made such a relationship to Calvin’s commitment to being a biblical theologian; this only confuses the category of biblical exegesis with that of biblical theology. I submit, then, that Calvin refrained from relating the threefold office of Christ in general to the atonement in particular because, as a biblical theologian, Calvin found no scriptural warrant for that systematic connection.

4) It is no exaggeration to conclude that sacrifice constitutes the heart of Calvin’s understanding of the atonement, so long as “heart” is intended to identify that one theme


of the atonement which substantiates and integrates all others. Peterson thinks otherwise because he conceives of the key atonement themes in Calvin’s thought as being side-by-side, or parallel, with each other. Yet Calvin showed a rather different conceptualization in his locus on sacrifice in the Mosaic Harmony. For there the key atonement themes of Scripture are seen as converging upon, intersecting with, and issuing from the theme of sacrifice. That Calvin’s New Testament commentaries, like the New Testament writings, collectively present a rich and diverse view of Christ’s atonement is readily granted. But if Calvin’s account of Christ’s atonement is to be grasped accurately, one must grasp that its richness and diversity is founded on, informed by, and developed from the undeniably predominant atonement theme in the Hebrew Scriptures, the theme of sacrifice.

Consider the five biblical themes other than sacrifice that Peterson considers most important to Calvin regarding the atonement, namely, Jesus Christ as the obedient second Adam, victor, legal substitute, merit, and example. The obedience of Christ was perfected by the characteristic act of that obedience, obedience unto self-sacrifice. Jesus is Christus Victor because he conquered the devil, sin, death, and hell by the efficacy of his sacrifice. Christ, like the lambs of old, was a legal substitute for transgressors of the law in order to incur the curse of the law as an expiatory sacrifice. Christ’s merit, like his obedience, was perfected by his sacrifice. And Christ’s example is one of faithfulness, patient endurance, and self-giving love, even unto sacrificial death, an example his followers are to emulate by offering themselves to God at all times and in every circumstance as living sacrifices. Peterson’s ability to exhibit much of the comprehensiveness but little of the coherency in Calvin’s thought on the atonement testifies to both the neglect and indispensability of the Mosaic Harmony, in which Calvin demonstrated quite plainly that he saw sacrifice as the infrastructure of Christ’s priestly work of reconciliation.
Chapter Six
Christ’s Priesthood and His Threefold Office

Calvin maintained that ancient Israel’s offices of priest, king, and prophet were distinguishable, divisible, and able to be considered in abstraction from the persons who occupied them. These offices were distinguishable from one another in that each was possessed of its own qualifications, its own characteristics, and its own tasks. What is more, these offices were divisible from one another in that each was held by different persons. And finally, these offices were able to be considered in abstraction from the persons who occupied them in that each office was extrinsic, temporal, and transferable.

Calvin also maintained that ancient Israel’s offices of priest, king, and prophet were not only fulfilled but transformed in Christ, having been forever joined together and embodied in the incarnate Son of God. As such, Calvin did not view the priestly, kingly, and prophetic ministrations of Christ as three separate offices, but as three distinguishable yet indivisible aspects of one office, whereby Christ accomplishes one work of salvation. Because Calvin considered the three aspects of Christ’s office to be distinguishable, he could write on Christ’s priesthood with sustained focus, as seen in previous chapters of this study, and could even accentuate the terrific importance of Christ’s priesthood by calling it “the principal point” on which salvation turns, and “the very turning point” on which salvation depends. Yet because Calvin considered the three aspects of Christ’s office to be indivisible, he deemed any attempt to ultimately separate or segregate one aspect of Christ’s office from the others tantamount to rending Christ asunder, and thus to

1 Inst. 2.15.6, OS 3:480.18-19; LCC 1:502; Comm. on Ps. 110:4, CO 32:164; CTS 11:306.
subverting the faith.²

Had Calvin not believed that one aspect of Christ’s office may be distinguished and subjected to sustained focus, this study on the priesthood of Christ in the thought of Calvin would be fundamentally misguided. In light of Calvin’s conviction that no aspect of Christ’s office should be ultimately separated or segregated from the others, however, the present chapter of this study will discuss Christ’s priesthood in relation to, and as a constituent facet of, Christ’s threefold office. The first section of this chapter concerns the threefold office of Christ in Calvin’s theological expositions of the faith, giving particular attention to the development in Calvin’s thinking on this topic up to its fullest and final expression in the 1559 Institutes. The second section of this chapter will give attention to Calvin’s biblical commentaries, so as to discern the scriptural underpinnings and dynamic interconnections in Calvin’s thought on Christ’s threefold office. A brief interaction with John Frederick Jansen’s influential book, Calvin’s Doctrine of the Work of Christ, will then draw this chapter to a close.

The Threefold Office of Christ in Calvin’s Theological Expositions of the Faith

It has been claimed, and rightly so, that the doctrine of Christ’s threefold office is a distinctive feature of Calvin’s thought. This doctrine, however, did not originate with Calvin. What is more, this doctrine does not even appear in Calvin’s earliest expositions of the Christian faith.³ The Christian tradition evidences a long and rather variegated history of using the office-bearers of God in the Hebrew Scriptures to describe the saving activity of Christ. Some patristic and medieval writers maintained that the messianic title


“Christ” suggests the three primary offices in ancient Israel: priest, king, and prophet. Yet Calvin’s predecessors far more prevalently ascribed only two offices to Christ, the offices of priest and king. Initially, Calvin too conceived of Christ’s office as twofold, involving only the offices of priest and king. Consider the first edition of the *Institutes*, printed in 1536. There, on the second affirmation of the Apostle’s Creed, beginning with the phrase, “And in Jesus Christ, his [God the Father’s] only Son, our Lord,” Calvin confessed:

We also believe that Christ himself was sprinkled with all the graces of the Holy Spirit…. And as the Spirit has rested upon him, and has poured itself out wholly upon him, in order that we may all receive from his fullness (that is, whoever of us are partners and partakers of him through faith) [Is. 11:1-5; 61:1-3; John 1:16], so do we believe in short that by this anointing he was appointed king by the Father to subject all power in heaven and on earth [Ps. 2:1-6], that in him we might be kings, having sway over the devil, sin, death, and hell [1 Pet. 2:9; Acts 10:36]. Then we believe that he was appointed priest, by his self-sacrifice to placate the Father and reconcile him to us, that in him we might be priests, with him as our intercessor and mediator, offering our prayers, our thanks, ourselves, and our all to the Father [Rev. 1:6; Ps. 110:1-4; Heb. 5:1-10; 13:15-16].

Now consider the *Instruction et confession de foy*, composed by Calvin in early 1537, shortly after he arrived in Geneva. The *Instruction* covers much the same subject matter as the 1536 *Institutes*, but does so more simply and briefly, and in French rather than Latin. That is because Calvin wrote the *Instruction* to help fortify and advance the Reformation among the general populace of Geneva. The following year, in 1538, the Latin edition of the *Instruction* was published in Basel under the title *Catechismus, sive*...

---


5 *Institutes, 1536 Edition*, OS 1:82; Battles 2.14.54.

christianae religionis institutio.  

Explaining once again in the Instruction that part of the Apostles’ Creed which reads, “And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,” Calvin wrote:

The title “Christ” signifies that through unction he has been fully endowed with all the graces of the Holy Spirit…. Now, through such an unction the Father has constituted him king in order that he subject unto himself all power in heaven and on earth, to the end that we too may become kings in him, having dominion over the devil, sin, death, and hell. Secondly, God has constituted him priest in order to satisfy the Father for us and to reconcile him through his sacrifice, to the end that in him we too might become priests, offering to the Father prayers, thanksgivings, ourselves, and all things of ours, having him as our intercessor and mediator.  

Furthermore, when the Instruction progressed to the next phrase of the Apostles’ Creed, which reads, “Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,” Calvin again advanced a twofold notion of Christ’s office. “Here we are told how the Son of God has been made Jesus for us,” he stated, “that is to say, Saviour, and Christ, that is, anointed as king to keep us, and as priest to reconcile us with the Father.”

Albeit in relatively undeveloped form, the threefold conception of Christ’s office first appeared in Calvin’s writing with the second edition of the Institutes in 1539. There he added the office of prophet to that of king and priest when treating the familiar phrase

---

7 For the text of Catechismus, sive christianae religionis institutio see CO 5:313-62. This text has been translated into English by Ford Lewis Battles. For a commentary on this 1538 Catechism that features Battles’ translation see I. John Hesselink, Calvin’s First Catechism: A Commentary (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), especially the material pertaining to the office of Christ, pp. 22-23, 119-21.

8 Instruction et confession de foy, OS 1:397; Instruction in Faith (1537), 48. For the corresponding passage in Calvin’s 1538 Catechism see CO 5:338; Hesselink, Calvin’s First Catechism, 22.

9 Instruction et confession de foy, OS 1:397-98; Instruction in Faith (1537), 48. For the corresponding passage in the 1538 Catechism see CO 5:338; Hesselink, Calvin’s First Catechism, 22-23.
of the Apostles’ Creed, “And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.” In the Catechism that Calvin prepared in late 1541, however, Christ’s threefold office begins to take shape. Unlike Calvin’s 1538 Catechism, this new Catechism, titled *Le Catéchisme de l’église de Génève*, was written as a series of question-and-answer exchanges between minister and catechumen. Exchanges thirty-four through forty-five pertain to the office of Christ.

Exchange thirty-four poses the question, “What force then has the name Christ?” The answer: “By this epithet his office is even better expressed. For it signifies that he is anointed by his Father to be king, priest, and prophet.” Exchange forty queries, “But do you reap any benefit from this?” The catechumen states, “Indeed all these things have no other purpose than our good. For Christ is vouchsafed these things by the Father, in order that he may share them with us, and out of this fullness of his we all draw.” In the forty-first exchange the minister probes further: “Explain this to me a little more fully.” The reply: “Christ was filled with the Holy Spirit and loaded with a perfect abundance of gifts, that he may impart them to us, according to the measure, of course, which the Father knows to be appropriate. So from him as the only source we draw whatever spiritual blessings we possess.” Finally, in exchange forty-five the minister summarizes the catechumen’s answers to questions thirty-four through forty-four: “All that you have said, then, comes to this, that Christ’s name comprises three offices which the Father

---


11 No original copy of Calvin’s 1541 Catechism is extant. According to Wulfert de Greef (*The Writings of John Calvin*, 133), however, the content of the 1541 Catechism is the same as the Latin edition of 1545, titled *Catechismus ecclesiae Genevensis*. 185
conferred on the Son, that he might transfuse their strength and fruit into those who are his.” The catechumen’s confident, concise reply is: “That is so.”

Yet the 1559 Institutes, Calvin’s latest and greatest systematic exposition of the Christian faith, is where the doctrine of Christ’s threefold office was given its classic form. There Calvin devoted the whole of book two, chapter fifteen to the threefold office of Christ, a chapter which he titled To Know the Purpose for Which Christ Was Sent by the Father, and What He Conferred Upon Us, We Must Look Above All at Three Things in Him: The Prophetic Office, Kingship, and Priesthood. Before examining Christ’s threefold office in the 1559 Institutes, however, a few prefatory observations are in order. First, Calvin treated the three aspects of Christ’s threefold office in the 1559 Institutes in the same order they appear in the title of book two, chapter fifteen—prophet, king, and priest. But the order that Calvin gave to Christ’s threefold office in the 1541 Catechism is king, priest, and prophet. Order seems to have mattered relatively little to Calvin in this regard, probably because he saw these roles not as successive stages in the history of Christ’s saving activity, but rather as correlative facets of one unified work of redemption. Second, the title of book two, chapter fifteen in the 1559 Institutes reveals


On Calvin’s understanding of Christ’s threefold office, Edmondson (Calvin’s Christology, 89) asserts, “If we are to understand Christ’s purpose, we must begin with his offer of himself through his death…that is, we must begin with his work as priest.” For according to Edmondson, Calvin believed that, “Through his priestly work, Christ opens the way for his work as prophet and king.” However, Edmondson’s claim is not supported by Calvin’s own ordering of Christ’s threefold office. The objective of book two, chapter fifteen in the Institutes, as expressly stated by Calvin himself, was to help readers understand Christ’s purpose. Calvin did not begin with Christ’s work as priest. On the contrary, he ended with it. Edmondson’s assertion can be commended in that it speaks to the fact that Calvin obviously viewed the cross as central to Christ’s purpose.
that, for Calvin, to understand Christ’s threefold office is to know that the purpose of Christ’s messianic mission was to bestow his benefits upon the people of God. This title indicates that Christ’s office possessed the same *pro nobis*, or “for us,” character in 1559 as it had since 1536.\(^\text{14}\) Third, Calvin situated his discussion on Christ’s threefold office in the 1559 *Institutes* immediately after his discussion on Christ’s person in book two, chapters twelve through fourteen, and immediately before his discussion on Christ’s work in book two, chapters sixteen and seventeen. Thus this chapter on Christ’s threefold office in the 1559 *Institutes* functions like a bridge, joining together the chapters immediately before and after. And this bridge, as Peterson observes, “was one of Calvin’s ways of telling his readers not to separate the person and work of Christ.”\(^\text{15}\) Fourth, while Christ’s office is taught with a serene and singularly pastoral tone in Calvin’s catechetical writings, the 1559 *Institutes* reveals a dual thrust, a thrust which remains pastoral but is at once polemical towards the sixteenth-century Roman church, as is apparent from the very outset of book two, chapter fifteen:

[T]oday the words ‘Son of God, redeemer of the world,’ resound upon the lips of the papists. Yet because they are satisfied with vain pretense of the name, and strip him of his power and dignity, Paul’s words apply to them: ‘They do not hold fast to the head’ [Col. 2:19]. Therefore, in order that faith may find a firm basis for salvation in Christ, and thus rest in him, this principle must be laid down: the

Still, Edmondson obscures the fact that Calvin did not view Christ’s prophetic, kingly, and priestly roles in terms of historical succession. Thus Edmondson obscures the fact that Christ’s priesthood did not commence on Good Friday, and that long before Good Friday, Christ was the prophet of his priestly sacrifice and the herald of a kingdom over which he was already king. Perhaps a more accurate suggestion as to why Calvin treated the three aspects of Christ’s threefold office in the 1559 *Institutes* in the order of prophet, king, and priest is that this order reflects something theologically significant for the mature Calvin, namely, that Christ reveals (prophet) himself as the Lord (king) whose lordship is effectually cruciform (priest).

\(^\text{14}\) Hesselink, *Calvin’s First Catechism: A Commentary*, 120.

\(^\text{15}\) Peterson, *Calvin and the Atonement*, 60.
office enjoined upon Christ by the Father consists of three parts. For he was given to be prophet, king, and priest. Yet it would be of little value to know these names without understanding their purpose and use. The papists use these names too, but coldly and rather ineffectually, since they do not know what each of these titles contains.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{The Prophetic Aspect of Christ’s Office}

God has provided “his people with an unbroken line of prophets” in order that his people would not be left “without useful doctrine sufficient for salvation,” noted Calvin.\textsuperscript{17} The pious, however, “had always been imbued with the conviction that they were to hope for the full light of understanding only at the coming of the Messiah.” Consequently, “the task common to the prophets” was to hold the pious in expectation of the Messiah, and to support their expectation until the Messiah appeared. Writing after that appearance, then, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of “the perfection of the gospel doctrine” relative to the doctrine preceding it, “first saying: ‘In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets’ [Heb. 1:1]. Then he adds, ‘In these last days he has spoken to us through a beloved Son’ [Heb. 1:2].’” That is to say, Christ is the last and the greatest of the prophets, “the fullness and culmination” of divine revelation.\textsuperscript{18}

Like all the Hebrew prophets who preceded him, continued Calvin, Christ “was anointed by the Spirit to be herald and witness of the Father’s grace.” Nevertheless, Christ was not a prophet “in the common way—for he is distinguished from other

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Inst.} 2.15.1, \textit{OS} 3:471.30-472.10; LCC 1:494.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Inst.} 2.15.1, \textit{OS} 3:472.11-13; LCC 1:494-95.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Inst.} 2.15.1, \textit{OS} 3:472.13-473.5; LCC 1:495.
teachers with a similar office.” 19 In other words, Christ’s supremacy over the prophets who preceded him is not only a supremacy of degree; it is also a supremacy of kind. That is because Christ is not a merely human herald of the Father, as were all other Hebrew prophets. Christ is God the Son in human flesh. Therefore, whereas Christ’s prophecy consisted in proclaiming the Father’s grace, the substance of the Father’s grace, and in turn the substance of Christ’s proclamation, was Christ himself. 20 Christ, the living Son, reveals himself as the revelation of God. Thus Calvin did not believe that Christ witnessed of the Father by pointing away from himself—as did all the other Hebrew prophets—given that the Father is hidden in majesty and may not be directly known. Rather, Christ witnessed of the Father by pointing directly to himself as God, so that through the proclamation of the gospel and the illumination of the Spirit, Christ can be received by faith as the visible image of the invisible God, and the fountain of all the Father’s gifts. 21 Here we grasp the theology of Calvin’s plea to fellow Christians that “outside Christ there is nothing [of God the Father] worth knowing, and all who by faith perceive what he is like have grasped the whole immensity of heavenly benefits.” 22

The prophetic aspect of Christ’s office had two important implications for Calvin. On the one hand, he stressed that Christ “received anointing, not only for himself that he might carry out the office of teaching, but for his whole body that the power of the Spirit might be present in the continuing preaching of the gospel.” In other words, the anointing of Christ, the head, is diffused to his members—those united to him by the Spirit through


20 Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought*, 69.


22 *Inst.* 2.15.2, *OS* 3:474.10-12; LCC 1:496.
faith—to the end that they too might bear witness that Christ is the image of the invisible God, and the fountain of all the Father’s gifts. It is in this sense that Calvin viewed God’s people to be partakers in Christ’s prophetic office. On the other hand, Calvin insisted that “the perfect doctrine he [Christ] has brought has made an end to all prophecies.” As such, to add to that doctrine is, in effect, to detract from the dignity and authority of Christ with respect to his prophetic office. Calvin maintained that the Roman church of his day had ceased to preach the gospel but continued to coin new doctrines, which, in his estimation, showed that Rome did not understand the purpose or use of Christ’s prophetic office, did not hold fast to Christ as its head, and thus could not offer a firm basis for salvation.

*The Kingly Aspect of Christ’s Office*

During Christ’s earthly ministry, the period often referred to as his humiliation, he performed signs. He commanded the elements, exorcised demons, cleansed lepers, healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, and even raised the dead. The purpose of these signs was to demonstrate that, in Christ, the kingdom of God was at hand. Christ’s exaltation to the right hand of the Father, however, marked a major development in the administration of this kingdom. According to Calvin, confessing that the crucified, exalted Christ now sits “at the right hand of the Father is equivalent to calling him the Father’s deputy, who has in his possession the whole power of God’s dominion.”

To be sure, Calvin considered Christ’s punishment of the disobedient—both now and at the last judgement—to be one important expression of Christ’s kingly dominion, a

---


dominion commonly implied in Scripture by the title “Lord.” Yet Calvin’s primary concern regarding Christ’s kingly ministrations in book two, chapter fifteen of the 1559 Institutes was not the punishment of the disobedient. Rather, Calvin’s primary concern was the consolation of the pious, as befits someone who was always acutely aware of being a religious refugee. Here, then, Calvin’s objective was to address how believers might benefit from the Father having given “all power to the Son that he may by the Son’s hand govern, nourish, and sustain us, keep us in his care, and help us.”

The first thing Calvin wished to establish when discussing Christ’s kingship is its spiritual nature. For from the spiritual nature of Christ’s kingship, explained Calvin, “we infer its efficacy and benefit for us, as well as its whole force and eternity.” Moreover, to understand the full benefit of Christ’s kingship, consideration must be given to how its eternality pertains to the whole body of the church, as well as to each individual member. With respect to the church, Calvin pointed to God’s promise regarding David’s kingdom: “‘Once for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David. His line shall endure forever…’ [Ps. 89:35-37].” Trusting that God is true and that his promises are infallible, yet aware that David’s dynasty did come to an end, Calvin concluded that the promised perpetuity of David’s kingdom was fulfilled in Christ. Therefore, Calvin inferred, “God surely promises here that through the hand of his Son he will be the eternal protector and defender of his church.” This perpetuity and power of Christ’s kingship is what Calvin considered the ultimate referent of the chide, “‘The kings and people rage in vain…for he


who dwells in heaven is strong enough to break their assaults’ [Ps. 2:2, 4],” and likewise, of the text, “‘Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool’ [Ps. 110:1].”

Thus Calvin felt that, properly understood, the spiritual nature of Christ’s kingship should embolden the whole body of the church, in order that it might flourish even in its present, embattled situation:

[N]o matter how many strong enemies plot to overthrow the church, they do not have sufficient strength to prevail over God’s immutable decree by which he appointed his Son eternal king. Hence it follows that the devil, with all the resources of the world, can never destroy the church, founded as it is on the eternal throne of Christ.

What is more, Calvin believed that understanding the spiritual nature of Christ’s kingship should benefit the church’s individual members by arousing their anticipation, indeed their longing, for the world to come:

Now with regard to the special application of this to each one of us—the same ‘eternity’ ought to inspire us to hope for blessed immortality. For we see that whatever is earthly is of the world and of time, and is indeed fleeting. Therefore, Christ, to lift our hope to heaven, declares that his ‘kingship is not of this world’ [John 18:36]. In short, when any one of us hears that Christ’s kingship is spiritual, aroused by this word let him attain to the hope of a better life; and since it is now protected by Christ’s hand, let him await the full fruit of this grace in the age to come.

It was clear to Calvin that Christ’s kingship is not of this world from the fact that the blessedness promised to Christians “does not consist in outward advantages—such as leading a joyous and peaceful life, having rich possessions, being safe from all harm, and

---

29 Inst. 2.15.3, OS 3:475.8-15; LCC 1:497-98.

30 Inst. 2.15.3, OS 3:475.15-21; LCC 1:498.

31 Inst. 2.15.3, OS 3:475.21-29; LCC 1:498.
abounding with delights such as the flesh commonly longs after.” On the contrary, just as their king was afflicted in body and soul before being exalted, so too must Christians live their present existences, as it were, under the cross (sub cruce).32 Though being called to a life of cross-bearing, then, the blessedness of Christ’s members consists in the fact that, by virtue of their union with Christ, they participate in his kingly office, and thus partake, even now, in its spiritual benefits. For this reason, “believers stand unconquered through the strength of their king, and his spiritual riches abound in them.”33 By relying upon the same Spirit whom Christ the king both bears and bestows, declared Calvin:

[W]e may patiently pass through this life with its misery, hunger, cold, contempt, reproaches, and other troubles—content with this one thing: that our king will never leave us destitute, but will provide for our needs until, our warfare ended, we are called to triumph. Such is the nature of his rule, that he shares with us all that he has received from the Father. Now he arms and equips us with his power, adorns us with his beauty and magnificence, enriches us with his wealth. These benefits, then, give us the most fruitful occasion to glory, and also provide us with confidence to struggle fearlessly against the devil, sin, and death. Finally, clothed with his righteousness, we can valiantly rise above all the world’s reproaches; and just as he himself freely lavishes his gifts upon us, so may we, in return, bring forth fruit to his glory.34

The Priestly Aspect of Christ’s Office

If the kingly aspect of Christ’s office entails the bestowal of every spiritual good, the priestly aspect entails the removal of every spiritual evil.35 Likewise, if the prophetic


33 *Inst.* 2.15.5, *OS* 3:478.6-7; LCC 1:500.

34 *Inst.* 2.15.4, *OS* 3:476.23-477.2; LCC 1:499.

aspect of Christ’s office entails bringing God to us, the priestly aspect entails bringing us to God. In book two, chapter fifteen of the 1559 *Institutes*, Calvin sought to demonstrate that this twofold purpose of Christ’s priesthood consists in two things: (1) Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice; and (2) Christ’s ongoing intercession.36

Calvin held that God, in his irreducible and uncompromising holiness, is alienated from fallen humans on account of their sin and guilt. As Israel’s priesthood inculcated for the Israelites, therefore, God’s holy wrath can only be satisfied, or propitiated, and God’s favour can only be enjoyed, as the result of sin and guilt being blotted out, or expiated, by the intervention of an atoning sacrifice.37 In Christ, however, the priesthood of Israel was not only fulfilled but transformed, as Christ was made both priest and sacrifice. That is to say, by the Father’s will and the Spirit’s unction, Christ became the officiating high priest over his all-sufficient, and thus once-for-all, self-sacrifice. Summing up his interpretation of chapters seven through ten in the Epistle to the Hebrews, Calvin declared:

> The priestly office belongs to Christ alone because by the sacrifice of his death he blotted out our own guilt and made satisfaction for our sins [Heb. 9:22]. God’s solemn oath, of which he ‘will not repent,’ warns us what a weighty matter this is: ‘You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek’ [Ps. 110:4; cf. Heb. 5:6; 7:15]. God undoubtedly willed in these words to ordain the principal point on which, he knew, our whole salvation turns. For…we or our prayers have no access to God unless Christ, as our high priest, having washed away our sins, sanctifies us and obtains for us that grace from which the uncleanness of our transgressions and vices debar us.38

36 For reasons soon to be examined, Edmondson’s treatment of Calvin on Christ’s priestly office (*Calvin’s Christology*, 89-114) is wholly shaped by Calvin’s commentaries on the gospels and the *Institutes*. That Edmondson completely overlooks Christ’s priestly intercession in this treatment is thus all the more conspicuous and puzzling.


38 *Inst*. 2.15.6, *OS* 3:480.11-23; LCC 1:502.
It is noteworthy that Calvin considered Christ’s priestly self-sacrifice so weighty a matter as to call it the principal point on which the whole of salvation turns. In Calvin’s estimation, the cruciality of the atoning death of Christ in the Christian economy cannot be exaggerated. For it was Calvin’s conviction that the sinner has provoked God’s wrath, and until that wrath is propitiated, the sinner’s predicament is hopeless. In light of the great importance of this point, moreover, Calvin deemed the Mass of the sixteenth-century Roman church to be “detestable.” For insofar as the Mass was presumed to be a daily re-offering of Christ at the hands of a sacrificial, mediatorial Roman priesthood, Rome showed that it was not content with Christ’s sole priesthood and once-for-all sacrifice, that it did not hold fast to Christ as its head. In other words, Calvin maintained that to deny the sufficiency of Christ’s once-for-all atoning sacrifice is to deny the efficacy of Christ’s lordship.

For Calvin, however, true knowledge of Christ’s priesthood does not end with the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ, because it follows from the efficacy of Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice “that he is an everlasting intercessor.” What is more, Christ has assumed this role of everlasting intercessor not only to render the Father ever propitious to the persons Christ redeemed by his sacrifice, but also to receive those persons “as his companions in this great [intercessory] office.” That is to say, having been passively consecrated to God by Christ’s sacrifice, believers now actively participate in the intercessory role of Christ’s sole priesthood. And as companions with Christ in his priestly intercession, believers may enjoy the manifold benefits of Christ’s priesthood. They should experience confidence in prayer and peace in their consciences as “they safely lean upon God’s fatherly mercy and

---

39 Inst. 2.15.6, OS 3:481.15-18; LCC 1:503; Inst. 2.15.1, OS 3:471.25-472.3; LCC 1:494.
are surely persuaded that whatever has been consecrated through the mediator is pleasing to God.”⁴⁰ In short, then, Calvin maintained that those united with Christ are accepted by and granted access to the Father upon the efficacy of Christ’s priesthood. And as Christ’s members, they may offer the Father the non-expiatory sacrifices of praise and gratitude in full assurance that those oblations will be gladly received. Thus Calvin confessed:

For we who are defiled in ourselves, yet are priests in him, offer ourselves and our all to God, and freely enter the heavenly sanctuary that the sacrifices of prayers and praise that we bring may be acceptable and sweet-smelling before God. This is the meaning of Christ’s statement: ‘For their sake I sanctify myself’ [John 17:19]. For we, imbued with his holiness in so far as he has consecrated us to the Father with himself, although we would otherwise be loathsome to him, please him as pure and clean—and even as holy.⁴¹

**The Threefold Office of Christ in Calvin’s Biblical Commentaries**

Calvin’s authorial intent for the *Institutes* was to set forth a systematized summary of the Bible’s teaching. Thus to examine Calvin’s *locus* on the threefold office of Christ in the *Institutes*, as has just been done, is to examine the threefold office of Christ in the form of a doctrinal construct. However, Calvin did not intend the *Institutes* to be an end in itself. Rather, Calvin wished his readers to become “armed with a knowledge” of the *Institutes* so as to facilitate their “approach” to his biblical commentaries.⁴² Accordingly,

⁴⁰ *Inst.* 2.15.6, *OS* 3:480.25-481.2; LCC 1:502.

⁴¹ *Inst.* 2.15.6, *OS* 3:481.2-10; LCC 1:502.

⁴² “John Calvin to the Reader,” *OS* 3:6.18-31; LCC 1:4-5. As Parker rightly notes (“Calvin the Biblical Expositor,” in *John Calvin: A Collection of Distinguished Essays*, 186n17), the LCC edition of Calvin’s text identifies “Scripture” as the object of the verb “approach” (*accedat*), despite the fact that Calvin was obviously referring to his biblical commentaries. This error makes for an odd and rather humorous rendition, namely, that Calvin considered the *Institutes* “a necessary tool” for those seeking to be spared “great annoyance and boredom” when reading Scripture.
while the aim of this chapter to this point has been to supply a knowledge of the threefold office of Christ in the *Institutes*, attention will hereafter turn to Christ’s threefold office in Calvin’s biblical commentaries.\(^43\)

Turning to Calvin’s commentaries should allow for a better sense of the scriptural underpinnings and dynamic interconnections in Calvin’s thought about Christ’s threefold office. Given Calvin’s prodigious output as a biblical commentator, however, care must be taken so as to maintain focus on the topic at hand. Here, then, the investigation of Calvin’s commentaries will be limited to his handling of those biblical passages dealing with the person of Melchizedek, as Melchizedek is an especially important biblical type in Calvin’s understanding of Christ’s office. Therefore, pertinent passages from three commentaries which predated and undoubtedly influenced the 1559 *Institutes* will be examined in turn: (1) the 1554 commentary on Genesis; (2) the 1557 commentary on the Psalms; and (3) the 1549 commentary on Hebrews.

*Genesis Chapter Fourteen*

The literary genre of Genesis, in Calvin’s estimation, is historical narrative. Genesis chapter fourteen tells of a battle among warring kings, a battle in which Abraham—then called Abram—rescued his nephew Lot from peril. While returning home from this successful mission, Abraham and his servants encountered a person by the name of Melchizedek, who greeted and fed the weary travelers. What is more, Melchizedek pronounced a blessing upon Abraham, and Abraham, in turn, rendered

\[^{43}\text{As previously observed, a threefold conception of Christ’s office first appeared in Calvin’s writing with the second edition of the *Institutes* in 1539. Calvin did not begin publishing biblical commentaries until 1540. It can be safely concluded, then, that Calvin wrote all his biblical commentaries with the conviction that Christ’s office is threefold.}\]
tithes to Melchizedek. This passage identifies Melchizedek as the king of Salem and the 
priest of the most high God.

Calvin considered the events related in Genesis chapter fourteen “chiefly worthy 
of remembrance,” that is, particularly important to the overall argument and narrative of 
Genesis, “for three reasons.”44 The reason most germane to the discussion at hand is the 
encounter between Abraham and Melchizedek. For in the person of Melchizedek, stated 
Calvin, “the kingdom and priesthood of Christ was shadowed forth.”45 Summarizing this 
momentous occasion, Calvin remarked:

That he received Abram and his companions as guests belonged to his royalty; but 
the benediction pertained especially to his sacerdotal office. Therefore, the words 
of Moses ought to be thus connected: Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth 
bread and wine; and seeing he was the priest of God, he blessed Abram; thus to 
each character [office] is distinctly attributed what is its own. He refreshed a 
wearied and famishing army with royal liberality; but because he was a priest, he 
blessed, by the rite of solemn prayer, the first-born son of God, and the father of 
the church.46

Yet Calvin maintained that “a more exalted and excellent mystery” was typified 
in this encounter between Abraham and Melchizedek. Melchizedek’s pronouncement of 
benediction was clearly “a symbol of preeminent dignity,” claimed Calvin. Melchizedek 
assumed to possess such dignity, and in turn, Abraham, “the father of all the faithful,” 
submitted himself to Melchizedek. Consequently, “it is not to be doubted that God had

44 Comm. on Gen. 14:1, CO 23:196; CTS 1:379. For more on how Calvin handled 
the individual chapters of Genesis in relation to the book’s overall argument and narrative 
see Randall C. Zachman, “Calvin as Commentator on Genesis,” in Calvin and the Bible, 


constituted him [Melchizedek] the only head of the whole church.”

The distinguished status of Melchizedek quite naturally raises questions regarding his identity. Calvin readily, albeit not tenaciously, upheld the traditional interpretation that Salem, over which Melchizedek was king, could be taken for Jerusalem. Yet Calvin cited several objections to the widely accepted notion that Melchizedek was in fact Shem, the son of Noah. Calvin deemed it improbable and pointless that the identity of Shem, a well-known patriarch, would be concealed with a new and obscure name. What is more, Moses makes no mention of Shem migrating to Judea. But even if such an unlikely migration had occurred, argued Calvin, it is unlikely that Abraham would have sojourned in that region as long as he did without seeking out his ancestor. For Calvin, though, the clinching argument against identifying Melchizedek as Shem comes from the apostolic interpretation of Genesis chapter fourteen in Hebrews 7:3, where “Melchizedek, whoever he was, is presented before us, without any origin, as if he had dropped from the clouds, and that his name is buried without any mention of his death.”

These objections attest to Calvin’s desire to give heed to the authorial intent of the biblical writers, and thus his disinclination to speculate beyond what has been selectively


49 Many Jewish and Christian scholars believed Melchizedek and Shem to be one and the same person. See Jerome, Hebrew Questions on Genesis, trans. with introduction and commentary by C. T. R. Hayward (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 47. Furthermore, see Luther, Lectures on Genesis, WA 42:535.30-536.1; LW 2:381.

50 Comm. on Gen. 14:18, CO 23:200-1; CTS 1:387-88; Comm. on Heb. 7:3, OE 19:106-8; CNTC 12:89-90. The identity of the Epistle to the Hebrews’ author was not of great concern to Calvin, though he did not think the letter to be Pauline. But the question of authorship notwithstanding, Calvin classified this letter “without hesitation among the apostolical writings” (Comm. on Hebrews, argumentum, OE 19:11.1-20; CNTC 12:1).
recorded in Scripture. As such, Calvin was not so much interested in the personal identity of Melchizedek. Rather, Calvin was chiefly interested in how Melchizedek prefigured the person of Christ. On this issue Calvin remarked:

The sum of the whole is, that Christ would thus be the king next to God, and also that he should be anointed priest, and that forever; which it is very useful for us to know, in order that we may learn that the royal power of Christ is combined with the office of priest.51

And as to the reason that Christ was anointed king and priest, Calvin confessed:

The same person, therefore, who was constituted the only and eternal priest, in order that he might reconcile us to God, and who, having made expiation, might intercede for us, is also a king of infinite power to secure our salvation, and to protect us by his guardian care. Hence it follows, that, relying on his advocacy, we may stand boldly in the presence of God, who will, we are assured, be propitious to us; and that trusting in his invincible arm, we may securely triumph over enemies of every kind. But they who separate one office from the other, rend Christ asunder, and subvert their own faith, which is deprived of half its support.52

Psalm 110

Because the present aim is to observe the dynamic interconnections in Calvin’s thought on Christ’s threefold office, it is worthy of mention, if only by way of introduction, that Calvin regarded Psalm 110 as a byproduct of the kingly and prophetic offices being joined together in the person of David. For in Psalm 110, the king of Israel, whom Calvin considered a typological anticipation of Christ, “spoke by the spirit of prophecy, and consequently prophesied of the future reign of Christ.”53 In fact, Calvin

53 Comm. on Ps. 110:1, CO 32:161; CTS 11:298.
customarily referred to the author of any psalm, who in the vast majority of cases he believed to be David, as simply “the prophet.”

But even though Calvin found a prophetic component in many of the psalms, his interpretation of the psalms in general may be, and usually is, described as literal and historical in character. That is because Calvin made a studied attempt to understand the psalms in their own historical context, so as to determine their immediate referent, if not always their exclusive or ultimate referent. Calvin, therefore, was not intent on relating every psalm to Christ. In his exposition of many psalms, in fact, Calvin did not so much as mention Christ. Yet Calvin considered Psalm 110 to be an exceptional case, in that a literal, historical approach to it yielded no immediate referent. He thus determined that Psalm 110 is purely prophetic, relating entirely and exclusively to Christ. For Calvin contended that even without the corroborating testimonies of Christ (Matt. 22:42-45; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42-43) and “the apostle” (Heb. 1:13; 5:6; 7:17, 21), “the psalm itself would admit of no other interpretation.” Its “truths…relate neither to David nor to any other person than the mediator alone.”

Calvin maintained that Psalm 110 contains four major truths. The first and second truths pertain to Christ’s kingship, whereas the third and fourth truths pertain to Christ’s priesthood. The first truth is that the Father granted Christ “supreme dominion, combined with invincible power, with which he either conquers all his enemies, or compels them to

---


submit to him.”57 It is derived from Psalm 110:1: “Jehovah said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool.’”58 In the last clause of this verse, king David, “the prophet,” declares that the one he calls Lord will subdue all opposition to his royal throne. At the same time, David intimates that this Lord’s kingdom will not enjoy enduring tranquility until he has utterly vanquished his enemies. Therefore, while “this prediction” concerning the ultimate triumph of Christ’s kingdom “will not be accomplished before the last day,” explained Calvin, Christ rules even now, in the midst of those enemies, as Psalm 110:2 clearly states. What is more, added Calvin, the particle “until” in Psalm 110:1 does not imply that Christ’s reign will cease when his enemies are made his footstool. Rather, this particle suggests a change in the manner of Christ’s reign. For then Christ’s kingship will be unopposed and thus unambiguous, meaning that “his divine majesty will be more conspicuous.”59

The second truth contained in Psalm 110, according to Calvin, is that God would extend the boundaries of Christ’s kingdom far and wide.60 Calvin understood this to be the meaning of Psalm 110:2, where David prophesies: “Jehovah shall send out of Zion the sceptre of thy power.” Calvin maintained that this verse implies a contrast between the monarchies of David and Christ, underscoring the supremacy of Christ’s kingship. For whereas the proportions of David’s kingdom were rather small, “God would cause his [Christ’s] power to extend to the remotest regions of the earth.”61 Thus Calvin argued

57 Comm. on Ps. 110, argumentum, CO 32:159; CTS 11:295.
58 Preface to Comm. on Ps. 110:1, CO 32:159; CTS 11:296.
59 Comm. on Ps. 110:1, CO 32:161; CTS 11:299-300.
60 Comm. on Ps. 110, argumentum, CO 32:159; CTS 11:295.
61 Comm. on Ps. 110:2, CO 32:162; CTS 11:300.
that this verse foretells the calling of the Gentiles through the promulgation of the gospel, as the sceptre of Christ’s power—that is, the instrument whereby Christ governs and advances his kingdom—is itself the gospel. In other words, David prophesies in Psalm 110 “that an innumerable offspring shall be born to Christ, who shall be spread over the whole earth.” That this prophecy had since been fulfilled was all the more astounding to Calvin, in that it was “accomplished by the sound of the gospel alone, and that, too, in spite of the formidable opposition of the whole world.”

The third truth contained in Psalm 110 is that “Christ, having been installed into the priestly office with all the solemnity of an oath, sustains the honours of that [office] equally with those of his regal office.” Calvin believed this to be the meaning of Psalm 110:4, where king David declared: “Jehovah has sworn and will not repent, ‘You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.’” Calvin readily granted “that anciently among heathen nations kings were wont to exercise the priestly office.” Yet Melchizedek was no heathen. On the contrary, as Genesis 14:18 indicates, Melchizedek, the king of Salem, was a priest of the most high God. What is more, the Mosaic law forbade Israel’s kings from holding the priestly office. The circumstances of Israel’s kings, including David, were thus “vastly different” from those of Melchizedek. For like the king predicted in Psalm 110, Melchizedek was divinely invested with the office of the priesthood in conjunction with the crown and throne. In Calvin’s estimation, however,

---

62 Comm. on Ps. 110:2, CO 32:162; CTS 11:301.


64 Comm. on Ps. 110, argumentum, CO 32:159; CTS 11:295.

perhaps the most important issue concerning Psalm 110:4 is that this predicted king’s appointment to the holy priesthood is punctuated with a divine oath. God is certainly “not wont to mingle his venerable name with matters of minor importance,” assured Calvin.\footnote{Comm. on Ps. 110:4, \textit{CO} 32:164; CTS 11:305.} Such being the case, he added:

\[W\]e may therefore conclude that the priesthood of Christ is invested with great importance, seeing that it is ratified by the oath of God. And, in fact, it is the very turning point upon which our salvation depends; because, but for our reliance on Christ our mediator, we would be all debarred from entering into God’s presence. In prayer, too, nothing is more needful for us than sure confidence in God, and therefore he not only invites us to come to him, but also by an oath has appointed an advocate for the purpose of obtaining acceptance for us in his sight.\footnote{Comm. on Ps. 110:4, \textit{CO} 32:164; CTS 11:306.}

The fourth truth contained in Psalm 110 is that the priesthood of this predicted king will be a new and everlasting priesthood.\footnote{Comm. on Ps. 110, \textit{argumentum}, \textit{CO} 32:159; CTS 11:295.} On the one hand, a priest of a different manner, or order, is promised, a priest whose manifestation shall fulfill, transform, and thereby bring to an end the provisional, temporary Levitical priesthood.\footnote{Comm. on Ps. 110:4, \textit{CO} 32:164-65; CTS 11:306.} On the other hand, it follows from the supremacy and eternality of this coming priest that “he has no successor.” In Genesis chapter fourteen, Moses discussed Melchizedek “as if he were a celestial individual,” noted Calvin. In other words, Moses said nothing of Melchizedek’s origin, or even more momentously, of Melchizedek’s end, thereby leaving Melchizedek, as it were, to live on through the ages. It is this latter feature in the Genesis description of Melchizedek that Calvin found David relating to Christ in Psalm 110, so as to underscore the perpetuity of Christ’s priestly office. “Therefore, they do him [Christ] grievous

\footnote{Comm. on Ps. 110:4, \textit{CO} 32:164-65; CTS 11:306.}
wrong, and wrest from him, by abominable sacrilege, the honour divinely conferred upon him by an oath, who either institute other sacrifices for the expiation of sins, or who make other priests,” bristled Calvin. Identifying his opponents more clearly, Calvin claimed that “if the popish priests” of the sixteenth-century Roman church “will assume the prerogative of effecting a reconciliation between God and men, they must of necessity denude Christ of the peculiar and distinguishing honour which his Father has conferred upon him.”

The Epistle to the Hebrews

By way of introduction to this discussion of Calvin’s commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, a few words concerning Stephen Edmondson’s important book, Calvin’s Christology, are in order. As his title suggests, Edmondson composed this book with the intent of offering readers an “exhaustive doctrinal exposition” of Calvin’s thought on the person and work of Christ. To fulfill this purpose adequately, Edmondson felt a “need to find within Calvin’s writing structures that hold his many Christological notions together and that are distinctly his.” Surely, then, Edmondson was pleased to report that he found “the fundamental Christological structures that organize his [Calvin’s] thought” to be “readily evident.” Principally, these structures are: (1) Calvin’s perception that Scripture, first and foremost, narrates God’s history with his people, a history which culminates in the history of Christ as related by the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; (2) Calvin’s understanding that the covenant God made with his people is essential to this history, meaning that scriptural history is covenantal history, and that the mediatorial

office of Christ is defined by his mediation of this covenant; and (3) Calvin’s delineation of Christ’s mediatorial office within the context of this covenantal history, under the rubric of Christ’s threefold office.\footnote{Edmondson, \textit{Calvin’s Christology}, 6-7.}

At this point it is altogether obvious that the structures Edmondson considers so salient in Calvin’s christological thought are predominantly historical in nature. Moving forward, moreover, it will become altogether obvious that the historical nature of these structures determines not only the sources Edmondson selects for his exposition of Calvin’s thought but also the manner in which Edmondson uses them. With this latter claim in mind, carefully ponder the following statement, where Edmondson explains his approach to chapter two of \textit{Calvin’s Christology}, a chapter about Calvin’s understanding of the relationship between Christ and covenantal history:

I rely on Calvin’s commentaries on the Old Testament and the four Gospels in my discernment of this relationship…as these recommend themselves as the best sources to discover Calvin’s Christological reading of Scripture; but I take the template read-off of these commentaries and apply it to Calvin’s \textit{Institutes} in the following chapters, in the belief that we find this same structure of the covenant history reflected there.\footnote{Edmondson, \textit{Calvin's Christology}, 7.}

These “following chapters” that Edmondson refers to here include chapters three, four, and five of \textit{Calvin’s Christology}, chapters constituting, in Edmondson’s description, “a detailed explication of Christ’s threefold office, exploring Calvin’s explanation of Christ’s work for us as priest, king, and prophet as it is found both in his Gospel commentaries and in the \textit{Institutes}.”\footnote{Edmondson, \textit{Calvin’s Christology}, 8.} What Edmondson is saying, in other words, is that
his whole explication of Calvin’s understanding of Christ’s threefold office is derived, in its entirety, from Calvin’s commentaries on the gospels and the *Institutes*. What is to be made of Edmondson’s selection of sources, and the manner in which he uses them? Does this approach, as Edmondson claims, reflect characteristics that are distinctly Calvin’s, and readily evident in Calvin’s thought? The following statement by Edmondson may well prompt some suspicion as to the veracity of such claims:

[M]y commitment to understand Calvin’s Christology in the context of Scripture’s narration of God’s covenant history with God’s Church is obviously derivative of Frei’s work on biblical narrative, especially insofar as Frei argues for Calvin as the archetype of narrative interpretation of Scripture which he champions in his *Eclipse*.\(^{74}\)

Given Edmondson’s intent to offer an exhaustive doctrinal exposition of Calvin’s christological thought, it is surely appropriate that he confer with Calvin’s commentaries on historical, or narrative, portions of Scripture. However, Edmondson’s so-called commitment to historical narrative seems more like a preoccupation, because it results in material and methodological determinations that are, in point of fact, neither distinctly Calvin’s nor readily evident in Calvin’s thought.

Consider Calvin’s own comments about Christ’s office as found in the gospels. Without doubt, maintained Calvin, these “four narratives” record how Christ discharged his office. Nevertheless, the “force and effect of his coming are more stressed in other books of the New Testament.” Relative to the doctrinal significance of Christ’s office, the Gospel of John differs “quite considerably” from the other three, observed Calvin.\(^{75}\) For


whereas Matthew, Mark, and Luke “narrate the life and death of Christ more fully,” John “emphasizes more the doctrine in which Christ’s office and the power of his death and resurrection are explained.” It is neither that Matthew, Mark, and Luke lack all doctrine pertaining to the office of Christ, nor that John is devoid of “historical narration.” It is simply that “the doctrine which points out to us the power and fruit of Christ’s coming appears far more clearly in him [John] than in the others.”

According to Calvin, then, the gospels do not recommend themselves as the best sources in the New Testament from which to explicate the doctrine of Christ’s office. Why? In large part, because the genre of the gospels is primarily historical narrative, and Calvin did not consider historical narrative to be a literary medium especially well-suited for doctrinal explication. In addition to these remarks by Calvin about the gospels, his studied attempt to distinguish history from doctrine in the Mosaic Harmony testifies to the clarity and consistency of his conviction on this issue. Thus it is little wonder that Calvin’s treatment on the priestly aspect of Christ’s threefold office in the Institutes bears no indication whatsoever of an inordinate influence from Calvin’s gospel commentaries, let alone the presence of any template-like organizational structure taken from them, as Edmondson alleges. Rather, as is commonly acknowledged among Calvin scholars, Calvin’s treatment on Christ’s priesthood in the Institutes exhibits the influence of the Epistle to the Hebrews. This too is little wonder, because in Calvin’s reckoning, “no book in Holy Scripture...speaks so clearly of the priesthood of Christ” as the Epistle to


77 Peterson, Calvin and the Atonement, 54n37; Zachman, John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian, 254; Partee, The Theology of John Calvin, 164-65.
To Calvin’s mind, however, the doctrine contained in Hebrews on the office of Christ is by no means limited to the priestly aspect of Christ’s office. On the contrary, the intention of its author was to set forward, in a full, holistic sense, “what the office of Christ is.” Yet Calvin’s treatment of Christ’s office in his commentary on Hebrews, as will soon become apparent, is notably different from his treatments of Christ’s office previously examined in this chapter. The office of Christ, according to Calvin, is the topic of three major portions of Hebrews, namely, Hebrews 1:1-3:6, 4:14-5:10, and 7-10. Though these portions are obviously much too large to explore Calvin’s handling of them in great depth or detail, his handling of each will now be highlighted, in turn.

_Hebrews 1:1-3:6_

The Epistle to the Hebrews begins with the gripping declaration that God, who in former days spoke to his people in many ways and times by the prophets, has in these last days spoken by his Son, the Son through whom God made all things, and to whom God appointed all things. “The purpose of this introduction is to commend the doctrine of Christ. It teaches that we are not only to receive this doctrine with reverence, but we are

---

78 Comm. on Hebrews, _argumentum_, OE 19:11.8-9; CNTC 12:1.


to rest in it alone,” observed Calvin.\textsuperscript{81} In other words, it is not that Christ brought yet another word pertaining to God’s self-disclosure but that Christ himself is the last word of God’s self-disclosure, meaning that true knowledge of God may be nothing less, more, or other than true knowledge of Christ.\textsuperscript{82} Calvin maintained that Hebrews begins in this way, namely, with “the dignity of Christ,” so its author might immediately address the “point which was in dispute, that the doctrine brought by Christ had the preeminence, because it was the fulfillment \textit{[clausula]} of all the prophecies.”\textsuperscript{83} With a sustained focus on this dispute “in the three first chapters” of Hebrews, moreover, its author establishes that Christ stands “in the supreme step of power \textit{[in summo gradu principatus]},” and concludes “that when he [Christ] speaks all ought to be silent, and that nothing should prevent us from seriously attending to his doctrine.”\textsuperscript{84} What Calvin believed the author of Hebrews to be doing in this portion of the epistle, then, was unobtrusively introducing and discussing the prophetic aspect of Christ’s office.\textsuperscript{85}

The prophetic preeminence of Christ is promptly expanded upon in Hebrews 1:3, where Christ is said to be the fullness of God’s glory, the very image of God’s nature, and the one who upholds all things by the word of his power. What must be kept in mind, declared Calvin, is “that the glory of the Father is invisible to you until it shines forth in Christ,” just as “the majesty of the Father is hidden until it shows itself as impressed on

\textsuperscript{81} Comm. on Heb. 1:1, \textit{OE} 19:15.8-10; \textit{CNTC} 12:5.


\textsuperscript{83} Comm. on Hebrews, \textit{argumentum}, \textit{OE} 19:12.31-13.2; \textit{CNTC} 12:2.

\textsuperscript{84} Comm. on Hebrews, \textit{argumentum}, \textit{OE} 19:13.13-16; \textit{CNTC} 12:3.

\textsuperscript{85} Parker, “Calvin’s Commentary on Hebrews,” 138.
his [Christ’s] image.” In short, the point to be grasped is “that God is revealed to us in no other way than in Christ.” For Calvin, then, the prophetic office of Israel was not only fulfilled but transformed in Christ, as Christ was made both messenger and message, both the human emissary for God and the incarnate manifestation of God. Thus the character and will—the very bosom, as it were—of the invisible God are rendered visible in Christ, the embodied word of God, to the end that the Father may be known, loved, trusted, and obeyed as he discloses himself in and through his Son.

In addition to teaching that Christ is the fullness of God’s glory, the very image of God’s nature, and the one who upholds all things by the word of his power, Hebrews 1:3 also teaches that Christ made purification for sins, and then sat down at the right hand of his Father in heaven. Calvin saw these closing words of Hebrews 1:3 as a transition from the first to the second phase of this epistle’s argument for the prophetic preeminence of Christ, though these words also prompted Calvin to reiterate that the authorial intent of this epistle is to teach what the office of Christ is. What should not be missed is that here Calvin spoke as if the office of Christ is essentially twofold, consisting of a prophetic and a priestly aspect, stating:

This [the topic raised in the closing words of Hebrews 1:3] is the second section

86 Comm. on Heb. 1:3, OE 19:18.20-19.4; CNTC 12:8. To be sure, Calvin thought that some knowledge about God can be had through creation, and for this reason Calvin sometimes referred to creation as “the theatre of God’s glory,” “a garment of God,” and even “an image of God.” See Zachman, John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian, 234-40. Even so, Calvin insisted that such knowledge is faint, fragmented, decidedly non-redemptive, and thus profoundly inadequate—a knowledge that neither does nor can apprehend God as Father, Saviour, and Lord. This qualification is important to recognize when interpreting Calvin, because it allowed him to refer to creation as, in some sense, an image of God, yet to proclaim, with no apparent fear of contradiction, as in his treatment of the second commandment, that apart from Christ, “a true image of God is not to be found in all the world” (Comm. on Exod. 20:4, CO 24:377; CTS 4:108).
of the doctrine which is treated in this epistle. The whole discussion is stated under these two heads—that Christ, to whom is given supreme authority, is to be listened to before all others; and that, because by his death he has reconciled us to the Father, he has put an end to the old sacrifices.\(^87\)

The second phase of the argument for the prophetic preeminence of Christ, which establishes that Christ is much greater than the angels, begins in Hebrews 1:4. For the remainder of this epistle’s first chapter, its author goes on to point out that Christ has a better name than the angels, that Christ is the proper object of angelic worship, and that Christ, having been exalted to the right hand of the Father, has a better station than the angels. The first word in Hebrews 2:1, “therefore [quamobrem],” moved Calvin to briefly summarize Hebrews chapter one. That he did so in terms of the doctrine brought by Christ demonstrates that Calvin considered the prophetic aspect of Christ’s office to be the chapter’s main theme. “He [the author of Hebrews] now makes clear what he has up to this point had in view by comparing Christ to the angels,” observed Calvin, “namely that he gives the highest authority to this [Christ’s] doctrine.”\(^88\)

Following the warning in Hebrews 2:1-4 about the danger of neglecting the great salvation manifested by Christ, a warning which receives its force from the preeminence of Christ’s prophetic office, the issue of Christ’s superiority to the angels is resumed. God the Father has subjected all things to Christ, argues the author of Hebrews, a singular dignity of which the angels have no share. Yet during the earthly ministry of Christ, his superiority to the angels was temporarily veiled. For as a human Christ partook in the suffering and temptation common to humans, that as a faithful prophet he might proclaim


\(^88\) Comm. on Heb. 2:1, OE 19:30.1-3; CNTC 12:18.
the name of God to them, and that as a merciful high priest he might render himself a propitiation for them.

The third and final phase of this epistle’s argument for the prophetic preeminence of Christ begins in Hebrews 3:1, where the author transitions from Christ’s superiority to the angels to Christ’s superiority to Moses. As to both the reason for and wisdom in this particular manner of advancing the argument, Calvin remarked:

Thus he [the author of Hebrews] advances prudently in his course. If he had begun with Moses, his comparison would have been more disliked, but when it is made clear from Scripture that celestial powers are subordinate to Christ, there is no reason why Moses or any mortal being should refuse to be classed with them, so that the Son of God may appear eminent above angels as well as men.89

The reasons for Christ’s superiority to Moses are discussed in Hebrews 3:1-6. Yet that discussion need not be explored at present, because it is peripheral to the issue at hand. What is of primary importance is that here, once again, Calvin spoke of the office of Christ as if it were essentially twofold, consisting of a prophetic and a priestly aspect. On Hebrews 3:1 Calvin commented:

Because he [the author of Hebrews] has earlier briefly compared him [Christ] with Moses and Aaron by describing him as doctor and priest, he now brings both descriptions together. He adorns him with double honours as he sustains a double character [duplicem sustinet personam] in the church of God. Moses performed the office of prophet and doctor, Aaron that of priest: but both duties [munus] are laid on Christ.90

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

It should be increasingly apparent that, for Calvin, the “whole discussion” of the

89 Comm. on Hebrews, argumentum, OE 19:13.6-11; CNTC 12:2.
90 Comm. on Heb. 3:1, OE 19:47.31-48.5; CNTC 12:34.
Epistle to the Hebrews is contained under “two heads” of doctrine, namely, the prophetic aspect of Christ’s office and the priestly aspect of Christ’s office. As seen, Hebrews 1:1-3:6 contains recurring references to the priestly aspect of Christ’s office, and Calvin readily comments upon them. Yet it is altogether clear that Calvin considered Christ’s prophetic office to be the main theme of this portion of Hebrews, especially if it is grasped—as Parker observes, and the block quotations directly above and below confirm—that Calvin related the roles of doctor and apostle to Christ’s prophetic office in this context. Calvin believed that Hebrews 4:14 marks a significant turning point in the development of this epistle, however, by ushering the priestly aspect of Christ’s office to the forefront of the discussion. Calvin wrote:

Thus far he [the author of Hebrews] has been speaking of the apostleship of Christ, and now he turns to his second office. We have said above that when the Son of God was sent to us, he was given a twofold character, that of teacher [doctoris] and that of priest. Now that he has exhorted the Jews to embrace the teaching of Christ and to obey it, the apostle shows the benefit that his priesthood has brought.

Thinking in broad terms about the outline and progression of this epistle as a whole, Calvin stated that the author “turns to explain the priesthood of Christ” because “the true, pure understanding of which [Christ’s priesthood] abolishes all the ceremonies of the law.” Hebrews 4:14-5:10 advances this larger objective in that here the author “briefly showed how welcome that priesthood ought to be to us, and how gladly we ought to acquiesce in it,” added Calvin. In the portion of the epistle presently at hand, in other

---

92 Parker, “Calvin’s Commentary on Hebrews,” 139.
93 Comm. on Heb. 4:14, OE 19:69.27-32; CNTC 12:54.
words, the author’s primary aim was to show briefly that the high priestly office of Israel was not only fulfilled but transformed in Christ, the great high priest. To this end the author “compares Christ with the Levitical [high] priests and shows where he is like them, and where unlike.”

Calvin highlighted five points on which the author compares Christ with the Levitical high priests. First, like the Levitical high priests, Christ was “taken from among men,” from which it follows that Christ, the Son of God, is also truly and fully human. Second, like the Levitical high priests, Christ does not “act privately,” but as a representative for the company of humans with whom he is identified. Third, like the Levitical high priests, Christ did not seek to appease God empty-handed, but with the means of sacrifice that God had appointed. Fourth, like the Levitical high priests, Christ was not immune from the infirmities common to humankind; thus he is well-equipped to sympathize with and render help to his fellow humans amidst their troubles. And fifth, like the Levitical high priests, Christ did not undertake his priesthood by his own volition but was elected and approved by God.

Despite these many likenesses, the relationship between the Levitical high priests and Christ is that of typological correspondence, not absolute identification. As such, there are differences that must be recognized as well. One highly significant difference is that Christ is sinless, whereas the Levitical high priests were not. Moreover, other key differences between the Levitical high priests and Christ stem directly from this issue of sin, as the following comment from Calvin demonstrates:

95 Comm. on Heb. 5:1, OE 19:74.5-6; CNTC 12:58.

Not all the things that are attributed to Levitical priests are applicable to Christ. We know that Christ was free from every infection of sin. In this he differed from all others, in that he had no need to offer sacrifice for himself. It is sufficient that he himself bore our infirmities, although he was free from and undefiled by sin. As far as the old Levitical priests are concerned, the apostle says that they were subject to human infirmity, and so they atoned for their own sins as well, by their sacrifices, so that they were not only fairer to the transgressions of others, but they suffered with them. This office ought to be applied to Christ to the extent of inserting the qualification previously mentioned, that he shared our infirmities yet without sin. Although he was always free from sin, yet that feeling for infirmities which has been spoken of is alone sufficient to make him disposed to help us, merciful and ready to forgive, and concerned for our ills. The sum of all this is that Christ is not only our brother because of his oneness with our flesh and nature, but he is also led and, as it were, fashioned to kindness and goodwill by his fellow-feeling for our infirmities.\textsuperscript{97}

What is more, Calvin maintained that while the Levitical high priests and Christ are indeed alike in that their priesthoods were legitimated and rendered efficacious by the calling of God, there is a momentous distinction in this regard that must be noted. The “difference between them,” elaborated Calvin, is “that when Christ succeeded according to a new and different form, and was made a high priest forever, it was clear that Aaron’s priesthood [Aaron being the archetype of the Levitical high priests] had been temporary, and was due to cease.”\textsuperscript{98} Receiving his cue from Hebrews 5:6, in other words, Calvin observed that Christ, the incarnate Son of God, was called by God to be the one true successor of the Levitical high priesthood, which was provisional by divine design. Yet Christ fulfilled the Levitical high priesthood according to a new and different form, in that Christ’s priesthood was divinely designed to be everlasting, as foreshadowed by the priesthood of Melchizedek.

\textsuperscript{97} Comm. on Heb. 5:2, \textit{OE} 19:76.2-18; \textit{CNTC} 12:60.

\textsuperscript{98} Comm. on Heb. 5:4, \textit{OE} 19:76.23-77.2; \textit{CNTC} 12:60.
Hebrews Chapters 7-10

From Hebrews 5:11 to the end of chapter six, the author “turns aside” to reprove and exhort those whose lack of maturity in the faith betrayed their slowness to hear and heed the apostolic witness concerning Christ. However, Hebrews 7:1 marks the author’s return to the topic of the priestly aspect of Christ’s office. After stating that the priesthood of Christ differs “from the ancient priesthood under the law,” observed Calvin, the author adduces three ways in which Christ’s priesthood is superior. First, Christ’s priesthood took the place of the Levitical priesthood, being established and sealed with a special oath from God. Second, Christ’s priesthood is eternal, and thereby remains efficacious forever. And third, he who executes Christ’s priesthood, Christ himself, transcends Aaron and all other Levitical priests in honour and dignity. All of these things, moreover, were “shadowed forth in the person of Melchizedek.”

In order to elaborate the ways in which Christ’s priesthood was foreshadowed by Melchizedek, the author of Hebrews “enumerates one by one the points to be noticed about Melchizedek which make him like Christ.” As seen previously in this chapter, Calvin discussed the typological correspondences between Melchizedek and Christ in both Genesis chapter fourteen and Psalm 110; thus there is no need to tarry long on Calvin’s comparison of Melchizedek and Christ in Hebrews chapter seven. There is one issue, however, that must not be missed. That issue concerns Hebrews 7:2, where the apostolic writer refers to Melchizedek as “king of righteousness” and “king of peace.” These titles provided Calvin the perfect opportunity to point out that the offices of both

---


king and priest are joined together in the person of Christ, just as they were in the person of Melchizedek. After all, that is precisely what Calvin did when commenting on Genesis chapter fourteen and Psalm 110. When commenting on Hebrews chapter seven, however, Calvin did nothing of the sort. To be sure, Calvin applied both of these titles to Christ, to whom they properly belong. Nevertheless, the notion of Melchizedek having been “king of righteousness” and “king of peace” is treated as part of the main typology at hand. In other words, righteousness and peace are treated as attendant features of the priesthood by which Melchizedek foreshadowed Christ, insomuch that it is as priest that Christ effects the purification and reconciliation of God’s people.101

T. H. L. Parker is widely regarded as a leading, perhaps the leading, authority on Calvin’s commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews; and according to Parker, the kingly aspect of Christ’s office “has no place” in Calvin’s interpretation of Hebrews. As mentioned previously in this chapter, Calvin maintained that the intention of the author of Hebrews was to show what the office of Christ is; and in Calvin’s estimation, the author’s entire discussion is contained under two heads of doctrine: the prophetic aspect and the priestly aspect of Christ’s office. What is discovered in Calvin’s commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, then, is an essentially twofold office of Christ. This is a rather fascinating discovery, for three reasons. First, the twofold notion of Christ’s office found in Calvin’s commentary on Hebrews is that of prophet and priest, whereas the twofold notion of Christ’s office found in the majority of patristic and medieval theologians, as well as in Calvin’s own writings prior to 1539, is that of king and priest. Second, Calvin’s handling of Genesis chapter fourteen and Psalm 110 evidence a decided emphasis on the kingly and priestly aspects of Christ’s office. Third, Calvin wrote all his biblical

commentaries, and thus all three commentaries discussed in this chapter, after 1539—that is, after a threefold notion of Christ’s office began appearing in every edition of Calvin’s 

*Institutes.* What, then, should be made of this discovery? With Parker, this writer does not believe it should be interpreted as an inconsistency or aberration in Calvin’s thinking or writing. Rather, this discovery speaks to the dynamic interconnections in the scriptural underpinnings of Calvin’s thought on Christ’s threefold office, as well as Calvin’s remarkable fidelity to the biblical document he was attempting to expound.\(^\text{102}\)

**Concluding Excursus: Jansen on Calvin and the Office of Christ**

John Frederick Jansen’s *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Work of Christ* is deemed a classic in the field of Calvin literature. Moreover, the theses that Jansen champions in this book have had an ongoing influence in that they continue to shape the thought of several more recent Calvin scholars.\(^\text{103}\) Jansen rightly maintains that Calvin’s earliest theological writings demonstrate his alignment with the majority of patristic and medieval theologians in his espousal of a *munus duplex*, or a twofold notion of the messianic office, in which Christ is king and priest. Jansen goes on to argue, however, that the primary importance of Calvin’s eventual espousal of a *munus triplex*, or a threefold notion of Christ’s office, was the systematic use he suggested for it, insomuch that the threefold formula popularized by Calvin became commonplace in the dogmatic literature

\(^{102}\) Parker, “Calvin’s Commentary on Hebrews,” 140; idem, “Introduction,” xxii; idem, *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought*, 68.

of the post-Calvin Reformed tradition. But regardless of how important Calvin’s systematic use of the *munus triplex* was for later theology, Jansen claims that it remained only “peripheral” to Calvin’s own thought, to which Jansen immediately adds:

I would go further. While Calvin suggests the formula as a theological category in his later dogmatics, he himself does no more with it—for the very good reason that he cannot make use of it. The essential structure of his doctrine of Christ’s work remains twofold. If such be the case, then the *munus triplex* is not the truest expression of his theology.

In Jansen’s estimation, therefore, the prophetic aspect of Christ’s office neither reflected nor flowed from Calvin’s biblical exegesis. Rather, Calvin became motivated to acknowledge Christ as prophet, and thus to espouse a threefold notion of Christ’s office, due to his desire for dogmatic systematization and his burden to safeguard the church’s ministerial order. Consequently, Jansen concludes:

In spite of the triple formula Calvin had suggested in his dogmatics, his exegesis finds a different and truer solution—namely, that Christ’s revelatory character belongs not under the *de officiis*, but under the *de persona*, permeating as it does both his kingly and priestly work, and providing the bond of union that unites these. Had Calvin here developed systematically his own biblical theology, I believe this would have been the answer.

In light of the content covered in this chapter, as well as the chapters prior to it, Jansen’s claims should seem quite out of sorts and more than a little problematic. While Jansen’s claims can be contradicted, they shall serve here as a foil by which to draw this

---


chapter to a fitting close. To that end, the following points should not be missed:

1) The prophetic aspect of Christ’s office is most certainly a product of Calvin’s biblical exegesis. Calvin’s handling of the Epistle to the Hebrews alone is sufficient to put any doubt of this to rest. As is clearly seen in chapter four of this study, however, the scriptural underpinnings for the prophetic aspect of Christ’s office are also prominent in Calvin’s *Mosaic Harmony*.

2) If the prophetic aspect of Christ’s office is most certainly a product of Calvin’s biblical exegesis, then the same may be said for Calvin’s teaching on the threefold office of Christ. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the first indication of Calvin’s movement from a *munus duplex* to a *munus triplex* occurred in 1539, just as Calvin was beginning his career as a biblical commentator. More to the point, however, the kingly, priestly, and prophetic aspects of Christ’s office are all readily evident in Calvin’s handling of Genesis chapter fourteen, Psalm 110, and the Epistle to the Hebrews, thereby demonstrating that Calvin believed the *munus triplex* to be the testimony of Scripture. To be sure, there is no succinct articulation of Christ’s threefold office to be found in Calvin’s exposition of these passages. In fact, the kingly and priestly aspects of Christ’s office dominate Calvin’s exposition of Genesis chapter fourteen and Psalm 110, whereas the prophetic and priestly aspects of Christ’s office dominate Calvin’s exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Yet this does nothing to undermine the scriptural underpinnings of Calvin’s teaching on the threefold office of Christ. Quite the contrary, this speaks to the dynamic interconnections among the three aspects of Christ’s office in Scripture, and accentuates Calvin’s acute concern for the integrity of the biblical texts he was seeking to expound.

3) In the *Institutes*, Calvin expounded the doctrines of the Christian faith,
including the doctrine of Christ’s office, in the form of theological loci—that is, in the form of doctrinal constructs. Beginning with the 1539 edition of the Institutes, Calvin consistently maintained that the office of Christ was threefold, consisting of prophetic, kingly, and priestly aspects. To be sure, Calvin distinguished the task he pursued in the Institutes from the task he pursued in his biblical commentaries. Yet these tasks should be seen as complementary rather than contradictory, contrary to what Jansen implies. For Calvin did not view the Institutes as a venue in which to expound aprioristic ideas or abstract, speculative analyses of the Christian faith. What is more, Calvin did not view theological loci, including that of Christ’s office, as a venue in which to force the Christian faith into preconceived schemes, formulas, or categories. Rather, Calvin’s aim in the Institutes was to present a systematized summary of the Bible’s teaching that would not only reflect his biblical exegesis but also facilitate one’s approach to his biblical exegesis in the form of his biblical commentaries.

4) Jansen claims that the prophetic aspect of Christ’s office is a peripheral and inoperative addendum in Calvin’s thought—an addendum which Calvin appropriated for schematic purposes, but an addendum of which Calvin neither did nor could make theological use. What Jansen’s claim implies is that, according to Calvin, there is a naturalistic knowledge to be had of God, and of Christ as king and priest. Thus Jansen’s claim betrays a profound misunderstanding with far-reaching implications. For according to Calvin, it is as prophet that Christ sets himself forth as the object of faith, through whom we know God as Father, Savior, and Lord, and in whom we receive all God’s benefits. Thus without the prophetic aspect of Christ’s office, there could be no real understanding of the priestly and kingly aspects of Christ’s office. What is more, without
the prophetic aspect of Christ’s office, there would be no preaching of the gospel, no faith, no twofold grace of justification and sanctification, and no individual or corporate life in Christ. Far from being a peripheral and inoperative addendum in Calvin’s thought, therefore, the prophetic aspect of Christ’s office is foundational for the subject matter that constitutes books three and four of Calvin’s latest, greatest exposition of the Christian faith: the 1559 *Institutes*.108

5) Jansen makes a categorical distinction between the office of Christ and the person of Christ. However, Calvin did not make such a distinction because Calvin did not consider the office of Christ in abstraction from the person of Christ. Quite the contrary, Calvin considered Christ to be the living embodiment of his office. The three primary offices in ancient Israel—prophet, priest, and king—could be considered in abstraction from those who held them because those offices were extrinsic, temporal, transferable, and separable, the latter in that they were held by different persons. Yet those offices were not only fulfilled but transformed, having been forever united and embodied in Christ, who as prophet is messenger and message, who as priest is sacrificer and sacrifice, who as king is victor and victory. For Calvin, in other words, the threefold office of Christ explains the relationship between who Christ is and what Christ has been divinely commissioned to do, to the end that Christ’s messianic identity might be manifest amidst the unity of his person and work.

Chapter Seven
Satisfaction, Intercession, Participation: Receiving Christ and Enjoying the Benefits of His Priesthood

Sin provokes God’s wrath, and until that wrath is propitiated, the sinner’s predicament is one of unremitting alienation from God. Of this Calvin was acutely aware, and thus he grasped with characteristic clarity the place and import of Christ’s priestly self-sacrifice. Only Christ could and did render an effectual satisfaction for our sins, and apart from that satisfaction we have no hope of access to God, reasoned Calvin. When contemplating Christ’s priesthood, therefore, “we must begin from the death of Christ in order that the efficacy and benefit of his priesthood may reach us.”¹

Yet while Calvin regarded Christ’s death as the necessary point of departure when contemplating Christ’s priesthood, by no means did Calvin regard the satisfaction Christ rendered for sins as the totality, or even the proper end, of his priestly ministrations. On the contrary, Calvin maintained that Christ’s priestly ministrations are twofold in nature, in that it follows from Christ’s once-for-all satisfaction for sins that the resurrected, ascended Christ “is an everlasting intercessor” for those whose sins he has effectually borne and borne away. For Calvin, in fact, it is only by virtue of Christ’s priestly intercession that the redeemed may enjoy the benefits of Christ’s priestly satisfaction.²

Recognizing that only Christ is called and equipped to undertake the ministrations of once-for-all satisfaction and everlasting intercession for the redeemed, Calvin was far from ambiguous concerning the uniqueness and singularity of Christ’s priesthood. This


sacrificial, mediatorial office belongs to Christ alone. To understand Calvin on this matter with any sense of adequacy, however, the following point must be grasped: Calvin’s insistence on the uniqueness and singularity of Christ’s priesthood does not mean that Calvin espoused an essentially extrinsic notion of the relationship between Christ and the Christian, as if Christ’s priestly ministrations were undertaken in a merely transactional manner by a third party acting before God in the stead of God’s people. Rather, Calvin maintained that “Christ plays the priestly role not only to render the Father favorable and propitious toward us…but also to receive us as his companions in this great office [Rev. 1:6].” As such, any notion of a priesthood of believers constituted by a plurality of individuals independent of or removed from Christ is utterly foreign to Calvin. However, Calvin readily confessed the reality of a priesthood of believers in the sense that believers are made to partake of, and are thus given a share in, the sole priesthood of Christ. What is more, Calvin confessed that believers come to enjoy the benefits of Christ’s priesthood only as the result of their reception of Christ himself, which is to say, only as the result of their participation in and with the person of their high priest. The objective at hand, then, is to explore the substance and implications of Calvin’s said confessions.

Substitution and Participation: Christ for Us, Christ in and with Us

In the latter half of book two of the Institutes, where Calvin gave particular attention to the finished work of Christ, his once-for-all accomplishments for us and our salvation, Calvin declared, “our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ [Acts 4:12]. We should therefore take care not to derive the least portion of it from

---

3 Inst. 2.15.6, OS 3:480.34-481.2; LCC 1:502.
anywhere else.” Shortly thereafter, Calvin explained at length the meaning of our whole salvation being comprehended in Christ. For having discussed Christ’s accomplishments for us in the latter half of book two of the Institutes, Calvin devoted all of book three to the application and reception of those accomplishments—that is, to the benefits and effects of Christ’s work. Calvin’s opening words in book three are thus terrifically momentous, as they accentuate what is most fundamental to his understanding of applied soteriology in general, and consequently, to his understanding of the benefits of Christ’s priesthood in particular. These words read:

[A]s long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us…. We also, in turn, are said to be ‘engrafted into him’ [Rom. 11:17], and to ‘put on Christ’ [Gal. 3:27]; for, as I have said, all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him.5

Here Calvin reveals that his entire understanding of applied soteriology, including his understanding of the benefits of Christ’s priesthood, is grounded on a relationship between substitution and participation, between what Christ did for us and what Christ does in and with us, respectively. For Calvin, moreover, this relationship between substitution and participation demands distinction yet forbids division. In other words, Christ’s work and its benefits can be neither conflated with nor sundered from Christ’s person and life, as his accomplishments for us remain useless to us until he dwells in and

4 Inst. 2.16.19, OS 3:507.1-508.1; LCC 1:527.

with us. Note once again Calvin’s clarity and conviction regarding a reality he considered truly grand:

[T]hat joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him.6

Christ’s righteousness surely is imputed to us, avers Calvin, but not while Christ himself remains remote from us. Only as we are made one with the person of Christ does his righteousness overwhelm our unrighteousness, because only by our participation in and with Christ’s person do we come to partake of Christ’s benefits.

The Nature of the Believer’s Participation in Christ

Calvin used several expressions, in addition to that of participation, to denote the solidarity of believers with their Lord, expressions such as union with Christ, communion with Christ, oneness with Christ, engrafting into Christ, putting on Christ, partaking of Christ, being joined to or inhabited by Christ, and the like.7 What Calvin did and did not mean by these descriptively rich expressions has been the subject of considerable

6 Inst. 3.11.10, OS 4:191.27-34; LCC 1:737.

debate. Thus the following comments serve to accentuate and clarify the most characteristic and crucial contours of Calvin’s thought on this matter:

1) The believer’s participation in Christ is profoundly intimate and intensely personal. “We ought not to separate Christ from ourselves or ourselves from him,” stated Calvin. “Rather, we ought to hold fast bravely with both hands to that fellowship by which he has bound himself to us.” Moreover, Christ does not only “cleave to us by an indivisible bond of fellowship, but with a wonderful communion, day by day, he grows more and more into one body with us, until he becomes completely one with us.” The sort of bond Calvin has in mind here goes far beyond that which is merely metaphorical, ethical, volitional, legal, or ideational. Calvin maintained that believers in Christ are members of Christ, and thus “truly united” to him. As head of his members, in turn, Christ imparts life to those possessed of this “true and genuine” communion. What is more, as believers in Christ are “truly” his members, they are made to partake in the very same indissoluble, insuperable love that exists between God the Father and God the Son. Still, the question remains as to what Calvin meant by the believer’s union with Christ being true and genuine. Strikingly, perhaps, Calvin claims this union is to be seen


11 Comm. on 1 Thess. 4:18, *CO* 52:167; *CNTC* 8:366.


as the whole of us being one with the whole of Christ—that is, as “complete and total” in the sense that it “is not a matter of the soul alone, but of the body also, so that we are flesh of his flesh etc. [Eph. 5:30].”¹⁴ In fact, Calvin argues that when Paul likens the relationship of Adam and Eve to that of Christ and the church in the fifth chapter of Ephesians, the implication that believers are members of Christ’s flesh and bones, “is no exaggeration, but the simple truth.” For just as Eve was formed from “the substance of her husband Adam, and thus was a part of him, so, if we are to be the true members of Christ, we grow into one body by the communication of his [Christ’s] substance.”¹⁵ To be sure, however, Calvin’s clear affirmation that the believer’s union with Christ entails the communication of Christ’s very “substance” does not mean Calvin espoused any notion whatsoever of the believer’s humanity mixing or intermingling with Christ’s divinity, so as to result in the believer’s humanity being denatured or deified. On the contrary, Calvin stridently repudiated this unbiblical transgression of the Council of Chalcedon’s christological boundaries amidst his dispute with the controversial Lutheran theologian, Andreas Osiander.¹⁶ What Calvin wished to affirm, therefore, is that true and genuine participation in Christ himself is the manner by which believers participate in Christ’s saving benefits. For Christ is not “afar off” from his members, wrote Calvin, but “makes us, ingrafted into his body, participants not only in all his benefits but also in himself.”¹⁷ In other words, Calvin confessed that believers are truly and genuinely joined

¹⁴ Comm. on 1 Cor. 6:15, CO 49:397-98; CNTC 9:130.
¹⁵ Comm. on Eph. 5:30, OE 16:271.24-272.8; CNTC 11:208.
¹⁶ Inst. 3.11.5-12, OS 4:185-97; LCC 1:729-43.
¹⁷ Inst. 3.2.24, OS 4:34.28-31; LCC 1:570.
to Christ in soul and body because Christ’s true and genuine human “flesh is a channel to pour out to us the life which resides intrinsically, as they say, in his divinity.”\(^{18}\)

2) The believer’s participation in Christ is spiritual—not in the sense of being less or other than a true and genuine union with Christ in soul and body, and not in the sense of being vague or nebulous, but in the sense of being affected by the agency of the Holy Spirit. To fulfill his role as mediator and head of his members, Christ has been endowed with the fullness of the Spirit, so that he may both bear and bestow the Spirit. Even more basic to the issue at hand, “the same Spirit is common to the Father and the Son, who have one essence, and the same eternal deity.”\(^{19}\) For Calvin, then, the Spirit is always and ever the Spirit of Christ in that the Spirit does not act as a surrogate for a distant or absent Christ, but rather as the personal agent of Christ’s presence and power. Thus Calvin maintained that the Spirit “is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.”\(^{20}\) By the Spirit, in turn, the believer possesses Christ and therefore all of Christ’s benefits, not least of which is a share in the incarnate mediator’s relationship with the Father, which means that as the Father beholds the Son, he beholds us included in the Son.\(^{21}\)

3) The believer’s participation in Christ is realized through the Spirit-wrought human activity of faith. In fact, Calvin deemed the inducement of faith in the elect “the


\(^{19}\) Comm. on Rom. 8:9, OE 13:160.25-161.9; CNTC 8:164-65; Inst. 3.1.2, OS 4:2-3; LCC 1:538-39.

\(^{20}\) Inst. 3.1.1, OS 4:2.5-6; LCC 1:538.

\(^{21}\) Inst. 3.1.1, OS 4:1.22-24; LCC 1:537; Comm. on John 17:21, OE 11/2:222.13-223.12; CNTC 5:148.
principal work of the Holy Spirit.” Here the theological interconnections of Calvin’s thought begin to emerge with considerable clarity. The Father has bestowed upon the incarnate Christ the fullness of every good and saving benefit of God. As such, Christ is inextricably joined to and endowed with the Spirit, meaning Christ cannot be obtained apart from the Spirit, just as the Spirit cannot be obtained apart from Christ. The Spirit’s incursion into the life of the elect effectually discloses Christ to them, so as to bring into existence the faith through which “the Son of God is made our own, and has his dwelling with us.” This Spirit-wrought faith, in other words, is the means by which the believer apprehends Christ himself, “possessing and enjoying him as he offers himself to us.” Thus while Calvin maintained that faith brings to fruition the believer’s participation in Christ, Calvin insisted that faith has no inherent value, power, or merit. Rather, faith is but the instrumental cause of this participation, deriving the whole of its saving character from its proper object, the person of Christ. Faith may be called truly and justly saving, therefore, only in the sense that through faith believers are possessed of and engrafted into Christ, who is their salvation. In light of faith’s instrumental nature, Calvin rejected any notion of equating the believer’s faith in Christ to the believer’s fellowship with Christ, as if faith constituted this fellowship. Otherwise, faith would be reduced to merely the Spirit-facilitated human work supplying the condition of our saving ourselves. Rather than faith being the substance of the believer’s fellowship with Christ, then, Calvin saw

22 Inst. 3.1.4, OS 4:5.14; LCC 1:541.


24 Inst. 3.11.7, OS 4:188-89; LCC 1:733-34.

this fellowship as the “remarkable effect of faith,” through which “believers gain Christ abiding in them.” For this very reason Christ called himself the bread of life, because by “partaking of him, his life passes into us and is made ours—just as bread when taken as food imparts vigor to the body.”

4) The believer’s participation in Christ is a mystery. Of course, Calvin believed that a great deal could be known and confessed regarding this grand reality. Even so, he maintained that the “manner and character” of this reality shall forever transcend our cognitive and linguistic capacities of articulation. Thus the believer’s participation in Christ can be apprehended but never comprehended; experienced but never explained, let alone explained away. This is not a concession to irrationality but a mark of intellectual maturity, thought Calvin, as one of reason’s strengths is its ability to identify its own limits, and thus to avoid ostensibly sophisticated forms of infidelity. “I am overwhelmed by the depth of this mystery,” he cried, “and with Paul am not ashamed to acknowledge in wonder my ignorance.” Chiding as “foolish” the rationalist, reductionist impulse to embrace apostolic witness only in accordance with one’s own understanding, Calvin urged, “Let us therefore labour more to feel Christ living in us, than to discover the nature of that communication.” Displayed here is Calvin’s conviction that the essence of this mystery is not accessible by scientific investigation or philosophical speculation, though its edges and implications are amenable to theological articulation and confessional illustration. Here also is Calvin’s refusal to degrade biblical mystery by reducing it to a


problem. Problems are subject to solution by the application of an appropriate technique, whereas biblical mysteries transcend every conceivable solution or technique. Problems elicit frustration and invite resolution, whereas biblical mysteries elicit contemplation and invite adoration. Problems obscure other related matters until solved, whereas biblical mysteries illumine such matters yet never surrender their own inherent inscrutability.28

The Soteriological Implications of the Believer’s Participation in Christ

Before discussing Calvin’s understanding of the believer’s participation in Christ with respect to Christ’s priesthood in particular, a few words are needed about Calvin’s understanding of the believer’s participation in Christ with respect to applied soteriology in general. Calvin’s understanding of salvation as participation in our incarnate substitute demonstrates the tremendous soteriological significance that Calvin attributed to Christ’s humanness, and in turn, distances Calvin from the dichotomist, even dualist, tendencies of some post-Calvin evangelical theology.29 Calvin viewed participation and substitution as distinguishable yet indivisible soteriological realities that are mutually informing and equally important. Naturally, therefore, he viewed Christ’s incarnation and atonement in like manner, refusing to separate Christ’s person from his work, and refusing to reduce Christ’s incarnate humanity to little more than a prerequisite for his atoning death. Just as


Calvin refused to separate Christ’s person from his work, moreover, Calvin refused to separate Christ’s saving benefits from Christ himself, as if salvation were the direct and immediate reception of an abstract and objectified commodity given on account of Christ yet apart from him—that is, as if Christ were the agent and condition of our salvation but not that salvation itself. Finally, just as Calvin refused to separate Christ’s saving benefits from Christ himself, Calvin refused to separate the objective accomplishments of Christ’s saving activity for his people from the subjective effects of Christ being in and with his people, as if the believer’s bond with Christ were merely metaphorical, ethical, volitional, legal, or ideational, not an inner experience of the life-giving, life-transforming presence of God. In short, Calvin’s understanding of salvation is relational and participationist, not transactional and appropriationist; for believers receive Christ and are saved in Christ, as opposed to obtaining an impersonal asset called salvation based on what Christ has done.

**Satisfaction and Participation: Dying, Rising, Ascending in and with Christ**

Turning now to the believer’s participation in Christ’s priesthood, we begin where Calvin deemed it necessary for all contemplation of Christ’s priesthood to begin, with his once-for-all satisfaction for sins. While maintaining that the shadow of the cross fell upon Christ’s entire earthly existence, here Calvin gave pride of place to the substance of that shadow: Christ’s expiatory, propitiatory death. Yet whenever mention is made of Christ’s death, noted Calvin, we must grasp at the same time what belongs to Christ’s resurrection and ascension.\(^{30}\) Calvin’s point is that while death, resurrection, and ascension are indeed

distinct aspects of Christ’s once-for-all satisfaction for sins, the organic interconnection among them renders the meaning and significance of each aspect incomplete and subject to distortion when isolated from the other two. Thus these aspects of Christ’s priestly reconciliation of sinners to God will be viewed together and addressed in turn.

_Dying in and with Christ_

Christ offered himself as a perfect sacrifice to his Father and was punished in our place, bearing in his body and soul the full force of our sin, guilt, and shame, and thus the full force of our alienation, condemnation, and death. In this way, Christ satisfied without remainder the demands of God, in order that believers may be freely and justly reconciled to God. Therefore, when the Apostles’ Creed confesses that Christ was dead and buried, observed Calvin, it means that Christ “in every respect took our place to pay the price of our redemption.”\(^31\) The element of substitution is both salient and robust in Calvin’s understanding of Christ’s death, as in Calvin’s view, Christ so truly and thoroughly took the place of sinners that his death cannot be properly understood as anything less or other than the death of him who, having known no sin, was made sin. “How can we become righteous before God? In the same way as Christ became a sinner,” declared Calvin.\(^32\) At the same time, however, Calvin held that this substitution could truly be undertaken, and its benefits truly imputed, only on the basis of a profound personal identification, wherein

\(^{31}\) _Inst_. 2.16.7, _OS_ 3:491.10-12; _LCC_ 1:511.

\(^{32}\) Comm. on 2 Cor. 5:21, _OE_ 15:106.3-4; _CNTC_ 10:81.
the incarnate mediator takes on and suffers in “our person,” as it were.33 Utterly foreign to Calvin, then, is the notion that Christ died for sinners so that they do not need to, as the extrinsic nature of such a transactional, appropriationist schema cannot address in any real or adequate sense the justice of God, the direness of the fallen human predicament, or the divinely intended effect of Christ’s death within the believer. More to the point, in Calvin’s estimation, is that Christ died for sinners so that, in and with him, they too could die. Because Calvin maintained that the design of Christ’s death is not to forgive sin in the abstract but to judge and destroy sin in the concrete human expression of the lives of sinners, he maintained that the only source of the believer’s death to sin is participation in the death of Christ.34

*Rising in and with Christ*

If Christ took the place of sinners in every respect in death, as Calvin held, then nothing about Christ’s death, as death, alleviates its severity and horror. His death is the wages of the sin he became, and the devastating nadir of his exposure to the wrath of his Father. As such, it is not merely meaningful but necessary to think of the resurrection as, first and foremost, the redemption and justification of Christ himself. For the resurrection is nothing if not God’s deliverance of Christ from the power of death, which was in full force until the moment he was raised. What is more, the resurrection is nothing if not the Father’s remission of the guilt Christ bore, and the Father’s acceptance of the man he had

33 Comm. on 2 Cor. 5:21, *OE* 15:106.4-7; *CNTC* 10:81; Comm. on Gal. 2:20, *OE* 16:56.16-20; *CNTC* 11:43.

judged, rendering Christ the representative in whom the believer receives newness of life, remission of guilt, and acceptance by God.\textsuperscript{35} Thus to deny that the resurrection is the redemption and justification of Christ is to deny that he became sin for us, that he is our substitute, and that his benefits are found nowhere but in him. Convinced that believers cannot share in what their incarnate substitute does not possess, and thus cannot mediate, Calvin held that just as our sinful flesh is mortified by participation in Christ’s death, we are raised in newness of life by participation in Christ’s resurrection. “[A]s the graft has the same life or death as the tree into which it is ingrafted,” explained Calvin, “so it is reasonable that we should be as much partakers of the life as of the death of Christ.”\textsuperscript{36} In other words, as the whole of us is united with the whole of Christ, his humanness acts as the means by which the benefits of his death and resurrection are communicated to us and made ours. No lesser connection could produce any life-giving, life-transforming effect. For it is but a “little thing” to have a merely conceptual grasp that Christ was crucified and raised from the dead, as he is “rightly known” only “when we feel how powerful his death and resurrection are, and how efficacious they are in us.”\textsuperscript{37}

\textit{Ascending in and with Christ}

In the very body that was crucified and resurrected, Christ ascended to heaven,


\textsuperscript{37} Comm. on Phil. 3:10, \textit{OE} 16:356.27-357.7; CNTC 11:275.
making through his body a way to accomplish the mediation proper to his priesthood by presenting believers in and with himself to the God who now receives them with paternal eagerness and delight. Therefore, Christ did not ascend to heaven in a private capacity, as if to dwell there alone, noted Calvin. Rather, Christ “entered heaven in our flesh, as if in our name,” so as to secure a common inheritance for head and members alike. Viewing localized presence as an essential property of fully human bodies, Calvin did not consider Christ to be spatially proximate to believers in the manner he was prior to his ascension. Nonetheless, Calvin maintained not only that the ascension is the believer’s participation in Christ’s return to the Father, but also that believers must partake of the body of their ascended substitute if the reconciliation he won for them in his body is to be theirs. Here Calvin would remind us that the Spirit is the bond by which Christ unites believers to himself—not because the third person of the Trinity is some spiritualized modality of a corporeally absent Christ, but because the Spirit is the person in whom believers access their embodied mediator at the right hand of the Father. Like anyone who takes seriously the church’s confession that the eternal Son of God became fully human without ceasing to be fully God, Calvin was acutely yet unabashedly aware that “every truth…preached of Christ is quite paradoxical to human judgment.” So while it seems impossible “that the Spirit truly unites” us to the ascended Christ, thought Calvin, faith ought to perceive

39 Comm. on John 14:2, OE 11/2:139.4-6; CNTC 5:75.
40 Inst. 2.16.16, OS 3:503.30-504.2; LCC 1:524; Comm. on Eph. 2:6, OE 16:182-83; CNTC 11:143.
41 Comm. on Rom. 6:1, OE 13:117.14-17; CNTC 8:121.
the folly of subjecting the secret and immeasurable power of the Spirit to our measure.\textsuperscript{42} What is more, faith ought to prompt those raised with Christ to heed Paul’s injunction of setting their minds on things above, so as to lift their hearts to their ascended head even as he draws them upwards to himself.\textsuperscript{43}

**Intercession and Participation: Living before the Father in and with Christ**

Calvin regarded Christ’s everlasting intercession as the second aspect and proper end of Christ’s twofold priestly ministration, by which intercession the redeemed come to enjoy the ongoing benefits of Christ’s once-for-all satisfaction for sins. Having entered heaven in our flesh, forevermore the embodied God, Christ’s intercession is bidirectional; for in his humanness Christ mediates God to us, and no less mediates us to God. Calvin thought that in both directions of his intercession, Christ’s heavenly ascent and exaltation exhibits the indelible impress of his earthly descent and humiliation, not a decisive break from it. With respect to Christ mediating man to God, Calvin deemed the notion of Christ kneeling before the Father and pleading as a supplicant an error that not only diminishes the grandeur of the situation, but also denies the unity of the Godhead. Rather, Calvin held that Christ’s advocacy for the redeemed consists of his continual appearance before the Father decked in the unfading splendour of his death and resurrection; the unremitting assertion of sin-bearing victory by him who was raised glorified yet wounded.\textsuperscript{44} In


\textsuperscript{43} Comm. on Col. 3:1, *OE* 16:443; *CNTC* 11:345-46.

\textsuperscript{44} *Inst.* 3.20.20, *OS* 4:325.26-32; LCC 2:878; Comm. on Rom. 8:34, *OE* 13:182.13-22; *CNTC* 8:186; Comm. on 1 John 2:1, *CO* 55:310; *CNTC* 5:244.

240
mediating God to man, moreover, the ascended and exalted Christ does not overpower and repel us with a naked majesty. For in Christ, thought Calvin, we find that God has profound experiential knowledge of being buffeted by and learning obedience amidst the harshness of human existence under the conditions of sin, rendering him an intercessor in whom divine graciousness and mercy are magnified.45 Thus what Christ accomplished in his earthly descent and humiliation is brought to fruition in his heavenly ascent and exaltation, as his intercession reconciles God and man in his very person, and through his flesh, which is our flesh, forges a new and living way of access for us to the Father.46

According to Calvin, then, Christ’s everlasting intercession has the stunning effect of incorporating believers into his relationship with the Father, which means the Father receives believers to himself with the same paternal acceptance and affection as he does his Son; this, of course, is the very force of the believer’s justification in Christ. Further, with a new and living way of access to the Father being forged in Christ, his members are able to rightly respond to the Father. Yet Calvin thought that if Christ’s priesthood is to aid and abet the true knowledge and pure worship of God, then the way that Christ’s members respond to the Father must be shaped by their participation in their ascended substitute’s relationship with the Father, as no human truly knows or rightly relates to the Father but the Son—and those who have been included in the Son. Thus Calvin held that Christ’s members are made to be a priesthood of believers in him, so as to partake in the


46 Inst. 2.16.16, OS 3:503.30-504.10; LCC 1:524-25; Comm. on Heb. 10:20, OE 19:163-64; CNTC 12:141.
chief end and ultimate benefit of Christ’s sole priesthood, namely, his worship of the Father. Christian worship, therefore, is the believer’s participation through the Spirit in the Son’s communion with the Father—that is, Christian worship is our participation in and with Christ in his vicarious life of worship and intercession.\(^47\)

Having been consecrated in body and soul by Christ’s consecration of body and soul for them, believers are to render what Calvin deemed the “finest worship of God.” This worship includes prayer, praise, faith, obedience, service of neighbor, and mutual love, care, and intercession for fellow believers—a comprehensive self-offering of body and soul in grateful response for the once-for-all expiatory, propitiatory self-offering made for us in Christ. Calvin saw the worship prescribed to the priesthood of believers as the divinely appointed vehicle by which the Father blesses Christ’s members. Moreover, Calvin saw this worship as the only possible alternative to idolatry, given that the only true worship of God is that which depends “solely upon Christ’s intercession.” For as Christ is the only mediator between God and man, “he is the only way, and the one access, by which it is granted us to come to God…to those who turn aside from this way and forsake this access, no way and no access to God remain.”\(^48\)

Thus on the one hand, Calvin did not understand the priesthood of the sixteenth-century Roman church to be an accurate manifestation of the priesthood of believers. For in his estimation, the Roman priesthood championed the offering of eucharistic sacrifices


and penitential satisfactions which were considered expiatory and propitiatory when any such attempt could do nothing but cast reproach upon the priesthood of Christ. 49 What is more, Calvin argued that the sixteenth-century Roman priesthood had not only corrupted the priesthood of believers, but also boasted of a title that had been unduly “snatched” from all believers. 50 On the other hand, however, Calvin did not understand believers to be priests in the sense of being a plurality of individuals whose worship is simply an offering made to the Father based on the merits of Christ’s work for them. Rather, Calvin espoused a corporate priesthood of all believers, brought into one body by their participation in the singular and utterly unique priesthood of their ascended substitute. Thus the worship of believers is to be nothing less or other than their response to the Father’s reception of them in Christ; and this response is to be determined by and reflective of their participation in Christ’s priesthood, as the only way believers can and do worship the Father is in and through Christ, who gathers up the worship of his members, cleanses it, and presents it together with his own. 51

49 Comm. on 1 Tim. 2:5, CO 52:269-72; CNTC 10:209-12; Comm. on 1 John 2:1, CO 55:308-10; CNTC 5:242-44.

50 Inst. 4.19.25, OS 5:459-60; LCC 2:1472-73.

Conclusion

Calvin expounded the priestly office of Jesus Christ in his biblical commentaries and *Institutes* with the aim of setting forth a heartfelt confession of the biblical, apostolic faith in such a way as to provide a faithful witness to the truth revealed by God in Christ. The exposition of Christ’s priesthood, like all other aspects of Calvin’s thought, was intended to advance the specific purpose of Calvin’s carefully considered programme of working and writing, the purpose of instructing Calvin’s fellow ministers in evangelical churches throughout Europe.

Calvin maintained that the Levitical priesthood constituted the centrepiece of ancient Israel’s divinely designed worship of God. What is more, Calvin maintained that the Levitical priesthood had no other object than the due observation of the second commandment, the commandment which Calvin understood to prohibit idolatry, and at the same time, promote the true knowledge and pure worship of God. The importance of these affirmations could hardly be overstated, given that Calvin viewed Jesus Christ as the archetype whom the Levitical priesthood foreshadowed. In other words, Calvin believed that the Levitical priesthood—with the sacrificial, mediatorial and prophetic, forth-telling aspects of its ministry—typified the person, accomplishments, and benefits of Christ with respect to his priestly office. According to Calvin, the Levitical priesthood subserved the due observation of the second commandment by fostering the true knowledge and pure worship of God among the ancient Israelites, thereby fortifying them against the idolatry of the surrounding Gentile peoples. Thus in similar manner, Calvin was convinced that if his fellow evangelicals were to think rightfully, worship faithfully,
and minister effectively amidst the perceived idolatry of the sixteenth-century Roman church, they would need a robust knowledge of Christ’s priestly office.

Crucial to a knowledge of Christ’s priesthood, in Calvin’s estimation, is a grasp of the utter singularity, uniqueness, sufficiency, and finality of that priesthood, the truth and reality of which leaves neither place nor possibility for offering any sort of expiatory, propitiatory sacrifices, or adducing any subsequent mediators between God and humans. But by no means did Calvin think of Christ’s priesthood in extrinsic, transactional, or appropriationist terms. On the contrary, Calvin insisted that all Christ has suffered and done for us as our substitute remains useless to us until he dwells in and with us, so as to bring about our participation through the Spirit in the Son’s communion with the Father. Christ undertakes his priestly ministrations, therefore, not only to render the Father propitious to us, but also to allow us to partake in the vicarious life and intercession of our ascended high priest, in whom we learn what it means to truly know and rightly worship the Father.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

Calvin’s Works


Ioannis Calvini opera selecta. Edited by Peter Barth, Wilhelm Niesel, and Dora Scheuner. 5 vols. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1926-52.

Calvin’s Works in Translation


Patristic, Medieval, and Reformation Works


______. *Quaestiones et locutiones in Heptateuchum*, in CCSL 33.


Gregory the Great. *Homilies on Ezekiel*, in PL 76.

____________. *Registrum Epistularum*, in CCSL 140, 140A.


Luther, Martin. *Lectures on Genesis*, in WA 42; LW 2.


____________. *Dispositio orationis in epistola Pauli ad Romanos*, in CR 15.


Secondary Sources

Books and Dissertations


249


251


Articles, Papers, Etc.


