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in this issue:

<i>Editor's Notes</i>	1
<i>Calvin's Struggle for Church Discipline</i> <i>Ronald L. Cammenga</i>	3
<i>John Calvin, the Church Reformer</i> <i>Russell J. Dykstra</i>	21
<i>The Doctrine of the Covenant in the Theology of John Calvin</i> <i>David J. Engelsma</i>	36
<i>A Review Article:</i> <i>The Reformed Faith of John Calvin: The Institutes in Summary</i> <i>Douglas J. Kuiper</i>	90
<i>Book Reviews</i>	104

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PROTESTANT REFORMED
THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

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Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary
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USA

Book Reviews

- | | |
|-----|--|
| 104 | Carson, D.A.. <i>Christ and Culture Revisited</i> |
| 111 | Godfrey, Robert. <i>John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor</i> |
| 114 | Gordon, Bruce. <i>Calvin</i> |
| 120 | Selderhuis, Herman J. <i>John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life</i> |
| 127 | Zachman, Randall D. <i>John Calvin and
Roman Catholicism</i> |

Editor's Notes

This issue of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* contains the last three speeches that were presented at the Calvin Conference sponsored last fall by the Protestant Reformed Seminary.

The undersigned examines Calvin's crucially important work on behalf of the restoration of biblical church discipline. As I indicate in the article, Calvin's enduring contribution in this whole area was the result of several great struggles in which he was personally involved, struggles that entailed sacrifice and loss for Calvin. He did not draw back. He maintained strong, biblically-informed convictions, for which he was willing to suffer persecution. May God stir up those who stand in the tradition of Calvin to stand firm on these principles today.

Prof. Russell Dykstra looks at "John Calvin, the Church Reformer." The professor outlines Calvin's life, highlighting God's special preparation of him for his future work as church reformer. He describes Calvin as a man, as the unique instrument of reformation, as a preacher, pastor, and seminary professor. Prof. Dykstra weaves throughout his biography highlights of the teachings of Calvin that were the firm theological basis for the great reformation of the church of the sixteenth century.

Prof. David Engelsma takes up the important matter of Calvin's covenant theology. Although Calvin never presented an organized, well-worked-out doctrine of the covenant, nevertheless, Prof. Engelsma demonstrates that Calvin set forth every important aspect of the doctrine of the covenant. Significantly, Calvin related covenant and election, and, as the professor shows, Calvin's doctrine of the covenant was controlled by election. Prof. Engelsma's special concern is to address one of the main heresies confronting Reformed and Presbyterian churches today, the heresy of the Federal Vision. Prof. Engelsma has greatly expanded his original speech at the Calvin Conference in order to deal more thoroughly with this powerful movement that has made significant inroads into even ostensibly conservative Reformed churches. He identifies the origins of the movement in the conditional

theology of the “Liberated” churches. And he shows how the Federal Vision departs from Calvin, from the Reformed confessions, and from Scripture.

Rev. Douglas Kuiper, a frequent contributor to our Book Review department, offers an extended review of Prof. David Engelsma’s recently published *The Reformed Faith of John Calvin: The Institutes in Summary*. This summary of Calvin’s *Institutes* has been published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association in commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin. The review is very positive, and along with Rev. Kuiper, I would like to recommend this fine volume to our readers. The book can be ordered online, or at the address of the Reformed Free Publishing Association: 1894 Georgetown Center Dr., Jenison, MI 49428-7137. This summary of Calvin’s *Institutes* is a great introduction to the *magnum opus* of the reformer.

In this issue, our readers will also find a number of book reviews, most of which are reviews of books on and about John Calvin. Our special thanks to Prof. Herman Hanko, who has so willingly submitted reviews for this issue.

Our prayer is that this issue will prove to be a blessing to our readers, and that the articles will stir up anew thanks to God for what He has given to His church—His church of the twenty-first century—in the great reformer John Calvin.

Soli Deo Gloria!

—RLC

Calvin's Struggle for Church Discipline

Ronald L. Cammenga

Introduction

By a conference such as this the Protestant Reformed Seminary acknowledges its debt to the great sixteenth-century Reformer John Calvin.

Without hesitation, without any embarrassment, we embrace the heritage that God has given to us through the great Reformer John Calvin. We are Calvinists. Gratefully we are Calvinists. We are convicted of the truths of Calvinism. We train men in the precious truths of Calvinism. We send them forth to proclaim the truths of Calvinism throughout the world.

In the "Catalog of the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches," in the opening paragraph that introduces everything else in the catalog, you will find the following:

The Seminary is therefore dedicated to preserve and develop the truth of the Word of God and to provide an education in this truth in all branches of theology. More specifically, the seminary maintains this truth as it has been historically maintained since the time of the great Protestant Reformation, especially the Reformation of John Calvin. These principles and truths of the Calvin Reformation form the heart of all the instruction offered.¹

The great achievement of the Reformation was that it restored the gospel of Christ to the church. This included many things. It included, first of all, that the true doctrine of the gospel was restored, centrally the truth that we are justified by faith alone on the basis, not

1 "Catalog of the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches," p. 4. This Catalog, which includes a complete description of the courses taught in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, is available upon request, or online at www.prca.org (The Protestant Reformed Theological School; catalog).

of our own works, but of the work and merit of Christ. It included the restoration of the pure preaching of the gospel as God's means to work and preserve the faith of His people. It included the recovery of the sacraments, the signs and seals of the gospel, which had been grossly corrupted and abused in the church prior to the Reformation. Really, the entire life of the church was founded anew on the sacred Scriptures.

One important aspect of the restoration accomplished by the Reformation, and particularly by John Calvin, was the restoration of biblical church discipline. By the time of the Reformation, church discipline had fallen into horrible neglect and abuse in the Roman Catholic Church. One of the main concerns of Calvin was to restore proper church discipline to its rightful place in the church.

Calvin's efforts for the recovery of biblical church discipline bore fruit in the Reformed creeds. What the confessions have to say about Christian discipline reflects Calvin's views. The Belgic Confession of Faith shows such a high estimate of Christian discipline that, in Article 29, it makes the exercise of Christian discipline in the punishing of sin a mark of the true church, and the corruption of discipline a distinguishing characteristic of the false church. In Article 30, the Confession insists that the true church must be governed by that spiritual policy that our Lord has taught us in His Word, in order that true religion be preserved and transgressors punished. In Article 32, the Confession asserts that for maintaining peace and unity in the church, excommunication or church discipline is requisite.

The Heidelberg Catechism, in Lord's Day 30 and 31, treats Christian discipline as one of the keys of the kingdom. This key is necessary for the church to use, for by this key all impenitent and unbelieving sinners are excluded from the Christian church and by God Himself from the kingdom of heaven.

The Second Helvetic Confession states that "discipline is an absolute necessity in the church and excommunication" (chap. 18).

In chapter 30, the Westminster Confession of Faith deals with the subject of church discipline. The third paragraph of the chapter defends the necessity of discipline in the church:

Church censures are necessary for the reclaiming and gaining of of-

fending brethren; for deterring of others from like offences, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump; for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel; and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.

In a personal letter to one of his fellow reformers, Henry Bullinger, Calvin wrote:

This, however, I will venture to throw out in passing, that it does appear to me, that we shall have no lasting Church unless that ancient apostolic discipline be completely restored, which in many respects is much needed among us.²

There is a strange silence about this important aspect of the work and legacy of John Calvin in the celebrations of the 500th anniversary of Calvin's birth. Little attention has been and is being paid to Calvin's great work in the area of the recovery of biblical church discipline. That is strange.

Or, is it?

Undoubtedly, this strange silence is due to the fact that there is no longer an appreciation for this aspect of Calvin's work. The Reformed churches, to a distressing extent, have forsaken the biblical church discipline for the recovery of which Calvin devoted his life.

All along, Calvin had his enemies, enemies that especially opposed his efforts to establish biblical church discipline in the church of Geneva. And there have always been those who have caricatured Calvin and maligned his work. One author in this camp writes: "One of the most momentous experiments of all time began when this lean and harsh man entered" the gates of the city of Geneva. Calvin, in his view, was the "dictator of Geneva." And he goes on to say:

To achieve [his] draconian suppression of personality, to achieve this vandal expropriation of the individual in favour of the community,

2 John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, ed. Jules Bonnet, trans. David Constable (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009 edition), vol. 4, p. 66.

Calvin had a method all his own, the famous church “discipline.” A harsher curb upon human impulses and desires has hardly been devised by and imposed upon man down to our own days. From the first hour of his dictatorship this brilliant organizer herded his flock, his congregation, within a barbed-wire entanglement of paragraphs and prohibitions, the so-called [Ecclesiastical] “Ordinances,” simultaneously creating a special department to supervise the working of [this] terrorist morality. This organization was called the Consistory....³

These are lies and slanders against a faithful servant of God who sought only that the church and the lives of its members be ordered according to the Word of God and that impenitent sinners would be excommunicated from her fellowship. Like Zerubbabel and Ezra of old, Calvin and the other Reformers brought God’s people back from their Babylonian captivity in the Roman Catholic Church. But the restoration of God’s people to the Jerusalem of His truth and the rebuilding of the Temple of His right worship was one thing. The preservation of both of these required also the rebuilding of the wall around the city, for their protection and defense. That wall was the wall of Christian discipline, and in the rebuilding of that wall Calvin spent himself.

A Brief Recounting of Calvin’s Struggles over Church Discipline in Geneva

From one point of view, Calvin’s entire ministry in Geneva can be viewed as his struggle for the recovery of biblical church discipline. It was really with a view to the organization of the church and the establishment of discipline, recognizing his own inabilities in this area, that William Farel first persuaded Calvin to take up his ministry in Geneva.

It was August of 1536. Calvin was just twenty-seven years old. The city of Geneva at that time had a population of nearly 10,000 people. By the standards of the day, it was a large and prosperous

3 Stefan Zweig, *The Right to Heresy: Castellio against Calvin* (New York: Viking Press, 1936), p. 54.

city.⁴ Prior to this, the city had committed to the cause of the Protestant Reformation and had expelled the Roman Catholic clergy. William Farel, the leader of Geneva's company of pastors, recognized in the young Calvin the God-endowed gifts that were desperately needed in the Reformed church of Geneva.

From the beginning of Calvin's first stay in Geneva the matter of church discipline was a contentious issue. It was contentious among the people, many of whom were not willing to have their lives ordered by the discipline of the church. Many of them were glad to be rid of Rome, and for this reason had supported the decision to become a Protestant city. But they resisted the application of the principles of the Reformation to the ordering of the church, and particularly of their lives. But especially were the efforts of Calvin and Farel resisted by the Genevan magistrates, the two main ruling councils of the city.

It was because of their steadfast insistence on church discipline that barely a year and a half after the beginning of Calvin's work in Geneva, he and Farel were banished from the city, in April of 1538.

After his banishment, Calvin lived for three years in Strasburg. This was a three-year respite from the struggles in Geneva. It was an enjoyable three years, as Calvin pastored a French refugee church in Strasburg. It was a productive period in Calvin's life. But it was also a time of preparation. For God used Calvin's stay in Strasburg to prepare him for resuming his work in Geneva, especially his work on behalf of biblical church discipline.

The leading reformer in Strasburg was Martin Bucer. He had prevailed upon Calvin to come to Strasburg. Bucer was an outspoken proponent of biblical church discipline, and it was Bucer who influenced Calvin greatly and whose views Calvin adopted. Bucer's fundamental position is expressed in his statement: "There cannot be a church without church discipline."

4 Helpful biographies of John Calvin include: Theodore Beza's *Life of John Calvin*, included as the opening piece in *John Calvin: Tracts and Treatises*, vol. 1; T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography*; Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin*; Francois Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*; Robert L. Reymond, *John Calvin: His Life and Influence*; Robert Godfrey, *John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor*; Bruce Gordon, *Calvin*.

After a three-and-a-half-year exile from Geneva, Calvin was finally persuaded to return to Geneva. He returned with the understanding that Geneva was committed to a return to biblical church discipline, and that the city leaders were persuaded of the necessity of church discipline. Theodore Beza writes in his *The Life of Calvin*:

Calvin being thus restored at the great entreaty of his church, proceeded to set it in order. Seeing that the city stood greatly in need of a curb, he declared, in the first place, that he could not properly fulfill his ministry, unless along with Christian doctrine, a regular presbytery with full ecclesiastical authority were established. At that time, therefore... laws for the election of a presbytery, and for due maintenance of that order, were passed, agreeably to the Word of God, and with the consent of the citizens themselves. These laws Satan afterwards made many extraordinary attempts to abolish, but without success.⁵

Calvin returned, but his struggles were not over. In fact, it can be said that his struggles were just beginning.

We cannot begin to cite all of the references in Calvin's works, especially in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, that speak of the nature and necessity of church discipline. Calvin's commentaries, his *Institutes*, his letters, his tracts and treatises simply abound with material on biblical church discipline. We should, though, at least consider a small sampling of Calvin's thoughts on the importance and necessity of discipline.

Calvin was committed to the absolute necessity of church discipline. He wrote in his *Institutes*:

...if no society, indeed, no house which has even a small family, can be kept in proper condition without discipline, it is much more necessary in the church, whose condition should be as ordered as possible. Accordingly, as the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the church, so does discipline serve as its sinews, through which the members of the body hold together, each in its own place. Therefore, all who desire to remove discipline or to hinder its restoration—whether they

5 Theodore Beza, "Life of John Calvin," in *Tracts and Letters*, p. xxx-viii.

do this deliberately or out of ignorance—are surely contributing to the ultimate dissolution of the church.⁶

On Calvin's return to Geneva after his banishment, he immediately set to work to institute anew discipline in the Genevan church. The day after his return, he and the other ministers began drawing up a definite order for the government and discipline of the church. The result was the formulation of the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances of the Church of Geneva*, which was ratified and officially introduced into the church on November 20, 1541. This document is the earliest predecessor of the very Church Order used in many Reformed churches today, including the Protestant Reformed Churches in America. The restoration of discipline and the office of ruling elder occupy a large place in these *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*.

Opposition to Calvin's Efforts on Behalf of the Restoration of Discipline

A constant thorn in Calvin's side in his efforts to restore discipline to the church of Geneva were the Libertines. This was a kind of political party in Geneva, the members of which had initially embraced the Reformation with eagerness, but out of no real love for the Reformed faith as such. This party was made up of wealthy and influential citizens of Geneva. Their main objective was to use the Reformation as a means to throw off the yoke of Roman Catholicism. Their battle-cry was "Liberty! No tyranny!" When it became plain that the new discipline introduced by the Reformed faith was in many ways more rigorous and demanding than Rome had ever been, they reacted violently against the Reformation. At every turn they opposed Calvin, crying out against the new discipline as an infringement of their liberty and personal freedom. They were the ones largely responsible for Calvin's banishment, and if they had had their way, he would have been banished again.

Calvin once commented that, compared to the Libertines, he con-

6 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.12.1, vol. 2, p. 1229.

sidered the pope to be a pretty good fellow. If you are familiar with Calvin's opinion of the pope, you can surmise what Calvin's feelings toward the Libertines must have been.

In his preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms*, Calvin rehearses his struggles with the Libertines:

Afterwards for the space of five years, when some wicked libertines were furnished with undue influence, and also some of the common people, corrupted by the allurements and perverse discourse of such persons, desired to obtain the liberty of doing whatever they pleased, without control, I was under the necessity of fighting without ceasing to defend and maintain the discipline of the Church. To these irreligious characters and despisers of the heavenly doctrine, it was a matter of entire indifference, although the church should sink into ruin, provided they obtained what they sought,—the power of acting just as they pleased.⁷

In the end, Calvin's efforts on behalf of the recovery of discipline met with success, and the leaders of the Libertines were banished from Geneva. Finally, in early 1555—fourteen years after his return—the struggle ended. The magistrates finally conceded to the church council the right of excommunication. Calvin wrote to Bullinger on February 24, 1555: "After long contests the right of excommunication had lately been at last confirmed to us, the syndics were afterwards elected in a quiet meeting and were such as we desired."⁸

The Main Features of the Church Discipline for Which Calvin Struggled

What were the fundamental features of the discipline that Calvin set in place in the church of Geneva? We can identify several outstanding characteristics of the church discipline instituted by the Reformation generally, and that Calvin championed.

7 John Calvin, "The Author's Preface," in *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949), vol. 1, p. xlv.

8 Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, vol. 6, p. 151.

In the first place, the form of church discipline restored by the Reformers was “Presbyterian,” that is, the Reformers reestablished the scriptural principle that the authority to rule the local congregation resides in the local body of presbyters, or elders.

The Reformers repudiated the hierarchical system of church government maintained by the Roman Catholic Church and rejected the idea of the supremacy of the bishop of Rome, the pope. Concerning the hierarchical system of Rome, Calvin says:

The spiritual government which Christ recommended has totally disappeared and a new and mongrel species of government has been introduced, which, under whatever name it may pass current, has no more resemblance to the former than the world to the kingdom of Christ.⁹

Calvin asserted, over against the Romish view, the truth that Christ is the one King and Head of the church. No pope, no bishop, no church council may rob Christ of His crown rights. His rule of the church is rooted in and reflects His redemptive work on behalf of the church.

This rule Christ exercises through His Spirit and Word. The Bible, therefore, is the constitution of all sound church government. It is the sole standard for the church's discipline.

In rejecting the hierarchical system of church government, Calvin brought the church back to the biblical pattern of the rule in each congregation being entrusted to certain men whom Christ appoints to the office of ruling elder. Calvin resurrected the office of ruling elder. Each local congregation was autonomous, that is, self-governing. Within each congregation, and appointed from among the members of the congregation itself, the rule and discipline of the church was entrusted to elders. Government by a body of elders, all of these elders themselves of equal authority, was a cornerstone of the biblical church discipline instituted by Calvin.

In the second place, the Reformation, and especially Calvin, in-

9 Calvin, “The Necessity of Reforming the Church,” in *Tracts and Letters*, vol. 1, p. 140.

sisted that in its work of discipline the church was independent. This was another aspect of the principle that the church was autonomous. Not only did Calvin face the opposition of the Libertines in Geneva, who wanted no discipline at all, but he was also constantly at odds with the civil government, which always and again insisted on the final say in matters of discipline and especially excommunication. Many of the other Reformers, as Luther and Zwingli, due somewhat to force of circumstances, did give to the state a role in the discipline of the church. And constantly Calvin was under pressure to do so as well.

But Calvin steadfastly refused, and maintained a sharp distinction between the state's sphere of authority and the church's sphere of authority. It might, perhaps, be a question whether Calvin was always consistent in maintaining this principle. But the fact of the matter is that it was a principle for which he fought tenaciously. Again and again he refused to tolerate the magistrate's encroachment on the rights and duties of the consistory, especially in the exercise of excommunication. At one time he handed in his resignation from office and declared that he would sooner die than comply with the city council's demand that one who had been excommunicated be granted the right to partake of the Lord's Supper.

In the minutes of the consistory dated November 7, 1553, we find this notice:

...the ministers presented themselves before [the members of the city council] and unanimously declared that they were unable to consent to this ruling [that the council give final approval of all decisions on excommunication], and that to compel obedience would be to drive them from their charge, for they would choose this or death rather than consent to the abandonment of so holy and sacred an order, which had for so long been observed in this church.¹⁰

In keeping with the sharp distinction Calvin made between the

10 Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, ed. and trans., *The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1966), p. 291.

jurisdiction of the state and that of the church, Calvin also maintained that in the carrying out of its authority the church must confine itself to the use of *spiritual* means. The sword and temporal punishments had no place in the *church's* exercise of her authority, of which things the Roman Catholic Church often made use in her efforts to enforce her rule. Calvin insisted that the church was shut up to spiritual means. Impenitent sinners must be the object of exhortation and admonition, excommunication being the extreme measure that the church might employ.

Thirdly, Calvin taught that the objects of the church's discipline were those members of the church who erred either in doctrine or in life. Unscriptural views, as well as godless living, unrepented of, called for the church's discipline. Neither heretics nor the unholy may be tolerated in the fellowship of the church. Both must be dealt with and both must be excluded. That this was Calvin's position is plain from the provisions of the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances of the Church of Geneva*. The contents of the *Registers of the Consistory of Geneva in the Time of Calvin* demonstrate that both heretics and the impious were subject, not only to the scrutiny of the consistory, but to ecclesiastical censure.¹¹ In his *Institutes*, Calvin writes:

I confess it a great disgrace if pigs and dogs have a place among the children of God, and a still greater disgrace if the sacred body of Christ be prostituted to them. And indeed, if churches are well ordered, they will not bear the wicked in their bosom. Nor will they indiscriminately admit worthy and unworthy together to that sacred banquet. But because pastors are not always zealously on the watch, and are also sometimes more lenient than they should be, or are hindered from being able to exercise the severity they would like, the result is that even the openly wicked are not always removed from the company of the saints. This I admit to be a fault and I do not intend to excuse it, since Paul sharply rebukes it in the Corinthians.¹²

11 Robert M. Kingdon, ed., M. Wallace McDonald, trans., *Registers of the Consistory of Geneva in the Time of Calvin, Volume 1, 1542-1544* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000).

12 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.15, vol. 2, p. 1029.

In another place, Calvin insists on the biblical warrant for the discipline of those who walk in defiance of God's commandments.

Therefore, in excluding from its fellowship manifest adulterers, fornicators, thieves, robbers, seditious persons, perjurers, false witnesses, and the rest of this sort, as well as the insolent (who when duly admonished of their lighter vices mock God and his judgment), the church claims for itself nothing unreasonable but practices the jurisdiction conferred upon it by the Lord.¹³

In the fourth place, it was an outstanding feature of the church discipline restored by Calvin that not only the lay members of the church but also the officebearers were subject to discipline. The practical fruit of the Roman Catholic hierarchical system was that the priests and clergy were virtually above discipline. It was practically impossible for concerned church members to do anything about wicked, godless clergymen. At the time of the Reformation the church was at the mercy of unbelieving and vile priests and bishops.

At the very outset of his treatment of discipline, Calvin informs the readers of the *Institutes* that he is going to divide the material he is about to present under two main headings: the "common discipline, to which all ought to submit" and the discipline of "...the clergy, who, besides the common discipline, have their own."¹⁴

As regards the discipline of the clergy, Calvin argues that so long as "the clergy expected from the people no more by word than they themselves showed by example and act. . .," the church was in a healthy condition. But as soon as the discipline of the clergy was neglected, the general degeneration of the church was set in motion. The neglect of discipline of the clergy was so widespread by Calvin's time that "today nothing more unbridled and dissolute than this order can be imagined, and they have broken into such license that the world cries out."¹⁵

All this was changed with the recovery of biblical church dis-

13 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.12.4, vol. 2, p. 1232.

14 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.12.1, vol. 2, p. 1229.

15 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.12.23, vol. 2, p. 1248ff.

cipline. Not only were the officebearers in the local congregation entrusted with the duty of *exercising* church discipline, but they themselves, ministers too, were *put under* the discipline of the church.

Purpose of Church Discipline

It was one of the outstanding features of church discipline that Calvin articulated the three main purposes for the exercise of church discipline. Having called the church to the work of discipline, Calvin saw very clearly that God had instituted discipline for a good purpose. In his *Institutes*, Calvin says this about the purpose of church discipline:

In such corrections and excommunications, the church has three ends in view. The first is that they who lead a filthy and infamous life may not be called Christians, to the dishonor of God, as if his holy church [cf. Eph. 5:25-26] were a conspiracy of wicked and abandoned men.... The second purpose is that the good be not corrupted by the constant company of the wicked, as commonly happens.... The third purpose is that those overcome by shame for their baseness begin to repent.¹⁶

Calvin's thinking was biblical in his setting forward these three purposes of church discipline. First of all, the faithful exercise of discipline by the church has as its purpose the purity and preservation of the church herself. Sin in the congregation, left undisciplined, poses a threat to the entire congregation. The danger—a very real danger—is that sin will grow until the whole congregation is infected.

This is the teaching of the Scriptures. In I Corinthians 5:6 the apostle speaks of sin in the congregation as leaven. Sin undisciplined works like leaven, spreading throughout the church until the whole church is leavened. In II Timothy 2:17 the apostle speaks of sin in the congregation as a cancer, literally “gangrene,” a poison and cancer that spreads through the whole body, threatening to destroy the body. In order, therefore, to guard the purity of the church, sin must be dealt with and the impenitent excommunicated from the church. The apostle's exhortation in I Corinthians 5:7 is: “Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump.”

16 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.12.5, vol. 2, p. 1232, 1233.

Secondly, the purpose of church discipline is the salvation of the erring brother who is the object of discipline. One of the primary purposes of discipline is that the sinner may be reclaimed. The ultimate purpose is not that he may be punished and cut off. But the ultimate purpose is that church discipline may be the means unto the sinner's repentance and restoration.

This too is biblical. In I Corinthians 5:5 the apostle teaches that the purpose of excommunication is that ultimately the sinner's spirit be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. In II Timothy 2:25, 26 Paul instructs the elders to labor, "in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will."

That the purpose of discipline is the salvation of the sinner underscores an important truth that must not be lost sight of. It underscores the truth that the motive for church discipline must always be *love* for the brother, love that seeks his temporal and his eternal well-being.

Since the motive of discipline is love, it is implied that the elders must never labor in a harsh or overly severe way. In commenting on II Corinthians 2:7, Calvin warns against pressing discipline to the point of harshness and cruel abuse. "For nothing is more dangerous," he writes, "than to give Satan a handle, to tempt an offender to despair." The purpose of discipline as regards the sinner being disciplined must not be forgotten.

The end of excommunication, so far as concerns the power of the offender, is this: that, overpowered with a sense of his sin, he may be humbled in the sight of God and the Church, and may solicit pardon with sincere dislike and confession of guilt. The man who has been brought to this is now more in need of consolation, than of severe reproof. Hence, if you continue to deal with him harshly, it will be—not discipline, but cruel domineering. Hence we must carefully guard against pressing them beyond this limit.¹⁷

17 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), vol. 2, p. 151.

Some would be surprised by how frequently Calvin warned against a harsh application of discipline. In discipline, whether in private or public admonition, “gentleness is required in the whole body of the church, that it should deal mildly with the lapsed and should not punish with extreme rigor, but rather, according to Paul’s injunction, confirm its love toward them [II Cor. 2:8].”¹⁸ And he warns that “[u]nless this gentleness is maintained in both private and public censure, there is a danger lest we soon slide down from discipline to butchery.”¹⁹

And, thirdly, it is the motive of church discipline that by her faithful exercise of discipline the church may glorify God. This, after all, is the very purpose of the church’s existence: the glory of God. This was the great truth that Calvin proclaimed. But God is glorified by the church in the truth, that is, in purity of doctrine and holiness of life. The church disciplines, therefore, maintaining the purity of doctrine and the holiness of life, in order that by that means the church may glorify God. The church must exercise discipline “that they who lead a filthy and infamous life may not be called Christians, to the dishonor of God...”²⁰ If impenitent sinners are allowed to remain in the fellowship of the body of Christ, the inevitable outcome will be “some disgrace falling upon its Head.”²¹

Our Calling Today to Preserve This Aspect of Our Calvin Heritage

This is the church discipline for which Calvin struggled. But what is *our* calling today as regards the preservation of this biblical church discipline?

To anyone who is sensitive to the Bible’s instruction on the necessity and nature of church discipline it is very plain that church discipline is under great attack today. From many quarters, and in Reformed churches too, there is opposition to the preservation and maintenance of discipline. There is no appreciation, only scorn, for this aspect of our Reformation heritage.

18 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.12.9, vol. 2, p. 1237.

19 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.12.10, vol. 2, p. 1238.

20 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.12.5, vol. 2, p. 1232.

21 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.12.5, vol. 2, p. 1232.

There are many who reject discipline entirely, as a thing too offensive for our times. There is the reluctance and neglect today on the part of the churches to discipline for false teaching, allowing those who hold heretical views to be tolerated in the bosom of the church unmolested. Especially is this true in the case of ministers and seminary professors. They deny the divine inspiration of Scripture and teach evolution and the false doctrine of a love of God for all. Titus 3:10 is ignored: “A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject.”

Many today make a disjunction between preaching and proper church discipline, and they conceive of it as being possible to maintain the pure preaching apart from the necessity of the faithful exercise of discipline.

We witness today, once again, a denial of the Scriptures as the standard for church discipline. Where the Scriptures are not openly declared to be fallible and errant, their infallibility and inerrancy are at least weakened and compromised.

Once again, we are also witnessing unbiblical alterations of the office of ruling elder. Not only is the work of this office changed but, contrary to the express teaching of Scripture, women are permitted to hold special office in the church. This can only have disastrous consequences for the preservation of biblical church discipline.

And not only do we witness in the churches today the neglect of faithful discipline, but we see the abomination of the churches themselves encouraging unholy and undisciplined living among the members. Homosexuality is tolerated and even condoned as a legitimate alternative lifestyle. Premarital sexual relations by the youth are overlooked and excused as the harmless expression of natural urges. Divorce, for every reason, and its consequent remarriage are justified. And, instead of disciplining for worldly living, the churches promote worldliness on the part of the members.

Besides, the whole idea of church discipline is simply contrary to everything that is taught by the churches and believed by the people today. The great message proclaimed by the churches is the message that God loves all men and sincerely desires the salvation of all men. Everyone has a place in God’s kingdom, and God wants everyone in

His kingdom. No one is to be excluded; no one is to be denied or shut out.

And then, of course, church discipline must go. The whole concept of excommunication, the idea that the kingdom of heaven is shut against some persons, simply does not fit with this message. And so the churches have abandoned it.

And we must admit, too, that we are inclined to neglect and to slight this duty; for the fact of the matter is that church discipline is painful work. It is painful for the members of the congregation, and it is painful for the elders who must be involved directly in this work. Especially is it painful for the members of the congregation who stand close to the person being disciplined. Perhaps it is a close friend, a relative, a son or a daughter, even a husband or a wife. We, too, are tempted to wash our hands of discipline and be done with it.

But, painful though church discipline may be, we must continue to see the importance and necessity of discipline for the life of the church. We must continue, in the face of all the neglect and corruption of discipline in our day, to preserve among us Reformed church discipline. It is simply part of being Reformed to insist on the practice of church discipline. Those who do away with discipline, by that very fact forfeit the right to the name "Reformed."

We carry out our calling to preserve this aspect of our heritage in John Calvin in a couple of important ways.

First of all, a concern for church discipline ought to reflect itself in a concern for discipline in our lives as individuals and in our families. Church discipline begins with self-discipline. The man who is concerned for the maintenance of church discipline ought himself to be living a disciplined, obedient life. Calvin was personally a godly man.

There ought to be a concern for discipline in our families. Parents ought to insist that their children live disciplined, obedient lives. And when their children refuse to live such a life, parents ought to discipline their children with the discipline of chastisement.

Secondly, our calling to preserve biblical church discipline must show itself in our insistence that the church of which we are members is faithful in exercising this discipline. We must not in silence stand

by while public sin, either in the area of doctrine or life, is tolerated in the church. But we must raise a voice of protest, and call the church to carry out its God-given calling.

And if, in spite of our protests, the church refuses to exercise discipline, we must withdraw from that church and institute the church anew or join a church that consistently practices church discipline. Reformed people insist that faithful church discipline is a mark of the true church. The church that neglects and corrupts discipline shows itself to be an apostatizing church.

Thirdly, this means that as churches and individuals we maintain and guard the office of ruling elder. We must nominate and elect to office only those men who clearly possess the qualifications Scripture lays down for elders—men who are equipped to rule. Once they are in office, we must insist that they carry out the duties of their office. Maintaining the office of elder means that we place ourselves and our families under the supervision of the elders and willingly, for Christ's sake, submit to their rule, all the while patiently bearing with their weaknesses.

In the fourth place, our concern for church discipline will mean that we desire to see, and will strive to assure, that discipline does actually realize the three great purposes outlined by Scripture. In our discipline we will aim at the purity of the church, the recovery of the sinner, and, above all, the glory of God.

We are Reformed Christians. That means that we confess the absolute sovereignty of God. That confession must show itself practically in the church's insistence that, in the lives of her members, God's law and God's will expressed in His Word is obeyed. Otherwise we contradict in our life the confession of God's sovereignty that we make with our mouths.

May God grant that, as church and as churches, we continue to show ourselves faithful to this mark of the true church of Jesus Christ in the world: the faithful exercise of Christian discipline. ●

John Calvin, the Church Reformer

Russell J. Dykstra

John Calvin was a church reformer par excellence. He was a church reformer only because God made him a church reformer, for the church is God's and reformation is God's work. When the church of God apostatizes from His truth and the biblical pattern for the church, then reform is required. The church must be re-formed, that is, formed back to the Bible.

Church reformation is a spiritual work, and therefore reformation begins with the Spirit changing the hearts of the members. God Himself determines the man who will work mightily to lead the church back to the Bible. God not only knows the need for reform, He sovereignly determines the man who will lead the reform of His church. God plans all the circumstances of his life, and thus molds and fits the man to be a reformer.

Such a man was John Calvin. God ordained Martin Luther to destroy the foundations of the apostate church, and to begin erecting anew. God chose Calvin to build on the foundation of Luther, to continue the reform of God's church back to the Bible.

The purpose of this article is, first, briefly to sketch the life and work of John Calvin. And, second, it is to show how God specially created Calvin and then molded him for the work. That is, what was there about Calvin, as regards his personality, training, and experiences, that made him to be the powerful church reformer that he was? Then, finally, we will examine major elements of the reform God worked through Calvin.

John Calvin's Life

John Calvin was born on July 10, 1509 in Noyon, Picardy. Thus Calvin was French. But the Dutch biographer Lawrence Penning describes the Picardians as the Fresians of France, that is, "resolute,

hardy, obstinate.”¹ Calvin’s family was a respectable family of middle rank. His father worked on legal and financial matters for clergy in and around Noyon.

John Calvin’s mother died in 1515, when John was but six years old. On account of this, he lived for long stretches with some aristocratic families of Noyon. His father later remarried. All told, John had three brothers and two half-sisters.

Education

With the children of these aristocratic families, Calvin was sent off to Paris to study in some of the best schools in Europe. He arrived in Paris in 1523 at about the age of fourteen. The goal, initially, was a solid education directed towards church office. John was following the path of his older brother, Charles, who did enter the priesthood.

After four or five years, John’s father instructed him to change schools in order to study law. This change was probably tied to his father’s troubles with the church, eventually resulting in excommunication. Calvin followed his father’s wishes, applied himself diligently, and eventually did complete his studies and obtain a degree in law.

But law was not his first love, and after his father’s death in 1531, John Calvin returned to his original goal of studying theology. He immersed himself in the classic literature of Greece and Rome as well as the writings of ancient church fathers. He learned Greek, Latin, and Hebrew thoroughly. All that was a solid foundation for an intensive study of Scripture and theology.

His conversion

To this point in his life John Calvin was still devoted to the Romish Church. He had opportunity, certainly, to hear about Martin Luther and the great stir he was creating, for the Reformation was already fourteen years old when Calvin returned to the study of theology. The Reformation was sweeping across Europe. The printing presses were churning out books and diatribes from followers of Luther and

1 Lawrence Penning, *Genius of Geneva, a Popular Account of the Life and Times of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1954), p. 12.

his opponents. But Calvin indicates that he rejected these ideas. He was stubbornly devoted to the Church and to her doctrine.

His conversion was sudden. He gives evidence that it was a struggle, not unlike that of Luther, though not as prolonged. Like Luther, he could not find peace in a salvation that included his own works. God changed John Calvin's heart and mind.

After his conversion, Calvin committed himself wholly to the Reformed truths with such diligence that he soon had other Reformed believers coming to him for instruction.

Calvin had friends in Paris that were of the same conviction. This came out publicly in a speech delivered by a close friend, Nicholas Cop. In a daring speech in the university, Cop set forth cardinal Reformation truths, including justification by faith alone. That speech was quite possibly written by Calvin, or with the assistance of Calvin. The speech caused such an uproar that Cop and anyone close to him with sympathies for the Reformation were forced to flee. Consequently Calvin fled Paris in 1533, leaving his life as a university student behind, and thus began a new chapter in his life.

A pilgrim

For the next three years, Calvin lived in various cities. He found refuge in the homes of several influential people, including Margaret of Navarre, who, although she was the sister of the King of France, was sympathetic to the Reformation. These various residences afforded him some protection, as well as the use of some excellent libraries where he could continue his study of theology. In addition, Calvin met Reformation theologians with whom he could discuss his newly embraced faith.

Calvin made his break from Rome official in 1534 by resigning his benefices. A benefice was something akin to a scholarship, and it committed the scholar to returning to the service of the church after his studies were completed.

Calvin moved to Basle in 1535. There he completed his first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It was published in 1536, when Calvin was but twenty-six years old.

Calvin made a trip to Italy, but his name was known to the Inquisi-

tion there, and he soon forsook the country. He passed through Geneva in 1536 on his way to Basle. There the fiery Reformed preacher William Farel detained him and compelled Calvin to remain and assist him in Geneva.

A new phase: Pastor

Calvin's life as a pastor can be divided into three distinct parts—his first stay in Geneva (July 1536 to April 1538); his ministry in Strasburg (September 1538 to September 1541); his second stay in Geneva (September 1541 to May 27, 1564).

Geneva: July 1536—April 1538

Although initially Calvin's work in Geneva was that of a lecturer on Scripture, Calvin was soon ordained a minister and began preaching regularly. His first stay in this Swiss city was marked by controversy and turmoil. The city of Geneva had officially decided to renounce Rome, but was far from embracing the Reformation as Calvin and Farel taught it. Their labors in Geneva ended abruptly when the city council voted to expel Calvin, Farel, and another faithful pastor, Pierre Viret.

Strasburg: September 1538—September 1541

Calvin, quite relieved to be free of the responsibilities in Geneva, now intended to return to the secluded life of the scholar. But that was not God's will. Martin Bucer prevailed upon Calvin to come to Strasburg to shepherd a church of French refugees in that German-speaking city.

The next three years were one of the happiest times of John Calvin's life. He worked exceedingly hard—preaching, teaching, and seeing to the needs of his flock. In addition, he wrote several commentaries and revised his *Institutes*. His congregation flourished under his diligent labors. They greatly appreciated him.

During this time Calvin married a widow named Idelette de Bure. Every indication was that John and Idelette Calvin had a happy marriage. Sadly, they had but one (living) child born to them, and he

survived only a few days. Their marriage lasted a brief nine years before Idelette died. Calvin never remarried.

Meanwhile, back in Geneva things had gone very badly in the church and the city. Eventually the city fathers became convinced that they had made a mistake by banishing the three faithful ministers, and they began asking Calvin to return. He ignored or rejected their overtures for a year, and then, in spite of his dread, he returned to Geneva under the conviction that God called him to serve there.

Geneva: September 1541—May 27, 1564

The first fourteen years in his second pastorate in Geneva were a time of almost unbearable pressure and strife. Calvin had enemies inside the church, including deficient, untrustworthy fellow pastors. The majority on the city council were enemies of Calvin and resisted all his efforts to reform the church. He was attacked by heretics, by Lutherans, by the theologians of Rome, and by Anabaptists. Within the city Calvin was reviled and reproached. One Genevan citizen named his dog “Calvin” so that he could have the pleasure of kicking him. Calvin fully expected to be cast out of Geneva a second time.

But by 1555, most of his powerful enemies had died, been executed, or left Geneva for various reasons. From then on, the majority of the city council supported him. Finally, Calvin had some peace. In this time reform in Geneva flourished. Geneva became the center of the Reformation, to which thousands of refugees fled. The Academy was established, and many hundreds of pastors were trained and sent out into all of Europe and beyond.

During these last years of his life, Calvin continued to work hard preaching and teaching. He took time also to write and to refine his theology. He breathed his last on May 27, 1564, and was buried in an unmarked grave. The work of John Calvin, the church reformer, was finished.

God’s Prepared Instrument

Focusing briefly on John Calvin as church reformer, we face the question: What in his upbringing and early training equipped Calvin to be a reformer? Several things can be noted.

Training

First, John Calvin was raised thoroughly Roman Catholic. He wrote, in his treatise against relics, that he had kissed a body part purported to be of Saint Anne, the mother of Mary. He had watched the mass countless times. He had endured the confessional, had worshiped the bread and then partaken of it, holding to the teaching that it was the very body and blood of Jesus. Calvin had knelt before the statues and pictures of Mary and other saints, offering up prayers for their help. And he was convinced that his salvation depended in part on his good works.

God caused John Calvin to know the idolatry, the perversions in doctrine, worship, and life, for this purpose: That he would know the evils inside and out and be able to reject them insightfully, even masterfully.

Secondly, God prepared Calvin by means of the thorough instruction he received. Under God's providential direction, for example, Calvin gained a complete knowledge of the Greek and Roman philosophers, so that he could demonstrate where the medieval theologians followed the philosophers rather than the Bible. God likewise saw to it that Calvin obtained a thorough knowledge of the biblical languages. *Calvin* learned Greek because it was necessary to read Plato and Aristotle, and Hebrew because it was part of the Renaissance study in vogue in that day. But *God* intended that Calvin become a master exegete who could work from the original languages of Scripture. Even his law degree was useful, in that it developed in Calvin a disciplined, logical mind, well able to prove his points, as well as to organize not only theology, but also the church itself.

The Man

God also created Calvin to be a reformer. What about John Calvin the man—his personality and character—equipped him to be a reformer?

One of the most notable things about John Calvin is that God created him with a brilliant mind. Calvin loved to learn, and his mind absorbed knowledge like a sponge. He was astoundingly disciplined and diligent. As a student, Calvin studied late into the night. In the

morning, he awoke long before others, and reviewed the lectures of the previous day, trying to commit them to memory. As a result, later in life he could quote philosophers and church fathers from memory. To produce the amount and quality of the work that he did, Calvin had to be extraordinarily gifted.

We find also that John Calvin was a man of iron will. He could not be budged from his positions. The negative side of that was that he had a terrible temper, which could erupt when he was opposed. Yet Calvin knew this weakness, would apologize, and confess his weakness. One recent biographer makes the point that because Calvin knew of this, he was particularly guarded in his writing. Generally this was true. He was more careful in his writing than many theologians of his day—and noticeably more restrained than his enemies who attacked him.

An example of his iron will in his own personal life is that, largely due to health concerns, Calvin determined to eat but one meal a day. And he stuck to it. Calvin would need this steadfastness in order to stand firm against those who resisted reform, and those who opposed the truth.

A third notable trait of John Calvin was that he had the gift of humility. This humility was a direct result, on the one hand, of his knowledge of the greatness and sovereignty of God, and on the other, from the knowledge of himself, that he was a sinner. Evidence of his humility is that Calvin did not consider himself qualified to be a pastor. He was, he insisted, by nature, timid. We do know that physically he was not a hardy man, but on the contrary was weak and sickly. Yet when God called Calvin to be a preacher, he humbly obeyed.

In addition, Calvin was never too proud to learn from others. Unashamedly he leaned on Luther. He wrote to Bullinger about Luther: “This...I would beseech you to consider first of all...that you have to do with a most distinguished servant of Christ, to whom we are, all of us, largely indebted.”²

After Farel and Calvin were driven out of Geneva, and the pastors

2 John Calvin, *Selected Works of John Calvin, Tracts and Letters*, ed. and tr. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), vol. 4, pp. 433-434.

who remained were maligning their characters, Calvin wrote to Farel: “But if we know that they cannot calumniate us, excepting in so far as God permits, we know also the end God has in view in granting such permission. Let us humble ourselves, therefore, unless we wish to strive with God when he would humble us.”³

He conferred with hundreds of believers and fellow pastors. He was not a maverick that went his own way. He stayed in touch with believers in many countries, writing over 1,200 letters. Calvin also established regular meetings of pastors in Geneva so that pastors could confer with each other.

More evidence of his humility is that he promoted church unity, not himself. One notable example of that is the work he did together with Bullinger on the document on the Lord’s Supper. That document went by the name of Zurich (the *Zurich Consensus*), even though Calvin had done most of the work.

A fourth significant characteristic of John Calvin the reformer was his detachment from this world. He had almost a disdain for earthly things. Calvin preached and lived the life of a pilgrim and stranger on the earth. He understood that “we are inclined by nature to a slavish love of this world.”⁴ Such a love, affirmed Calvin, leads to a bondage to this world such that a man cannot even seek God.

While recognizing that all good gifts are from God, to help us contemplate the goodness of God, Calvin himself shunned the riches of this world. He exhorted the flock: “We are to be ready without regret to leave all that belongs to this world.” God makes Christians, he wrote, as “birds upon the branch.”

Why is this significant for John Calvin as reformer? Because a man who loves the things of this world cannot be an effective church reformer. Such a man will not dare to take a stand for the truth, for fear that he will lose his position, his home, and his possessions. Calvin would stand for the truth boldly. He would refuse to compromise on the significant points of the reformation. He was not concerned about

3 Calvin, *Selected Works*, vol. 4, p. 75.

4 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Henry Beveridge, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1966), 3.9.1.

his earthly position or possessions. Calvin, as reformer, sat loose with regard to the things of this world.

A fifth personal characteristic of the man is his astounding ability and determination to work. Calvin refused to be idle. He refused to allow his many bodily ailments and afflictions to deter him from work. In the last year of his life, after he was no longer able to preach, he was encouraged to rest and to cease from his working in bed. Calvin's answer indicates his thinking on work: "What! Would you have the Lord find me idle?"⁵

All that, God determined for and created in John Calvin in order that Calvin might be a powerful tool for reformation. But there is one thing more, something that overshadows all the rest. Calvin, by the grace of God, was such a powerful reformer because he was a preacher.

The Preacher

Calvin became a preacher but a short time into his first stay in Geneva. He had received a solid theological training in the universities. Initially in Geneva he lectured on Scripture. But it was not long before the church recognized his God-given abilities and ordained him, and Calvin began preaching regularly.

In Strasburg Calvin blossomed as a preacher and pastor. Ordinarily he preached four times a week. He also conducted faithful pastoral labors in his congregation of some four hundred members.

In his second stay in Geneva, Calvin's regimen eventually included preaching twice on Sunday, and early in the morning Monday through Friday on alternate weeks. On Fridays, all the ministers (and any interested members) gathered to hear and discuss a sermon preached by one of the ministers in rotation, including Calvin. Thus Calvin regularly preached eight or nine times in two weeks.

Calvin's preaching was expository. He preached through whole books of the Bible, explaining all the verses. About 1,500 of these sermons have been published.

John Calvin was also a faithful pastor who visited his flock.

Why is this, namely, his being a preacher and pastor, important for

5 Calvin, *Selected Works*, vol. 1, p. lxxxiv.

Calvin the reformer? Partly the answer is that he was not an ivory-tower theologian, detached from the realities of life and the church. Calvin had *wanted* that solitary life of a scholar; but *God*, through the fiery Farel, called him to the ministry in Geneva. God had a purpose in doing that. It was good for Calvin, the reformer.

The value for Calvin was, first, that he preached to real people, and specifically to God's people. He knew the needs and struggles of God's sheep. He understood, for example, that the theology and worship of Rome brought spiritual disaster to the people. It brought them into dread terror of God. It robbed them of the assurance of salvation.

As a pastor, Calvin saw too that both the theology of Rome and the gross immorality of the clergy had led to immoral living among the people. Consequently, the people needed to be instructed and admonished. And Calvin admonished them pointedly—from the Scriptures. He called them to godliness, a godliness arising out of thankfulness.

Secondly, God intended that Calvin be a preacher because it meant that Calvin was immersed in the Scriptures. He drew his theology from the Scriptures. Scripture governed his thinking. His *Institutes* were drawn from and proved by the Bible. Every new edition of the *Institutes* gave evidence that Calvin was constantly engaged in the study of Scripture, for the *Institutes* would include new references from the particular books of the Bible through which Calvin had preached or on which he had written commentaries after the publication of the previous edition.

Most of all, God determined that Calvin be a preacher because God's Word, especially His Word preached, is God's means for reforming His church. That stands to reason, since reformation is forming the church back to the Bible in doctrine, worship, and walk of life.

It is worth noting that Calvin had the highest regard for the Bible. The Bible is God's Word, he insisted, and believers accept that Word as surely as if they heard God speak the words. Thus the Bible is true. It is also sufficient, as well as clear and understandable.

As *preacher*, John Calvin was God's instrument to reform His church. And a powerful preacher and reformer he was. Armed with

the sword of the Spirit, he led the reform of the church in Geneva. When Calvin wrote *The Necessity of the Reformation*, he did not write in the abstract—he knew of what he wrote. When he answered letters that asked for advice, he wrote out of experience. Exactly because Calvin was doing the work of preacher and reformer in Geneva, he was a powerful reformer for the church of God in Europe, and beyond.

Calvin's Focus

On what especially did Calvin focus in the reforming of the church? We call attention to five areas that Calvin considered particularly significant in his work.

The first is doctrine, purity of doctrine, or, the truth of God. In his reply to Cardinal Sadolet, Calvin insisted that the necessity of the Reformation was not the corruption of the clergy, as vile as their lives were. Rather, Calvin wrote: “That necessity was, that the *light of divine truth had been extinguished, the word of God buried*, the virtue of Christ left in profound oblivion, and the pastoral office subverted” (emphasis mine, RJD).

A theme of Calvin was that, above all things, it is necessary rightly to know the one true God. The church had departed from the truth. She had forsaken sound preaching of the truth. She had obscured Christ in the preaching and in the sacraments. The reformation of the church depended on a return to the right knowledge of God and of ourselves. To that end Calvin wrote a confession during his first stay in Geneva, and the people had to know and affirm it in order to be members of the church.

God ensured that doctrine remained Calvin's focus by bringing into his ministry one controversy after another. These controversies forced Calvin, on the one hand, to reject the lie, and on the other, to defend and develop the doctrines of Scripture. Calvin had to defend the truth of predestination in two separate conflicts—with Albertus Pighius in the 1540s and once again with Jerome Bolsec in the early 1550s. Also, in dealing with Pighius, Calvin strove mightily against the false teaching of the freedom of the will, affirming the bondage of the will as forcefully as Martin Luther had against Erasmus.

Calvin repeatedly exposed and refuted the errors of Rome. He

did so in his response to the letter of Sadolet, which he answered for Geneva. He wrote against the veneration of relics. He pointed out the errors in the pronouncements of Trent as they came forth. And Calvin refuted the pronouncements of the Roman Catholic faculty at the Sorbonne.

Calvin rejected the Socinians, who questioned the deity of Christ. He faced down Servetus on such a basic doctrine as the Trinity. And he engaged in debates with the Lutherans in the bitter controversy over the Eucharist.

And through it all, God used Calvin to set the church back upon the right doctrinal foundation of the truth.

A second area of primary importance to Calvin was worship. Calvin wrote, "There is nothing more perilous to our salvation than a preposterous and perverse worship of God."⁶

Significantly, in *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, Calvin started with the mode in which God is duly worshiped.

In his reply to Cardinal Sadolet, Calvin set forth what has come to be known as the regulative principle of worship. He wrote:

[T]he rule which distinguishes between pure and vitiated worship is of universal application, in order that we may not adopt any device which seems fit to ourselves, but look to the injunction of Him who alone is entitled to prescribe. I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word.⁷

Calvin's application of the regulative principle to the official worship service meant that the worship in Geneva differed considerably from that endorsed by Luther. Calvin's liturgy removed everything Rome practiced that did not find a sanction in the New Testament, including choirs and musical instruments. This purging extended to the church buildings, as idols, pictures, and religious symbols (such as crosses) were removed.

The sacraments required special attention in the reform of worship.

6 Calvin, *Selected Works*, vol. 1, p. 34.

7 Calvin, *Selected Works*, vol. 1, p. 128.

This is readily understandable. The sacraments had been perverted in the church over the course of a thousand years. The church had expanded them from the two instituted by Christ, to seven. As practiced by Rome, the sacraments obscured Christ and God's grace with meaningless ceremony. Sacraments had become idolatrous exercises. Calvin stripped them of all their extraneous trappings and, especially important, he returned to the right *theology* of the sacraments.

Calvin led the church back to the Bible in worship. Restored was the centrality of God's Word. The Bible was to be read, preached, and sung; and in the sacraments it was seen. The worship services emphasized simplicity, especially in the sacraments. The worship was not to be merely external, but spiritual, of the heart. And the services were characterized by reverence.

Calvin drew on several sources, including the churches in Strasburg, to formulate a liturgy that was consistent with the regulative principle. One could rightly maintain that his liturgy came from the Bible, but it was also a conscious return to the ancient church.

God used Calvin mightily to reform worship back to the Bible.

A third area of significant reforming work for Calvin was church government. To begin with, God used Calvin to restore the special offices to their rightful place in the church. The simple fact is that they were lost and perverted by the church of Rome. Calvin went back to the Bible, and insisted that there were but four offices—elders, appointed to rule; deacons for the care of the poor; ministers to preach the Word and administer the sacraments; and the doctors, or professors, to teach, particularly to train men for the ministry.

Besides, Calvin restored proper, biblical church discipline to the church (a topic treated in Prof. Ronald Cammenga's article in this *Journal*, see "Calvin's Struggle for Church Discipline").

Fourth, Calvin worked hard for the reform of the lives of all church members. He stressed godliness. Calvin knew that the priests had lived in immorality, thus leading the people astray. For this reason, Calvin laid special stress on the need for Protestant ministers to lead the way in godliness. Calvin himself was the supreme example.

The people must live in obedience to God, he maintained. The fact is, the Reformation movement carried along some who wanted

to escape the harsh severity of Rome, and therefore went over to the Reformation, hoping to be freed from any supervision of the church. These Antinomians gave the Reformation a bad name. Calvin restored proper church discipline and preached godliness rooted in thankfulness. He applied it to life in the home, to the family, to marriage, and to daily work. The spiritual tools of preaching and Christian discipline had a powerful effect on morality in Calvin's Geneva.

Finally, Calvin reformed education in the church. In the church of Rome, the common people were, by and large, kept ignorant. They were told simply to believe what the church taught, and that was enough. They were instructed to put their faith IN the church, to believe that what she taught was right. The church would save them.

Calvin insisted that faith was not in the church but in Christ, and the people had to know God in Jesus Christ. Therefore they needed knowledge, that is, a certain knowledge of what the Bible taught. To that end he stressed education for children, so they could read the Bible. He also stressed the need for catechetical instruction. He wrote a catechism for the youth during his very first stay in Geneva, and later revised it. He had catechism classes every Sunday for the youth. He also stressed the importance of knowledge for adults. (Recall the confession they had to affirm.)

To that end he also stressed an educated clergy. Calvin demanded that prospective ministers have a quality university training, including a good knowledge of the original languages. They must receive a solid theological training.

That emphasis led to the opening of the Academy in Geneva, established officially in 1559. Training for ministers in Geneva included careful academic preparation and practical preparation through serving in the rural churches under the supervision of the faculty. A candidate for the ministry could also expect a thorough examination of his doctrinal commitment and moral character.

Conclusion

In harmony with John Calvin's goal for his life and ministry, we say: All glory to God, who raised up a John Calvin to reform His church. Thanks be to God for the enduring nature of John Calvin's

work. That is our heritage. His influence is everywhere in the Reformed and Presbyterian churches.

One discovers the influence of Calvin whenever he reads from Calvin's works. It is striking that not only Calvin's doctrines, but even words and phrases from his writings have made their way into the Reformed creeds and liturgical forms. The Heidelberg Catechism, for example, sets forth the regulative principle of worship in Lord's Day 35. The definition of faith (Lord's Day 7) is drawn from Calvin. The emphasis on the law as a rule of gratitude—that is Calvin's influence.

Or consider Calvin's influence in the Belgic Confession in the sacraments, especially the real, spiritual presence of Christ in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper (Articles 33-35). The lengthy section on the church reflects Calvin's teaching (Articles 27-32), as does the doctrine of Scripture, even to the Canon of Scripture (Articles 2-7). Similarly, Calvin's insistence that the magistrates are called to defend and promote true religion appears in Article 36.

The Canons' five heads are rightly identified as the five points of Calvinism—his emphasis on election and reprobation, on total depravity, even assurance. One finds likewise that the lovely expression "judgment of love" in the Canons originated with Calvin.

Calvin's *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* are the foundation for the Church Order of Dordrecht. His influence is written large in the Church Order.

Turn to the form for the administration of baptism and the form for the Lord's Supper, and discover the same—Calvin's thought is woven into them.

The value of John Calvin for the Reformed church today simply cannot be overstated. No single theologian has had a greater positive impact on the church than Calvin. May God give the Reformed church the grace to follow in his footsteps. Not blindly, for no man is infallible. But where he followed Scripture, we gladly follow him yet today. ●

The Doctrine of the Covenant in the Theology of John Calvin¹ (and in the Theology of Reformed Churches in the 21st Century)

David J. Engelsma

Introduction

The doctrine of the covenant of grace is thrust to the foreground in Reformed and Presbyterian churches by the contemporary heresy of the federal vision. The name of the heresy, by which its proponents themselves call their teaching, clearly indicates that this teaching puts the doctrine of the covenant on the front burner of the Reformed churches, for “federal” means “covenant.” Although the heresy corrupts every aspect of the confessional Reformed doctrine of salvation, from justification to perseverance, as well as the doctrine of the atonement of the cross, it is fundamentally a vision of the covenant.

Closely related to the New Perspective on Paul (which especially in the theology of N. T. Wright is also a covenant doctrine²), the federal vision teaches that God in grace establishes His covenant with all the physical children of believers alike at and by their baptism. In baptism God unites all of them alike savingly to Jesus Christ. At baptism

1 This is the significantly revised and expanded text of an address given at a conference commemorating the five hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Calvin in September 2009. The conference was put on by the Protestant Reformed Seminary.

2 The influence of Wright on many of the advocates of the federal vision, as on many other evangelicals, is great. For Wright’s distinctly covenantal presentation of the New Perspective on Paul (which rejects the Reformation’s understanding of Paul in its entirety, that is, the gospel of grace as recovered by the Reformation), see, among his many books, N. T. Wright’s *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); and *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009).

God graciously addresses the promise of the covenant to all of them alike, “I will be your God, and you shall be my son or daughter.” By baptism God also begins graciously to bestow on all of them alike the spiritual gifts of salvation obtained for them all by the death of Jesus Christ.

This by no means, however, assures the salvation of any of the baptized children, for, according to the federal vision, the covenant of grace, the gracious covenant promise, the gracious covenant union with Christ, and the blessings of covenant salvation are *conditional*. That is, they depend for their continuation with the children and for their realization in the final salvation of the children upon works that the children must perform, namely, faith and obedience. The failure of a child to perform the conditions results in the retraction of the covenant promise, the breaking of the covenant union with Christ, and the loss of the benefits of the covenant.

From this doctrine of a conditional covenant it follows, according to the men of the federal vision (as indeed it does follow), that justification in the covenant is by faith and works.³

3 For the doctrine of the federal vision by the men of the federal vision themselves, see Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2000); John Barach, *Covenant!* (audiotapes of lectures by John Barach, Steve Wilkins, Steve Schlissel, and Douglas Wilson at the 2002 Pastors’ Conference, Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Monroe, La. [Brooklyn: Messiah’s Ministries, 2002]); Douglas Wilson, John Barach, Steve Wilkins, and others, *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, ed. E. Calvin Beisner (Fort Lauderdale, Fla.: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004); and *The Federal Vision*, ed. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (Monroe, La.: Athanasius Press, 2004). Contributing writers in the last volume include Steve Wilkins, John Barach, Rich Lusk, Peter J. Leithart, Steve Schlissel, and Douglas Wilson. For the only critique heretofore (after at least ten years of the open promotion of the heresy in the Reformed and Presbyterian churches, dating from Shepherd’s publication of his *The Call of Grace* in 2000) of the federal vision with regard to its doctrine of a conditional covenant, the root of the heresy and the issue that the men of the federal vision themselves proclaim as fundamental to their vision, see David J. Engelsma, *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers: Sovereign Grace in the Covenant*

In the providence of God, who invariably uses heretics and heresies for the development of the truth, the federal vision brings to a head the controversy over the covenant within the Reformed churches from the time of the sixteenth century Reformation of the church to the present day. Again and again, this controversy has flared up in serious conflict, often resulting in schism.

The federal vision is the avowed development of the covenant doctrine that teaches that the covenant is graciously made by God in Christ with all the physical offspring of believers alike, but is dependent for its continuance with a child and for its fulfillment in the salvation of a child upon the works of the child. This is the doctrine of a *conditional* covenant.

In diametrical opposition to the doctrine of a conditional covenant has stood, and still stands today, a doctrine of the covenant that holds that the covenant of grace, its gracious promise, its saving union with Christ, its blessings, its maintenance, and its fulfillment in everlasting salvation are dependent upon the will of God. The will of God, upon which the covenant depends, is His eternal decree of election in Christ. This is the doctrine of the *unconditional* covenant.

The fundamental issue in the controversy between these two doctrines of the covenant is whether the covenant of grace is governed by

(Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2005). It is striking, and significant, that those who do address the fundamental issue raised by the federal vision—the doctrine of the covenant—concentrate virtually exclusively on the covenant with Adam and on the Sinaitic covenant, *despite the fact that the federal vision is a theology of the new covenant in Christ*. The book that promised to examine the federal vision in light of its basic covenantal doctrine, Guy Prentiss Waters' *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R, 2006), failed to deliver. When it traced the federal vision to its “sources,” it said not one word about the doctrine of a conditional covenant. Rather, it pointed to “theonomy.” Why will not the Reformed and Presbyterian theologians who are concerned about the federal vision take up the issue that the men of the federal vision themselves openly declare is the heart of their theology: the conditionality of the new covenant, inasmuch as (according to the federal vision) the new covenant is not governed by the eternal decree of predestination?

election. The doctrine of a conditional covenant, especially in its contemporary development in the federal vision, rejects, indeed abhors, the teaching that election governs the covenant. The doctrine of an unconditional covenant, in contrast, boldly and gladly confesses that God's eternal election, accompanied by eternal reprobation, governs the covenant.

The contemporary doctrine that calls itself the federal vision brings the ages-long controversy in the Reformed churches between the two covenant doctrines to a head, because the federal vision makes plain, indeed *insists*, that the doctrine of a conditional covenant is the denial of justification by faith alone. With this fundamental truth of the gospel of grace are also denied the five points of Calvinism as confessed in the Canons of Dordt.

As AD 325 was the hour of crisis for the truth of the Godhead of Jesus, as the early sixteenth century was the hour of crisis for the truths of the bondage of the will and justification by faith alone, and as the early seventeenth century was the hour of crisis for the doctrine of predestination, so the present time is the hour of crisis for the truth of the covenant of grace.

At this crucial hour in the history of the progress of the truth of the gospel, Reformed churches are called to examine, and reexamine, the doctrine of the covenant. They are to conduct this examination in light of Scripture, particularly Galatians 3, where the apostle imbeds justification by faith alone and the cross of Christ, which is the judicial basis of justification, in the covenant God established with Abraham and Abraham's "seed" and where the apostle identifies Abraham's seed as "Christ" (v. 16) and those who are Christ's (v. 29).

But in their examination of the doctrine of the covenant, the Reformed churches do well also to let Calvin, in so many ways the doctrinal, ecclesiastical, and spiritual father of these churches, shed light on the truth of the covenant.

The men of the federal vision do not much appeal to Calvin, and with good reason. The federal vision is closely tied to the theology of the New Perspective on Paul, especially as taught by N. T. Wright. The New Perspective on Paul openly rejects the Reformation's (and thus Calvin's) understanding of justification, the cross, and, in fact,

all of Paul's teaching about salvation, especially as that teaching is found in Romans and Galatians.⁴ The federal vision itself rejects the doctrines of grace confessed in the Canons of Dordt, whose source in Calvin is correctly indicated by their popular name, "the five points of Calvinism."⁵

The examination, in the twenty-first century, of Calvin's doctrine of the covenant may not be merely an abstract, academic exercise. Rather, it must take place in the context of the great controversy over the covenant that now comes to a head. And it must be undertaken with the conviction that the truth about the covenant is essential to the gospel of grace and, therefore, a life-and-death matter for the Reformed churches and their members.

4 "The stray lambs [Wright and his New Perspective on Paul cohorts—DJE] are not returning to the Reformation fold.... It is time to move on" (Wright, *Justification*, 29).

5 This is demonstrated, with quotations of the men of the federal vision, in Engelsma, *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers*, 135-232. An exception to the avoidance of Calvin by the men of the federal vision is Peter A. Lillback's *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001). Lillback indicates his thesis in these words: "Calvin's use of the covenant was not hampered (*sic!*) because of his belief in the doctrines of sovereign election and reprobation" (229). In accordance with this thesis, which is the denial that election governs the covenant in Calvin's theology, Lillback discovers in Calvin's covenant doctrine the teaching of justification by faith and works and, thus, Calvin's difference with Luther on the fundamental issue of the Reformation. See my critical review of Lillback's book "The Recent Bondage of John Calvin: A Critique of Peter A. Lillback's *The Binding of God*," in the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 35, no. 1 (November, 2001): 47-58. Dutch theologian C. Graafland rightly condemns Lillback's thesis: "The truth of the matter [of the relation of election and covenant—DJE] is precisely the other way round [from that proposed by Lillback—DJE], namely...that Calvin's doctrine of the covenant stands entirely in the service of his doctrine of election" (C. Graafland, *Van Calvijn tot Comrie: Oorsprong en Ontwikkeling van de Leer van het Verbond in het Gereformeerd Protestantisme*, 3 vols. [Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1992-1996], 1:88; the translation of the Dutch is mine).

Prominence of the Covenant

It must freely be acknowledged that John Calvin did not systematically, thoroughly, and, therefore, perfectly clearly and consistently develop the biblical and Reformed doctrine of the covenant. Calvin wrote no monograph on the covenant of grace. He commented on the covenant wherever it happened to come up in his treatment of the Christian faith in the *Institutes* and in his explanation of Scripture in his lectures and commentaries. Therefore, one can find inconsistencies in his analysis of the covenant, especially in the commentaries.

This is nothing strange.

There is development of doctrine in the history of the post-apostolic church as the Spirit of truth guides the church into deeper, clearer, purer, fuller understanding of the biblical revelation. Invariably, the Spirit has used heretics and heresies in this process, as today He uses the men of the federal vision. The Reformation, and Calvin in particular, *restored* the gospel of grace; they did not *perfect the church's understanding* of the gospel. The Spirit left something for us to do.

Although Calvin did not systematically and thoroughly develop the doctrine of the covenant, he taught it, and he taught it with regard to its fundamental aspects. So prominent is the covenant in Scripture that a biblical theologian, such as Calvin surely was, *had* to reckon with, and explain, the covenant. Such is the relation in Scripture between covenant, on the one hand, and the truth of salvation by grace alone, having its source in God's eternal election, on the other hand, that Calvin, wholly committed as he was to proclaiming sovereign grace, *had* to present the covenant, not as contradicting sovereign grace, not as in some mysterious "tension" with sovereign grace, and not as independent of sovereign grace. But Calvin had to present the covenant as being in harmony with sovereign grace, indeed magnifying sovereign grace as its very goal.

Besides, Calvin was forced to pay close attention to the covenant in his defense of the Reformed faith against his Anabaptist adversaries. The basic error of the Anabaptists, Calvin contended, was their false doctrine of the covenant, just as the fundamental ground of infant baptism for Calvin is the right doctrine of the covenant. Against the

erroneous covenant doctrine of the Anabaptists, Calvin taught the unity of the old and new covenants; the inclusion in the covenant of the infant children of believers; and covenant salvation by sovereign grace. Concerning this last, the basic issue in the controversy of Reformed orthodoxy with the federal vision, to a man the Anabaptists of Calvin's day proclaimed the false gospel of salvation by the free will of the sinner.⁶ They denied that the grace of salvation is governed by divine election.

Fundamental Importance of the Covenant

Not only is the doctrine of the covenant prominent in Calvin's theology, but it is also of fundamental importance. I deliberately refrain from using the word "central"—of "*central* importance"—because I am not making a case for regarding the covenant as the "central-dogma" for Calvin in the sense in which some in the past regarded predestination as "central-dogma" in Calvin's theology.⁷

What I am affirming is that Calvin clearly recognized the prominence of the reality of the covenant in Scripture, running as it does throughout the Bible from Genesis to Revelation and looming large in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. And Calvin regarded the prominent doctrine of the covenant as a fundamental truth. It bears decisively on the other doctrines of Scripture. It is an integral element of the gospel of salvation by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. To ignore the covenant would make impossible the right understanding of the Bible. To go wrong on the covenant would be to corrupt the entire message of the Bible.

In its emphasis on the covenant, therefore, and in its relating all the other truths of the Bible, including the truth of the Trinity and the truth of the person and work of Jesus Christ, to the doctrine of the

6 The main places in the *Institutes* where Calvin engages in controversy with the Anabaptists are 2.10, 11, where the subject is the unity of the old and new testaments, and 4.16, where Calvin defends infant baptism.

7 On predestination as the proposed "central-dogma" in the theology of Calvin, see Francois Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, tr. Philip Mairet (London: William Collins Sons, 1963), 263-265.

covenant, the Reformed church after Calvin has faithfully followed the guidance of the Holy Spirit through John Calvin.

Calvin expressed the fundamental importance of the covenant. Commenting on Zacharias' prophecy concerning the birth of Jesus Christ in Luke 1:67-79, particularly the words, "As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets...to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; the oath which he swore to our father Abraham," Calvin wrote: "[The prophets] all uniformly make the hope of the people, that God would be gracious to them, to rest entirely on that covenant between God and them which was founded on Christ." Calvin added: "Our chief attention is due to the signature of the divine covenant; for he that neglects this will never understand any thing in the prophets." He went on to declare, "The fountain from which redemption flowed [is] the *mercy* and gracious *covenant* of God."⁸

Calvin was teaching that Jesus Christ and all His salvation come to God's people in, and because of, the covenant of God with them. Jesus Christ is the covenant Christ. His salvation is covenant salvation. To be known rightly, Jesus must be known as the mediator of the covenant. His saving work is the establishment of the covenant. Every blessing that a regenerated and believing sinner enjoys in Christ Jesus is a covenant blessing.

Calvin emphasized that the blessings of salvation in Jesus Christ belong strictly to the covenant of grace. Continuing his commentary on Luke 1:67-79, Calvin called attention to "this order" of God's saving work in Jesus Christ:

First, God was moved by pure mercy to make a covenant with the fathers. *Secondly*, he has linked the salvation of men with his own word. *Thirdly*, he has exhibited in Christ every blessing, so as to ratify all his promises.... Forgiveness of sins is promised in the covenant, but it is in the blood of Christ.⁹

8 John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, tr. William Pringle, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 70, 71; the emphasis is the translator's.

9 Ibid., 71, 72.

Commenting on Hebrews 9, the passage teaching the new covenant as fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31-34, Calvin declared that, like the forgiveness of sins, so also eternal life is the blessing of the covenant:

The object of the divine covenant is that, having been adopted as children, we may at length be made heirs of eternal life. The Apostle teaches us that we obtain this by Christ. It is hence evident, that in him is the fulfillment of the covenant.¹⁰

In keeping with his understanding of the blessings of salvation as benefits of the covenant, in the prayer that concluded his lecture on Jeremiah 31:33 Calvin besought the enjoyment of salvation for himself and his auditors by asking God for the experience of the *covenant*: “Grant, Almighty God, that as thou hast favored us with so singular a benefit as to make through thy Son a covenant which has been ratified for our salvation,—O grant, that we may become partakers of it.”¹¹

Reformed pastors and believers might test their own regard for the covenant by asking themselves how often they implore God that they, their congregation, and their family may be partakers of the covenant.

In the *Institutes*, Calvin indicated his regard for the covenant as fundamental, if not central, by setting his entire doctrine of Christ in the context of the covenant of grace. Calvin began his exposition of the person and work of Jesus Christ in chapter twelve of book two. Immediately preceding this exposition of the truth of Christ is Calvin’s treatment, in chapters ten and eleven, of the unity and differences of the old and new covenants. Significantly, the opening line of Calvin’s doctrine of Christ is, “He who was to be our Mediator [must] be both

10 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, tr. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 207.

11 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, tr. John Owen, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 134.

true God and true man.”¹² “Mediator” signals the reality of the covenant.

The Unity of the Covenant

An essential aspect of the importance of the covenant for Calvin was the truth that the covenant with Old Testament Israel and the covenant with the New Testament church are one and the same covenant. They are two “forms,” or “administrations,” of the one covenant of grace established in one and the same Jesus Christ with one and the same people, bestowing one and the same salvation from sin. This truth, Calvin demonstrated and defended in his controversy with the Anabaptists.

Calvin located the heart of the Protestant and Reformed controversy with the Anabaptists in the Anabaptist rejection of infant baptism. The rejection of infant baptism implied that Old Testament circumcision and the covenant it signified and sealed were essentially different from New Testament baptism and the covenant of which it is sign and seal. Calvin contended, correctly, that rejection of infant baptism is inherently dispensational: denial of the unity of the covenant and, therefore, denial of the unity of the saving purpose and work of God in history. And this is to minimize, if not to lose sight altogether of, the fundamental importance of the (New Testament) covenant of grace.¹³

12 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.12.1.

13 Ibid., 2.10, 11; 3.16. The evidence of Calvin’s contention that dispensational theology, intimately bound up with, if not rooted in, the rejection of infant baptism, reduces the covenant of grace with the New Testament church to an incidental, if not an after-, thought of God is contemporary dispensationalism’s bold teaching that the church is merely a “parenthesis” in God’s main text of saving national Israel and dispensationalism’s equally bold teaching that the “blessed hope” of the church is the rapture, which gets the church out of the way so that God can fulfill His really important covenant with the Jews. It has always seemed to me that the ardent desire of dispensational, Baptist churches for their rapture, so that Christ may finally turn His attention to the Jews, is like the intense longing of a woman to be banished to a far country, so that her husband may make love to his other

It is not the purpose of this treatise to explore this crucially important aspect of Calvin's doctrine of the covenant in detail. But let us appreciate Calvin's insistence on the unity of the covenant, and our indebtedness to Calvin for this insistence. By that insistence, we Reformed Christians have the entire Bible, specifically the Old Testament, as the word of God *to us*—with all its glorious promises; all its heartwarming, but also humbling, history; and all its righteous laws.

By that insistence, we have our children and our grandchildren in the communion of Christ and in the fellowship of His church, the covenant family.

And by that insistence, we are delivered from bizarre premillennial dispensationalism, particularly the pre-tribulation rapture, which is the logical development of the Anabaptist error.

Let us recognize how serious an error dispensationalism is, that is, the denial of the unity of the covenant and thus of the oneness of God's saving work in both Old and New Testaments, inherent in the rejection of infant baptism. As Calvin warned, the Anabaptist doctrine tears Christ in pieces; makes the Jews of the Old Testament a "herd of swine" (since the covenant with them was merely earthly, giving merely earthly goods); and diminishes the grace of God in Christ in the new covenant in comparison with His grace in the old covenant, inasmuch as in the old covenant His grace extended to the children of the godly, whereas in the new covenant it does not.¹⁴

And let us hear at least a few brief statements by the Reformer concerning the oneness of the covenant and concerning the seriousness of denying this oneness: "[These] two covenants are actually one and the same"; "[This truth] is very important"; "[The denial of this truth by the Anabaptists] is this pestilential error."¹⁵

wife—a longing as ridiculous as it is inexplicable. And what is Christ doing with two wives, anyway?

14 "Certain madmen of the Anabaptist sect, who regard the Israelites as nothing but a herd of swine...for they babble of the Israelites as fattened by the Lord on this earth without any hope of heavenly immortality" (ibid., 2.10.1).

15 Ibid., 2.10.1, 2.

Application of the Fundamental Importance of the Covenant

The Reformed churches must teach, and the members must know, God as the covenant God; Christ as the Christ of the covenant; salvation as the realization of the covenant with a covenant people; and the Christian life and experience as the practice and enjoyment of the covenant of grace.

How unbecoming, how ominous, is the silence concerning the covenant in many Reformed and Presbyterian churches today. The silence betrays lack of esteem for the covenant, if not total ignorance of it. It is as though a married woman would always be talking about the good things she gets from a certain man, while dismissing or ignoring the marriage to that man, which is the source of the good things she receives. I use this figure advisedly. Scripture represents the covenant as God's marriage in Christ to the church and its members.¹⁶

One particularly glaring manifestation of sheer disregard for, if not total ignorance of, the covenant is that young people born to believers and baptized in infancy make a "decision for Christ" (as they say) in their teenage years (often under the pressure of a high-powered, Arminian evangelist), and then rejoice in the "personal relation" with God they have thus established. They should be rejoicing in *God's* covenant decision for them, already in their infancy, as expressed by baptism, and in the very personal relation of friendship that God's covenant decision has brought about between God and them by His Spirit.

It is the characteristic Baptist, dispensational minimizing of the covenant that renders the Baptist John Piper ineffectual against the influential advocate of the New Perspective on Paul N. T. Wright. Piper valiantly defends justification by faith alone against Wright's and the New Perspective's denial of this cardinal doctrine. But as a Baptist, Piper does not, indeed cannot, grasp that justification in Wright has its source in Wright's doctrine of the covenant, as indeed Paul's doctrine of justification has its source in Paul's doctrine of the covenant. Wright's response to Piper's attempt to defend the Reformation's doctrine of justification—an admirable attempt—is simply devastating.

16 Ezekiel 16; Ephesians 5:22-33.

Paul's doctrine of justification is...about what we...call *the covenant*—the covenant God made with Abraham, the covenant whose purpose was from the beginning the saving call of a worldwide family through whom God's saving purposes for the world were to be realized. For Piper, and many like him, the very idea of...covenant...remains strangely foreign and alien.¹⁷

Recognize its [the one covenant of grace established with Abraham—DJE] *existence* for Paul...and for any construction of his theology which wants to claim that it is faithful to his intention. For whenever you ignore it...you are cutting off the branch on which Paul's argument is resting. To highlight this element, which Reformed theology ought to welcome in its historic stress on the single plan of God (as opposed to having God change his mind in midstream [as is the teaching of dispensational Baptists such as John Piper—DJE]), is to insist on the wholeness of his train of thought.¹⁸

Wright demonstrates that justification by faith in Galatians 2 and 3, as also in the book of Romans, is a blessing of the covenant and cannot be understood if divorced from the covenant. Piper cannot get at the root of Wright's heresy, because that root is an erroneous doctrine of the covenant, and the very idea of covenant remains strangely foreign and alien to dispensational Piper.

Covenant was not “strangely foreign and alien” to John Calvin. On the contrary, it was fundamental. In the theology of Calvin, the doctrine of the covenant was fundamental, simply because, as a perceptive, faithful interpreter of the word of God, Calvin did justice to the importance of the covenant of grace in Scripture.

How important the reality of the covenant was to Calvin is seen even more clearly and convincingly when one considers the importance in Calvin of the union of the church and of believers and their children with Christ.

The Nature of the Covenant

Calvin taught that the very essence of salvation is union with Jesus

17 Wright, *Justification*, 12.

18 Ibid., 94.

Christ and, thus, with the triune God. This is how Calvin opens his doctrine of salvation—soteriology in theological terms—in chapter one of book three of the *Institutes*:

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.... We also...are said to be “engrafted into him” [Rom. 11:17]...for...all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him.¹⁹

Calvin immediately added, “The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.”²⁰

A little later, treating of faith, Calvin wrote: “Not only does [Christ] 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.”²¹

In his defense of justification by faith alone, against the charge by Rome that the doctrine imperils a life of good works, Calvin replied that this is impossible. The impossibility resides in a saving work of the Spirit that precedes both justification and sanctification. This work always gives both the righteousness of justification and the consecration to God that is sanctification. It is the saving work of union with Christ.

Although we may distinguish them [justification and sanctification], Christ contains both of them inseparably in himself. Do you wish, then, to attain righteousness in Christ? You must first possess Christ; but you cannot possess him without being made partaker in his sanctification, because he cannot be divided into pieces [I Cor. 1:13].²²

19 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., 3.2.24.

22 Ibid., 3.16.1.

Salvation as union with Christ is everywhere in Calvin's theology. Union with Christ is the meaning and goal of the sacraments. Calvin defined baptism as "the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, *engrafted in Christ*, we may be reckoned among God's children."²³ The meaning of the Lord's Supper is, for Calvin, "this mystery of Christ's secret union with the devout."²⁴ The Heidelberg Catechism expresses Calvin's doctrine of the sacrament of the supper in Lord's Day 28:

What is it to eat the crucified body and drink the shed blood of Christ?

It is...to be so united more and more to his sacred body by the Holy Ghost, who dwells both in Christ and in us, that although he is in heaven, and we on the earth, we are nevertheless flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones....²⁵

Union with Christ was also for Calvin the bliss and glory of eschatology. The bodily resurrection of the believer in the day of Christ will be "union with God...[as a] sacred bond." This union with God is "the highest good," as even the heathen philosopher Plato knew.²⁶ In raising His people from the dead, "[the Lord] will somehow make them to become one with himself." Calvin thought that "every sort of happiness is included under this benefit."²⁷

If, now, as some in the later Reformed tradition, notably Herman Hoeksema, contend, union with Christ is the very nature, or essence, of the covenant of grace, Calvin ascribed to the covenant the fundamental importance of being everlasting salvation itself.²⁸

23 Ibid., 4.15.1; emphasis added.

24 Ibid., 4.17.1

25 Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 76, in Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1966), 332, 333.

26 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.25.2.

27 Ibid., 3.25.10.

28 For Hoeksema's doctrine of the covenant as a bond of fellowship between God in Christ and the elect church, see his *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), 285-336 and his *Believers and Their Seed: Children in the Covenant* (Grandville, MI:

Calvin did not, in fact, definitively and consistently describe the covenant as union with Christ and fellowship with God. But there are compelling indications in Calvin that he viewed the covenant as essentially a relationship of fellowship with God in Christ.

First, Calvin called the union with Christ that he regarded as the essence of salvation and the highest good “wedlock”: The union of the people of God with Christ is “that sacred wedlock through which we are made flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone [Eph. 5:30], and thus one with him.”²⁹ “Wedlock” alludes to God’s marriage to the church of both the Old Testament and the New Testament, and this marriage is the covenant, as Calvin well knew.³⁰ “Wedlock” is a living bond of communion in love.

Second, there are numerous, explicit statements in Calvin describing the covenant as essentially the relationship of fellowship in love between God in Christ and the elect church. Two such statements occur in Calvin’s commentary on the great covenant passage in Jeremiah 31:31-34, God’s promise of the new covenant with Israel and Judah—a promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ in the covenant of grace with the church, according to Hebrews 8-10. Calvin

Reformed Free Publishing Association, rev. ed. 1997). His insights concerning the nature of the covenant as a living bond of communion and concerning the importance of the covenant as the highest good and the supreme blessedness of salvation, rather than merely a means by which salvation is obtained, were much earlier than the publication dates of these two books might suggest. Hoeksema wrote *Believers and Their Seed* (in Dutch) in the 1920s. His dogmatics was the content of his instruction in the Protestant Reformed Seminary from its very beginning in the middle 1920s. In those days, he had virtually all Reformed and Presbyterian theologians against him. All were teaching that the covenant is a contract and that it is merely the means by which the sinner may obtain salvation.

29 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.3.

30 Ezekiel 16 describes God’s covenant with Old Testament Israel as marriage. Ephesians 5:22-33 extols the fulfillment of the covenant with the New Testament church as marriage—the *real* marriage. Revelation 19:7-9 prophesies the perfection of the covenant in the new world as the marriage of the “Lamb...and his wife.”

observed that the word “covenant” used by God in the promise of the new covenant was more “honorable” for Israel and Judah than the word “edict” would have been. The word “covenant” shows that God “deals with his own people more kindly” than does a king who imperiously places his people under edicts. “Covenant” means that God “descends and appears in the midst of them [His people], that he may bind himself to his people, as he binds the people to himself.”³¹

Regarding the words, “[I] will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer. 31:33), words that express what the covenant *is* and words that Calvin elsewhere called “the very formula of the covenant,”³² Calvin explained, “Here God comprehends generally the substance of his covenant.”³³

Contract Conception

Most Reformed churches and theologians have not followed this lead of Calvin, or allowed the covenant formula to determine their understanding of the essence of the covenant. Rather, they have viewed the covenant as a contract, or an agreement, or even as a “bargain” between God and men, as though the covenant were similar to a business deal.

The contract conception of the covenant is imbedded deeply in the Reformed tradition. The English Puritan William Perkins defined the covenant as God’s “contract with man, concerning the obtaining of life eternall, upon a certaine condition.” Perkins added, “This covenant consists of two parts: Gods promise to man, Mans promise to God. Gods promise to man, is that, whereby he bindeth himselfe to man to be his God, if he performe the condition.”³⁴

31 Calvin, *Jeremiah*, vol. 4, 129.

32 Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.10.8.

33 Calvin, *Jeremiah*, vol. 4, 133.

34 William Perkins, “A Golden Chaine,” in *The Workes of...Mr. William Perkins*, vol. 1 (London: John Legatt, 1626), 32. It ought to be noted that Perkins by no means intended to separate covenant from election. His definition of the covenant immediately follows Perkins’ assertion that the covenant is the “outward meanes of executing the decree of Election” (31).

The Presbyterian “Sum of Saving Knowledge,” a document drawn up at the time of the Westminster Assembly, often published with the Westminster Standards, and thus influential in forming the doctrine of the covenant in the minds of Presbyterians, is crass. It calls the covenant God’s “bargain” with the sinner and views the sinner’s acceptance of God’s “offer” of the covenant as the sinner’s “closing” of the “bargain.” “Let the penitent desiring to believe...say heartily to the Lord... ‘I have hearkened unto the offer of an everlasting covenant of all saving mercies to be had in Christ, and I do heartily embrace thy offer. Lord, let it be a bargain.’”³⁵

The popular Louis Berkhof defined the covenant of grace as “that gracious agreement between the offended God and the offending but elect sinner.”³⁶ He described God and the sinner as “contracting parties.”³⁷

According to Klaas Schilder, “*Covenant* is the mutual *agreement* between God and His people, established by Him Himself, and maintained (according to His gracious work) by Him Himself and His people as two ‘parties.’”³⁸ The parenthetical phrase, “according to His gracious work,” obscures but does not in the least blunt the force of Schilder’s clear, bold statement that the covenant is maintained by God *and by His people*. This statement explains what Schilder meant by conditions of and in the covenant. Although the covenant is established by God alone (with every child of godly parents alike, Esau as well as Jacob), it depends for its continuance with a child and for its realization in the everlasting salvation of a child upon works that the child must perform. This implies that the covenant,

35 “The Sum of Saving Knowledge,” in *The Subordinate Standards and Other Authoritative Documents of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: repr. William Blackwood & Sons, 1973), 196.

36 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1938), 277.

37 Ibid., 284.

38 Klaas Schilder, *Looze Kalk: Een Wederwoord over de (Zedelijke) Crisis in de “Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland”* (Groningen: Erven A. De Jager, 1946), 66. The emphasis is Schilder’s. The translation of the Dutch is mine.

its blessings, and salvation, though graciously established with and bestowed upon a child, can be lost. The men of the federal vision are doing nothing more or other than making explicit what lay (*and lies!*) implicit in this doctrine of the covenant, and developing it—developing it in the open denial of justification by faith alone and of all the doctrines of grace confessed in the Canons of Dordt. A little earlier in the chapter in which he gave the definition of the covenant quoted above, *in the context of denying that election governs the covenant*, Schilder asserted that the covenant is conditional.³⁹

The seriousness of this sterile conception of the covenant is not only that it sucks the life out of the covenant. A bond of communion in love, like earthly marriage, is vibrant, warm, interesting, and exciting; a contract is a cold, calculating, and lifeless business. But the notion of contract, or agreement, also inherently jeopardizes, indeed compromises, the grace of the covenant and its salvation. It does this in two ways. For one thing, contract makes the establishment and fulfillment of the covenant the cooperative work of God and the sinner. It takes two to draw up and ratify a contract; two parties hammer out and keep an agreement. For another thing, contract suspends the covenant, its salvation, and all its benefits upon stipulations, or conditions, that the sinner must perform.

The contract idea of the covenant militates against two fundamental aspects of the grace of God's covenant. First, the covenant is established, kept, and perfected by God alone. The history of Old Testament Israel demonstrates that the covenant is "unilateral" not only in its establishment but also in its maintenance and fulfillment. That God, and God alone, maintains and fulfills the covenant that He, and He alone, established with Israel is the doctrinal message of Ezekiel 16. God unilaterally established the covenant with Israel: "I swear unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the LORD" (Ezek. 16:8). God also unilaterally keeps and fulfills this covenant. After a long history of Israel's egregious, appalling unfaithfulness to her divine husband, when all that could be expected was God's angry or sorrowful acknowledgment of the breaking of the covenant by His

39 "*verbondsvoorwaarden*," *ibid.*, 59.

people, God announces, “Nevertheless, I will remember my covenant with thee in the days of thy youth, and I will establish unto thee an everlasting covenant” (Ezek. 16:60). This everlasting covenant is the new covenant in Jesus Christ.

The second aspect of the grace of God’s covenant against which the contract conception militates is that the covenant (which, as Calvin noted, is “founded on Christ”⁴⁰), the blessings it bestows, and the salvation it promises depend upon God alone. Concerning the redemption, regeneration, and sanctification of His chosen, covenant people, Jehovah declares that He does all these things, “not...for your sakes...but for my holy name’s sake” (Ezek. 36:21-38).

This intrinsic opposition of the contract conception of the covenant to sovereign grace is boldly expressed, and clearly disclosed, today by zealous advocates of the contract conception in these words, which have become virtually a mantra: “Covenant is not identical with election.” Granted, this determined opposition to sovereign grace in the covenant is subtly couched in deceptive terminology, suggesting that some Reformed theologians are so stupid as to “identify” the eternal decree and the historical working out of the decree. But what is meant by the mantra is that the covenant is not governed by God’s eternal decree of election in Christ. The covenant of grace with its gracious promise, its establishment with a baptized baby by uniting him or her savingly to Christ, its bestowal of at least some of the blessings of salvation, its continuance with the child, and its realization in the everlasting salvation of the child is cut loose from divine election.

And this is the issue between the two rival doctrines of the covenant in the Reformed tradition that I mentioned earlier in this essay: on the one hand, a doctrine of the covenant as a gracious, but conditional contract with all the baptized children of believing parents alike and, on the other hand, a doctrine of the covenant as a bond of communion with Christ that God graciously and unconditionally (to be redundant) establishes, keeps, and perfects with the elect children only.

40 Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists*, vol. 1, 70.

Governed by Election

These two radically different and diametrically opposed doctrines of the covenant have existed in the Reformed churches since the time of the sixteenth-century Reformation.⁴¹ But they have not peacefully coexisted. On the contrary, they have fought vigorously, indeed violently, tearing at their mothers' innards, as Jacob and Esau once contended for the covenant in the womb of Rebekah.

The two covenant doctrines were very much involved in the controversy of Reformed orthodoxy with the Arminian heresy in Europe in the early seventeenth century. It is unfortunate that the important conflict of Reformed orthodoxy with the Remonstrants, or Arminians, in the late 1500s and early 1600s over the doctrine of the covenant is all but lost sight of as both defenders and opponents of the Canons of Dordt concentrate on the "five points," which do not include the truth of the covenant as a main topic. Nevertheless, Canons, II/8 and especially Canons, II, Rejection of Errors/2, 3, and 4 demonstrate that an essential aspect of the Arminian heresy was (*and is!*) the doctrine of a conditional covenant, necessarily implying justification by works. Against the Arminian doctrine that the cross of Christ merely acquired the right for God to establish a conditional covenant with all men, Canons, II/8 teaches that the "blood of the cross," which "effectually redeem[ed]...all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation," "*confirmed*" the new covenant.⁴² Canons, II, Rejection of Errors/2, 3, and 4 condemn that aspect of the Arminian heresy that consisted (*and still today consists!*) of the teaching that "faith itself and the obedience of faith" are "conditions" of the new covenant of grace.⁴³

The conflict between the two covenant doctrines raged in the

41 The Dutch scholar C. Graafland has conclusively demonstrated the fact and nature of these two different conceptions of the covenant in the Reformed tradition in his magisterial three-volume work, *Van Calvijn tot Comrie*.

42 Canons, II/8, in Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 587.

43 Canons, II, Rejection of Errors/2, 3, 4, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 164, 165.

Reformed churches of the Secession (Dutch: *Afscheiding*) in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century.⁴⁴

The struggle over these two doctrines of the covenant was the occasion of schism in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in the early 1940s and in the Protestant Reformed Churches in the early 1950s.⁴⁵

44 For an account of the sharp controversy over the covenant in the Secession churches, see David J. Engelsma, "The Covenant Doctrine of the Fathers of the Secession," in *Always Reforming: Continuation of the Sixteenth-Century Reformation*, ed. David J. Engelsma (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2009), 100-136.

45 For analysis of the controversy over the covenant in the Dutch churches in the early 1940s, see E. Smilde, *Een Eeuw van Strijd over Verbond en Doop* (Kampen: Kok, 1946) and C. Veenhof, *Prediking en Uitverkiezing* (Kampen: Kok, 1959), 294-312. Smilde and Veenhof were on opposite sides of the conflict, but they agreed concerning the doctrine that was at issue: the relation of covenant and election. Veenhof takes note of the controversy over the covenant in the Protestant Reformed Churches resulting in schism in 1953. Correctly, Veenhof observed that this controversy was "over the same questions," that is, over covenant and election (311, 312). For an understanding of the covenant controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches, the editorials of Herman Hoeksema in the *Standard Bearer* in the late 1940s and early 1950s are of paramount importance. The editorials are especially important for their clear delineation of the two contrasting and opposing covenant conceptions and for their distinct indication of the implications of the two covenant doctrines for the gospel of grace. Two series of editorials are noteworthy. One is the series, "The Liberated Churches in the Netherlands [with regard to their doctrine of the covenant—DJE]," in volume 22 of the *Standard Bearer* (1945, 1946). Included in this series is significant reflection on the controversy over the covenant in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in the early 1940s. Hoeksema concluded this series with the declaration that the Protestant Reformed Churches do not "agree with the stand of the Liberated Churches on the covenant. In following Heyns they leave the track of Reformed truth" (Herman Hoeksema, "The Liberated Churches in the Netherlands," *Standard Bearer* 22, no. 18 [June 15, 1946]: 414). The other series is titled, "As to Conditions." It ran in volume 26 of the *Standard Bearer* (1949, 1950). As the title expressed, this series examined the two opposing doctrines of the covenant with regard to the issue of the conditionality or unconditionality of the covenant.

The fundamental issue between these two doctrines of the covenant is whether the covenant of grace is governed by God's eternal, unconditional decree of election. That is, is God's purpose with the covenant the realization of the decree of election in the saving of the elect, and the elect only? Does election determine who will be, and who will not be, saved in the covenant? Does election determine who they are to whom God makes the promise of the covenant, with whom He establishes the covenant, to whom He gives the covenant blessings, and with whom the covenant is kept unto everlasting life?

Those who view the covenant as a conditional contract made by God with all the baptized children alike deny that the covenant is governed by election. Indeed, denial that election governs the covenant is inherent in the conception of a conditional covenant. The covenant, its promise, and the establishment of the covenant with all the baptized children are gracious—gracious with the grace of the redeeming blood of Jesus Christ, in which the covenant is rooted, and gracious with the grace of the saving will of God, which is the source of the “blood of the cross” that confirmed the covenant, according to Canons, II/8. If, now (as the defenders of a conditional covenant hold), God graciously promises the covenant to every baptized child, Esau, as well as Jacob; if in grace God actually establishes the covenant with every baptized child alike; and if God even graciously begins to give every baptized child some of the blessings of the covenant, covenant grace is wider than election, and resistible. In this case, covenant salvation does not depend on divine election. Nor is covenant grace effectual simply by virtue of election. The covenant falls outside the control of election.

That on the view of those who teach a conditional covenant God's election does not govern the covenant is all the more evident when one considers that, according to Scripture and the Canons of Dordt (*and John Calvin!*), election—*biblical* election—is always accompanied by reprobation. For the teaching that God, “out of his sovereign, most just, irreprehensible and unchangeable good pleasure,”⁴⁶ has eternally rejected certain baptized children of believers and that His purpose with them, from their infancy, is their spiritual hardening and damna-

46 Canons, I/15, in Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 584.

tion, the doctrine of a conditional covenant has no place whatever. The proponents of a conditional covenant of grace established with all the children of believers alike reject the apostle's teaching in Romans 9:6-24 that God sovereignly reprobated Esau (grandson of Abraham and child of godly parents!) unto eternal damnation, in hatred of him, before Esau was born or had "done any good or evil," including the evil of despising the covenant, its Christ, and its grace.

The doctrine that affirms a conditional covenant, while denying that the covenant is governed by election, is, by virtue of this fact, a doctrine of conditional predestination. It is a covenant doctrine that is opposed to the first head of doctrine of the Canons and, therefore, to all the doctrines of sovereign grace. It is a doctrine of conditional predestination and a doctrine opposed to the first head of the Canons *regarding the covenant, specifically regarding the salvation and perishing of baptized children of believers.*

The truth of this judgment concerning the doctrine of a conditional covenant is evident in the history of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands ("liberated"), the churches associated with the name of Klaas Schilder and the churches whose covenant doctrine is now being developed by the men of the federal vision. Schilder himself attempted to hold on to a relation between covenant and election. But the relation, as Schilder sketched it, was so tenuous, and Schilder's description of the relation, so tortuous, as to leave his theology of covenant wide open to development that presents predestination as conditional. Having defined the covenant as an agreement between two parties, Schilder declared that the covenant is "determined" by God's "speaking, through His Word (promise and demand). And by this speaking He executes His counsel (of election)." Schilder added: "As well as that of His reprobation (inasmuch as it is a predestination unto punishment specifically regarding a despising of the administration of the covenant of grace)."⁴⁷

Development of this covenant doctrine that views predestination as conditional was promoted, if not required, by the fact that, as "liberated" theologian C. Veenhof tells us, Schilder and his colleagues, including Veenhof, deliberately formulated their distinctive,

47 Schilder, *Looze Kalk*, 66. The translation of the Dutch is mine.

“liberated” doctrine of the covenant in such a way that “concerning covenant, covenant promise, and Baptism very consciously this was *not* placed under the control of election.”⁴⁸ When Schilder wrote that the covenant is “determined” by God’s speaking, he intended emphatically to deny that the covenant is “determined” by election.

In a recent important essay, “liberated” theologian Erik de Boer demonstrates that Schilder’s conditional covenant doctrine has resulted in criticism of the doctrine of predestination confessed in the first head of the Canons, by theologians in the “liberated” Reformed denomination and in other denominations.⁴⁹

48 Veenhof, *Prediking en Uitverkiezing*, 299. The emphasis is Veenhof’s. The translation of the Dutch is mine.

49 Erik de Boer, “Unfinished Homework: Charting the Influence of B. Holwerda with Respect to the Doctrine of Election,” translated, with introduction and epilogue by Nelson D. Kloosterman, *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 18 (2007): 107-136. The importance of de Boer’s essay is not only the candid acknowledgment by a contemporary “liberated” theologian that the “liberated” doctrine of the covenant, deliberately framed to be “free” of God’s predestination, found itself at once in conflict with the Reformed doctrine of predestination as confessed in the first head of doctrine of the Canons. But its importance is also the disclosure that Schilder was fully aware of the conflict caused by his covenant doctrine. de Boer relates that seminary students made Schilder aware of his colleague Holwerda’s nullification of the Reformed doctrine of predestination—and the first head of the Canons—in one fell swoop, by declaring that election in the Bible, *including Ephesians 1:4*, is a historical decision of God. And Schilder permitted it. In de Boer’s words, “Schilder...gave his junior colleague some elbow room” (113). The importance of the essay is also its exposure of the falsity, if not the duplicity, of the schismatic faction in the Protestant Reformed Churches in the early 1950s, as well as of the Reformed community that looked on (including Schilder, Holwerda, and the other theologians of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands [“liberated”]), when they loudly and persistently denied that anything Reformed was at stake in Hoeksema’s and the Protestant Reformed Churches’ lonely battle against the teaching of a conditional covenant that is not governed by election. *Everything* was at stake! At stake was the Reformed doctrine of predestination as set forth in the first head of doctrine of the Canons and, with this doctrine, the whole of the gospel of grace, including, as the federal vision makes undeniably evident today, justification by

This criticism of predestination in the Canons of Dordt began immediately upon the “liberation” in the early 1940s with the teaching of Prof. B. Holwerda that virtually every mention of election in the Bible, including *Ephesians 1:4*, refers to a *historical* choice on God’s part.⁵⁰ Construing election as historical, which is the ultimate form of conditionality, effectively nullifies the biblical basis of the first head of the Canons and, thus, the Reformed doctrine of predestination.

The criticism has continued down the years to the present day. In 1992, H. Venema wrote that “clearly the notion must be abandoned that God already in eternity has fixed who will be elect and who will be reprobate and this without considering human acts of commission or omission.”⁵¹

In 2003, Dr. B. Kamphuis, professor of dogmatics at the “liberated” seminary, declared that the “Canons of Dort...cannot be the church’s last word about divine election.” By “last” word, Kamphuis meant “authoritative” word. The reason, said Kamphuis, is that “back then the discussion about the relationship between covenant and election still had to occur.”⁵² He meant that theologians had not yet attempted to impose the “liberated” doctrine of the covenant on biblical predestination. Kamphuis was mistaken. The fathers at Dordt were well aware of the conditional covenant doctrine of Arminius, Episcopius, and their disciples, and rejected it.

faith alone. For the rejection of the gospel of (particular, sovereign) grace, there was no “elbow room” in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

50 Ibid., 109-111.

51 Cited in *ibid.*, 123. “Liberated” theologian H. Venema assailed the doctrine of election confessed by the Canons of Dordt in his book *Uitverkiezing? Jazeker! Maar hoe?* (Kampen: Van Den Berg, 1992). Venema charged that Calvin’s doctrine of predestination has “heavily oppressed” many church members (12). He expressed his indebtedness in viewing predestination as a conditional, historical decision of God, determined by the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of the conditions of the covenant, to Prof. B. Holwerda, one of the founding fathers of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (“liberated”): “I am indeed indebted to him [B. Holwerda]” (8; the translations of the Dutch are mine).

52 Cited in de Boer, “Unfinished Homework,” 132.

de Boer makes clear that the criticism of the Canons is ongoing among “liberated” theologians. One ominous item on the agenda is “fresh reflection on the doctrine of reprobation” that will do away with “*gemina praedestinatio*,” that is, double predestination.⁵³

This criticism of the Canons, arising out of the “liberated” doctrine of a covenant that is cut loose from election and conditional, comes to full fruition today in the covenant theology of the federal vision.

Graafland, who proposes Schilder’s covenant doctrine as the solution to the ages-long controversy over the covenant in the Reformed tradition (and is, therefore, a friendly critic), freely acknowledges that in his doctrine of the covenant “K. Schilder... pursued the track [of Saumur] (!),” that is, Amyraldianism.⁵⁴

Amyraldianism was essentially a doctrine of the covenant. It taught a gracious covenant of God in Christ with all humans alike, dependent, however, for the realization of God’s universal, gracious, saving will motivating this covenant upon the condition of faith. Added to this universal, gracious covenant, which is not governed by election, but rather opposed to it, is another covenant with the elect. The universal, conditional covenant of grace is primary.

Amyraldianism was a deliberate attack on Dordt, a subtle form of Arminianism (the essence of which is the doctrine of universal, conditional, and, therefore, resistible grace), and, once approved, the opening up of Reformed churches to blatant Arminianism.⁵⁵

The doctrine of an unconditional covenant, in contrast, affirms that the grace, promise, blessing, and salvation of the covenant flow from and depend upon the sovereign good-pleasure of the electing God. It denies that the (saving) grace of the covenant is wider than election. It denies that the (saving) grace of the covenant is resistible. It denies

53 Ibid., 134.

54 Graafland, *Van Calvijn tot Comrie*, vol. 3, 403.

55 On the Amyraldian doctrine of Moyse Amyraut of Saumur, France in the middle 1600s, see A. G. Honig, “Amyraut (Moyse),” in *Christelijke Encyclopaedie voor het Nederlandsche Volk*, ed. F. W. Grosheide, J. H. Landwehr, C. Lindeboom, and J. C. Rullmann, vol. 1 (Kampen: Kok, 1925), 111. Honig notes that “Amyraldianism has prepared the way for the falling away again into Arminianism.” The translation of the Dutch is mine.

that the (saving) grace of the covenant is dependent upon the willing or working of the baptized child.

Confessing that the covenant was confirmed in the blood of Christ, concerning which “it was the will of God” that that blood “effectually redeem...all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation,” the Canons of Dordt not only obviously bring the covenant into the closest relationship with election but also teach that election governs the covenant.⁵⁶

Herman Bavinck expressed the conviction of the original ministers of the Secession churches in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century, and one of the two conflicting doctrines of the covenant in the later history of these churches, when he wrote:

Election only and without qualification states who are elect and will infallibly obtain salvation; the covenant of grace describes the road by which these elect people will attain their destiny. The covenant of grace is the channel by which the stream of election flows toward eternity. In this covenant Christ indeed acts as the head and representative of his own.⁵⁷

Bavinck expressly rejected the teaching that “election is particular while the covenant of grace is universal,”⁵⁸ that is, the teaching that the grace and saving will of God are particular in election, but universal in the covenant. Included in the teaching rejected by Bavinck is the

56 Canons of Dordt, II/8, in Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 587.

57 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3: *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 229. It should not be overlooked that Bavinck regarded Christ as head of the covenant with regard to all those whom the Father has given Him, that is, the elect church. “[Jesus Christ] was appointed head of a new covenant” (295). Basic to the denial that election governs the covenant is the denial that Christ is head of the covenant of grace, for, if Christ is head of the new covenant (as Romans 5:12-21 teaches that He is), the new covenant is established with Christ and with His elect members (as Galatians 3:16, 29 says it is). And this is anathema to those who want someone and something other than the predestinating God to govern the covenant.

58 Ibid.

notion that covenant grace is universal *among all baptized offspring of godly parents*. Bavinck's point was that the grace of the covenant is not, and cannot be, wider than election.

The Protestant Reformed Churches have officially declared "that all the covenant blessings are for the elect alone" and "that God's promise is unconditionally for them only: for God cannot promise what was not objectively merited by Christ."⁵⁹ In the course of the controversy over the covenant in the Protestant Reformed Churches in the early 1950s, Herman Hoeksema wrote, "the relation between election and the covenant...[is] at the very heart of the Protestant Reformed truth."⁶⁰

The ages-long controversy between these two doctrines of the covenant in the Reformed tradition is brought to a head today by the theology of the federal vision. For the federal vision is the logical, necessary, full development of the doctrine of a conditional covenant with all the baptized children alike. That is, the federal vision is the development of the doctrine of the covenant that denies that election governs the covenant. Norman Shepherd has written that the federal vision is essentially the doctrine of a gracious covenant with all the physical children of Abraham and all the physical children of believers alike, which covenant, however, is conditioned by the faith and obedience of the children. "The Abrahamic covenant was not unconditional."⁶¹ "Faith, repentance, obedience, and perseverance... are conditions" upon which "the new covenant" in Jesus Christ depends for its realization in the salvation of any child.⁶² Shepherd and the federal vision theology of which he is a leading proponent emphatically do *not* "view the covenant from the perspective of election."⁶³

The reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian theological world is well aware that the federal vision is rooted in the doctrine

59 "Declaration of Principles," in *Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches*, 418.

60 Herman Hoeksema, "The Declaration [of Principles,] Not A Mistake," *Standard Bearer* 27, no. 7 (January 1, 1951): 152.

61 Shepherd, *The Call of Grace*, 22.

62 Ibid., 50.

63 Ibid., 83.

of a conditional covenant, particularly the covenant doctrine of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (“liberated”) and of the Canadian Reformed Churches. At the meeting of leading advocates of the federal vision and its mild critics at Knox Seminary in 2003 (a meeting from which real critics of the federal vision were excluded), Carl D. Robbins responded to John Barach’s bold promotion and defense of the covenant theology of the men of the federal vision. Barach had taught a conditional covenant of grace with all the physical children of Abraham and with all the physical children of believing parents alike. From this covenant doctrine, Barach drew the implications that all the physical children of Abraham and of believers alike are “genuinely” united to Christ in the sense of Galatians 3:27; were died for by Christ; and are elect in the sense of Ephesians 1:4 and II Thessalonians 2:13. Nevertheless, according to Barach, many of these fall away and perish eternally, since they fail to perform the prerequisite conditions.

Responding to this open rejection of the five points of Calvinism as set forth in the Canons of Dordt and the Westminster Standards, before all the worthies assembled at Knox Seminary, Carl Robbins declared:

I’ve finally grasped that he [John Barach] is simply re-stating *the* distinctive (*sic*) of the “Liberated” Reformed Churches. Therefore, it must be fairly pointed out that Pastor Barach cannot be charged with “theological novelty,” for his views were first propounded by Klaas Schilder in the 1940’s and (before him) Calvin Seminary Professor William W. Heyns from the early 1900’s. In fact, Pastor Barach has simply and faithfully re-stated those covenantal understandings—even to the extent of using Schilderian phraseology such as ‘head for head’ and other catch-phrases popularized in the Dutch covenantal debates.⁶⁴

64 Carl D. Robbins, “A Response to ‘Covenant and Election,’” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, 157. Robbins accurately traces the more recent history of the covenant doctrine now fully developed by the federal vision: Heyns/Schilder/federal vision. However, Robbins omits the two earliest sources of the doctrine: Pelagius and Arminius. In his essay on “Covenant and Election” in *The Federal Vision*, Barach begins his defense of the conditionality of all of (covenant) salvation with the words, “One of my great theo-

Making explicit what is implicit in the doctrine of a conditional covenant, the federal vision denies justification by faith alone in the covenant and, with this doctrine (the heart of the gospel of grace), all the doctrines of grace as confessed by the Canons of Dordt. The men of the federal vision boldly announce to the Reformed churches what the earlier advocates of a conditional covenant did not like to acknowledge: If the *covenant of grace* is conditional, *all of salvation* is conditional, beginning with *justification*; and if *God's will—election*—does not govern the covenant, the only alternative is that the will of the *sinner* governs the covenant, specifically the *will of the sinful child*.⁶⁵

The Reformed and Presbyterian churches are now put to the test,

logical heroes [is] Klaas Schilder” (John Barach, “Covenant and Election,” in *The Federal Vision*, 15). By Robbins’ own judgment (“Pastor Barach has simply and faithfully re-stated those covenantal understandings”), Robbins must condemn the “covenantal understandings” of Heyns and Schilder as the Arminian heresy in principle. The alternative is his approval of Barach’s and the federal vision’s covenant doctrine, which teaches justification by faith and works; conditional, inefficacious election; universal atonement, at least regarding all baptized children; resistible grace in the sphere of the covenant; and the falling away of covenant saints, as Barach and the other men of the federal vision confessed at the Knox meeting. As Robbins and all of those assembled at Knox Seminary understood perfectly well, the doctrine of John Barach and the federal vision is not “theological novelty.” It is essentially the old doctrine of a conditional covenant taught by Schilder and Heyns. It is the covenant doctrine held by the (mild) critics of the federal vision themselves, as by the churches to which most of them belong. This is the reason why, with the rarest exception, the reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches will not, indeed *cannot*, discipline the men of the federal vision and why the Reformed and Presbyterian theologians who express some unhappiness with the federal vision (*the denial of justification by faith alone!*) are determined *not* to take hold of the heresy at its root, that is, its covenant doctrine.

65 For the demonstration of the federal vision’s denial of justification by faith alone and, with this cardinal doctrine, all of the five points of Calvinism, see Engelsma, *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers*, 135-232.

not so much by the men of the federal vision as by God Himself, who uses heresies to confirm and develop the truth, but also to expose the lie. The question is not whether the churches will produce non-binding study papers about justification. The question is not even whether the churches will uphold justification by faith alone (which some have already ignominiously and fatally failed to do—at *their major assemblies*).⁶⁶

But the question is: Will the churches now condemn the doctrine of a conditional covenant, which has produced the heresy of the federal vision, particularly the denial of justification by faith alone? And the question is: Will the churches now embrace, wholeheartedly and openly, the doctrine of the covenant that has election governing the covenant, which doctrine is the only theological soil in which the truth of justification by faith alone and the “five points of Calvinism” flourish? Will the churches confess the doctrine of the unconditional covenant? Will they preach it? Will they teach it to the children in catechism?

66 On the failure, indeed willful, scandalous refusal, of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Westminster Seminary (Philadelphia) to defend the doctrine of justification by faith alone in the hour of crisis, thus approving and promoting justification by faith and works, see O. Palmer Robertson, *The Current Justification Controversy* (Unicoi, Tennessee: Trinity Foundation, 2003); A. Donald MacLeod, “A Painful Parting, 1977-1983: Justifying Justification,” in *W. Stanford Reid: An Evangelical Calvinist in the Academy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), 257-279; Paul M. Elliott, *Christianity and Neo-Liberalism: The Spiritual Crisis in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Beyond* (Unicoi, Tennessee: Trinity Foundation, 2005); and W. Robert Godfrey, “Westminster Seminary, the Doctrine of Justification, and the Reformed Confessions,” in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries*, ed. David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R, 2004), 127-148. Godfrey states that a “majority of the faculty” at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia “supported...as orthodox” a professor—Norman Shepherd—who was known to be teaching that “justification was both definitive and progressive, and... that there were two instruments of justification: faith and works.” Godfrey identifies himself as a member of the Westminster faculty during the time of the controversy over justification, and as a “critic” of Shepherd’s doctrine of justification (*Pattern of Sound Doctrine*, 136, 137).

At this crucial hour for the covenant, the churches can learn from Calvin.

Calvin on Covenant and Election

In the theology of John Calvin, the covenant is always closely related to, indeed is inseparable from, election. The relation is that election governs the covenant.

That election governs the covenant in Calvin's theology should surprise no one who has the least knowledge of Calvin's thinking. The saving grace of God in Christ, for John Calvin, as for all the Reformers, *has its source in election, and is, therefore, strictly determined by election*. The covenant bestows this saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. No one would argue that the covenant bestows non-saving grace. The main saving grace that the covenant bestows is justification on the basis of the cross, as Paul teaches in Galatians 3. The justification of the Gentiles by faith is the grace that God promised when He established the covenant with Abraham: "And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed" (Gal. 3:8). If saving grace, particularly justification, has its source in, and is determined by, election (as Calvin devoted his life to proclaiming) and if the grace of the covenant is saving grace, chiefly justification (as no one denies), it follows that the covenant and its grace have their source in, and are governed by, election.

That Calvin, whose whole ministry was devoted to the defense of election as the source of the grace of God in Christ Jesus, would place the grace of the covenant outside the government of election is unthinkable on the very face of it.

When Calvin contends for the truth that the grace and salvation of God are governed by God's eternal predestination, he invariably appeals to *Romans 9*, which speaks of God's grace *in the covenant*—grace to Jacob, but not to Esau, both being sons of godly parents. Against the "sentiments" of Pighius—that "wild beast"—that "the mercy of God is extended to every one, for God wishes all men to be saved; and for that end He stands and knocks at the door of our heart, desiring to enter" (sentiments that in the twenty-first century widely

pass for Calvinistic orthodoxy, and the rejection of which earns from this novel Calvinistic orthodoxy the opprobrium “hyper-Calvinistic”), Calvin appeals to Paul’s assertion, in Romans 9, that “out of the twins, while they were yet in the womb of their mother, the one was *chosen* and the other *rejected!* and that, too, without any respect to the works of either, present or future...but solely by the good pleasure of God that calleth!”⁶⁷

How closely covenant and election are related in Calvin’s thinking appears in his definition of predestination in the *Institutes*:

In actual fact, the *covenant of life* is not preached equally among all men, and among those to whom it is preached, it does not gain the same acceptance either constantly or in equal degree. In this diversity the wonderful depth of God’s judgment is made known. For there is no doubt that this variety also serves the decision of God’s eternal election.⁶⁸

For Calvin, not only is the covenant of life closely related to election, so that the truth of the latter must be spoken in the same breath with the reality of the former, but the covenant is also governed and controlled by election. And not only is the saving purpose and effect of the covenant (the covenant’s gaining “acceptance”) determined by election (“this variety...serves the decision of God’s eternal election”), but even the *preaching* of the covenant to some and not to others is also determined by election (“the covenant of life is not preached equally among all men”).

In the context of his consideration of the shameful degeneracy of the Jews in the Old Testament, an apostasy that might seem to imperil God’s covenant with them, Calvin assures his readers that “[God’s] freely given covenant, *whereby God had adopted his elect*, would stand fast.”⁶⁹

Calvin insists that the promise of the covenant is for the elect only,

67 John Calvin, “A Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God,” in *Calvin’s Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 152.

68 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.1; emphasis added.

69 Ibid., 2.6.4; emphasis added.

so that God establishes the new covenant with the elect, and the elect only. Commenting on the outstanding prophecy of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34, Calvin writes:

This is that one of the two covenants which God promises that He will not make with any but with His own children and His own elect people, concerning whom He has recorded His promise that “He will *write His law in their hearts*” (Jer. 31:33). Now, a man must be utterly beside himself to assert that this promise is made to all men generally and indiscriminately. God says expressly by Paul, who refers to the prophet Jeremiah, “For this is the covenant that I will make *with them*. Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers: but I will put My laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts” (Heb. 8:9, 10).⁷⁰

What makes this statement of Calvin concerning the government of the covenant promise by election even more weighty is that Calvin makes the statement in refutation of Pighius’ doctrine that God’s grace is universal, that is, not governed by an eternal election of some in distinction from others.⁷¹ To deny that election governs the covenant is necessarily to confess that God’s (saving) grace is wider than election, dependent for its efficacy upon the will or works of the sinner, and resistible—the doctrine of Pighius.

In the sphere of the covenant, election governs the preaching of the gospel with regard to its saving purpose and power. Commenting

70 Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, 100, 101.

71 Pighius, Calvin has just noted, contended that the grace of God is intended for, and therefore made available to (“well-meaningly offered to,” let us say, that is, with a sincere desire on God’s part to save), all men with appeal to II Timothy 2:4 and Ezekiel 18:23—the favorite texts of the novel Calvinistic orthodoxy of the twenty-first century, and explained and applied by this novel orthodoxy exactly as did the old Roman Catholic heretic Pighius. Pighius, who received rough treatment at the hands of Calvin, was born too soon. In the twenty-first century, Pighius would be the leading authority and spokesman of the novel Calvinistic orthodoxy, that is, of the doctrine that the saving grace of God both on the mission field and in the covenant is universal and resistible.

on Isaiah 54:13, “all thy children shall be taught of the LORD,” Calvin declares: “The Gospel is preached indiscriminately to the elect and the reprobate; but the elect alone come to Christ, because they have been ‘taught by God.’” Calvin adds: “Therefore to *them* [the elect] the Prophet undoubtedly refers,” which means that, for Calvin, Zion’s children (for they are the children spoken of in Isaiah 54:13) are the elect, not all the physical offspring of Abraham.⁷²

As this last citation shows, Calvin explains the seed of Abraham, the house of Israel, and the children of believers as the elect among the physical descendants of Abraham, among the physical inhabitants of Israel’s house, and among the physical offspring of believers. It is a principle of Calvin’s interpretation of the Old Testament that Galatians 3 and Romans 9 determine who the true children of Abraham and the legitimate house of Israel are—the children and house to whom God is gracious, to whom the covenant promise is directed, and with whom God establishes His covenant.

With reference to the fact that many of the natural descendants of Abraham were unbelieving and perished, which might seem to indicate the failure of God’s covenant promise to Abraham, Calvin writes: “[The apostle] by no means makes the fleshly seed the legitimate children of Abraham, but counts the *children of the promise* alone for the seed.”⁷³ Having restricted the “legitimate children of Abraham” to the children of the promise, as the apostle does in Romans 9, Calvin is not content to identify these legitimate children as those who believe. With appeal to the apostle in Romans 9, Calvin insists on identifying the “legitimate children”—the true seed of the covenant—as the elect: “[The apostle] ascends higher [than the faith of the children—DJE] into the mind of God, and declares that those were the children of promise whom God chose before they were born.”⁷⁴

72 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 146; emphasis added.

73 Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, 56; emphasis added.

74 Ibid. Calvin practices his hermeneutical rule of interpreting Old Testament Scripture, particularly the prophets, in the light of the teaching of Romans 9 and Galatians 3 that the children of the covenant are God’s elect—Christ and those whom the Father gave Him—throughout his com-

When Calvin sometimes says that the covenant is established with all the physical offspring of Abraham (as he does), he invariably adds that the covenant is not established with all *in the same way* and that there is, in fact, among the physical offspring of Abraham “*a twofold class of sons*.” These two kinds of children of Abraham are determined by God’s eternal predestination.⁷⁵

mentaries on the Old Testament. One instance, among countless others, is Calvin’s commentary on Zechariah 1:15. Calvin explains that the “little” displeasure of God with His sinful people “must be applied to the elect... for he speaks not of the reprobate and of that impure mass from which he purposed to cleanse his own house; but he hath respect to his covenant” (John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 5, *Zechariah and Malachi*, tr. John Owen, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950, 47).

⁷⁵ See his commentary on Genesis 17:7, in John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, tr. John King, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 447–451. In strongly affirming the truth that all the physical offspring of Abraham are included in the *administration* of the covenant, Calvin uses incautious, indeed erroneous, language, which at that early stage of the development of the doctrine of the covenant is to be expected. But he immediately sets things straight regarding the fundamental issue by distinguishing two kinds of “sons” in the covenant, in accordance with God’s eternal predestination. Summing up his explanation of the children of Abraham, Calvin writes: “Here, then, a twofold class of sons presents itself to us, in the Church; for since the whole body of the people is gathered together into the fold of God, by one and the same voice, all without exception, are, in this respect, accounted children; the name of the Church is applicable in common to them all: *but in the innermost sanctuary of God, none others are reckoned the sons of God, than they in whom the promise is ratified by faith. And although this difference flows from the fountain of gratuitous election, whence also faith itself springs; yet, since the counsel of God is in itself hidden from us, we therefore distinguish the true from the spurious children, by the respective marks of faith and of unbelief*” (449; emphasis added). Calvin’s final word is that, under the administration of the covenant, there are “true” children and “spurious” children and that this radical difference between the “twofold class” of children is determined by eternal predestination. This is the fundamental issue in the controversy between the two doctrines of the covenant that now comes to a head in the heresy of the federal vision. And this, the defenders of the doctrine of a conditional covenant made with all the children alike and the men of the federal vision reject.

Identifying the true, legitimate children of the covenant as the elect in Christ, Calvin is simply teaching what the apostle teaches in Galatians 3. The seed of the covenant to whom the promise was made and with whom the covenant is established is “Christ” (v. 16) and all those, but those only, who “[are] Christ’s,” ultimately because of divine election (v. 29).

Because the covenant has its source in and is governed by election, for Calvin the covenant is sure and steadfast. It depends upon the promising God, not upon the working children. It is founded upon Christ and His cross, not upon conditions performed by little children (or, for that matter, grown men and women). Its source is the gracious will of God in eternity, not the will of man.

Commenting on Lamentations 2:1, the prophet’s lament over the destruction of Jerusalem and the seeming failure of the covenant because of the unfaithfulness of Judah, Calvin proclaims: “Though men were a hundred times perfidious, yet God never changes, but remains unchangeable in his faithfulness; and we know that his covenant was not made to depend on the merits of men [that is, men’s works—DJE].”⁷⁶

The Covenant, Unconditional

That the covenant has its source in and is governed by election implies that the covenant is unconditional. As never before in the history of Reformed thought about the covenant, it is imperative today that theologians make unmistakably clear what they mean by the conditionality or unconditionality of the covenant.

The meaning of unconditionality in the ages-long controversy over the covenant, culminating today in the life-or-death struggle of Reformed orthodoxy with the federal vision, is *not* that there is no necessary means by which God realizes His covenant with the elect. There is a necessary means. It is faith, and faith is the gift of God in the covenant (Eph. 2:8; Canons, III, IV/14).

Neither is the meaning of unconditionality that the covenant is not “mutual.” Of course the covenant is “mutual.” The right conception of the covenant views it as a relationship of love in which God

⁷⁶ Calvin, *Jeremiah*, vol. 5, 343.

befriends and saves His children in sovereign love and the children cleave to and serve God in thankful love. “Cleaving to God” is our “part” in the covenant. This is the language of the Reformed “Form for the Administration of Baptism.” The form does not call a second, contracting “*party*” to perform conditions, carry out an agreement, or keep their end of a bargain. But, in a lovely, apt, Spirit-influenced word, the form admonishes and obliges God’s covenant children to do their “*part*” by “*cleaving*” to their Father.⁷⁷

Cleaving is not the activity of one who is negotiating an agreement, carrying out the stipulations of a contract, or keeping his end of a bargain. Cleaving is the activity of a child responding spontaneously to a mother’s tender love, of a woman drawn ineluctably by her husband’s fervent love, and of a friend who finds his or her friend irresistibly dear. Cleaving is willing, ardent, thankful love desiring God and, therefore, seeking closer, ever closer, communion with the good, gracious, and desirable God who has first loved us in Jesus Christ. Cleaving is covenant “mutuality.” It differs radically from conditional, contractual mutuality.

The realizing of this “mutuality” and thus of our doing our part in the covenant is the efficacious work of the Spirit of the covenant Christ in God’s covenant people, as the third and fourth heads of the Canons of Dordt make confessional for all churches and persons who call themselves Reformed.

Neither is the meaning of unconditionality that there are no demands in the covenant. There certainly are demands in the covenant, as God made perfectly clear when He established the covenant with Abraham: “Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore” (Gen. 17:9). Creedal, Reformed Christianity condemns the denial of demands in the covenant, as in the Christian life, as the heresy of antinomianism. The willing performance of the demands by the covenant people, essentially the keeping of God’s law, is an important aspect of God’s

77 “Whereas in all covenants there are contained two parts, therefore are we by God, through baptism, admonished of and obliged unto new obedience, namely, that we cleave to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,” etc. “Form for the Administration of Baptism,” in *Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches*, 258.

own work of covenant salvation, as the promise of Jeremiah 31:33 makes plain: “I will put my law in their inward parts,” and as Augustine taught us long ago: “O God, give what Thou demandest, and demand what Thou wilt.”

In the past, orthodox champions of grace have sometimes inaccurately referred to the necessary means of the covenant, the essential mutuality of the covenant, and the fitting demands of the covenant as “conditions.” Although their terminology was faulty, and even dangerous, their theology of the covenant was sound. The great covenant controversy, now coming to a head in the federal vision, is not strife about words.

The meaning of unconditionality is very simply that the gracious promise of the covenant, the gracious establishment of the covenant with one, and the gracious bestowal of covenant blessings (and union with Christ certainly is the covenant blessing *par excellence*) *are not wider in scope than election*. Rather, the grace of the covenant is determined by election.

The meaning of unconditionality is very simply that the realization of the promise with a child, the maintenance of the covenant with a child, and the child’s everlasting salvation *do not depend upon something the child does, regardless that the child is said to perform the condition with the help of God*. Rather, the covenant and its salvation depend solely upon the sovereign will and grace of God.

The meaning of unconditionality is very simply that the explanation why some baptized children finally inherit eternal life in the day of Jesus Christ, whereas other baptized children do not inherit eternal life, *is not that, although all alike were the objects of the covenant favor of God and savingly united to Christ, some distinguished themselves from the others, showed themselves worthy of eternal life, or obtained eternal life, by their own work of believing and obeying*. Rather, the explanation is that God, in sovereign, discriminating grace, chose some unto eternal life in the covenant, whereas He reprobated others. That some children of believers receive the gift of faith from God, and other children of believers do not receive it, proceeds from God’s eternal decree.⁷⁸

78 See Canons, I/6, in Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 582.

Calvin expressly declares that the covenant of grace with Abraham and Christ, which is the subject of the passage in Galatians 3 that Calvin is explaining, is unconditional. Having just repudiated the teaching that “salvation would be suspended on the condition of satisfying the law,” Calvin states:

He [the apostle in Galatians 3:18] immediately adds, *God gave it* [the inheritance that is the covenant promise—DJE], not by requiring some sort of compensation on his part, but by free promise; for if you view it as conditional, the word *gave*...would be utterly inapplicable.”⁷⁹

C. Graafland, who himself rejects Calvin’s covenant doctrine (and is, therefore, not a biased critic), freely and correctly acknowledges that for Calvin election governs the covenant: “[Calvin] saw the decisive factor of the covenant locked up (*sic*) in the eternal, divine decree of election and reprobation. Because others (the humanists) did not want to know anything of this, Calvin lays even heavier stress on it.”⁸⁰

79 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, tr. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 98.

80 Graafland, *Van Calvijn tot Comrie*, vol. 3, 393. Such is their fear, if not detestation, of God’s sovereign, gracious election in Jesus Christ that the defenders of a conditional covenant, among whom is C. Graafland, cannot describe the relation of election and covenant as taught by the defenders of an unconditional covenant otherwise than in pejorative words. In the quotation just given, Graafland speaks of the covenant’s being “locked up” in the decree of election and reprobation, in Calvin’s theology, like an unfortunate prisoner in a dank, dark cell. Elsewhere, Graafland (and many others) mournfully refer to election’s “oppression” of the covenant and gravely allege the unresolvable and threatening “tension” between covenant and election in the theology of those who affirm that election governs the covenant. I have earlier quoted Peter A. Lillback’s assertion that, if the eternal decree of election were to have anything to do with the covenant, election would “hamper” the covenant—a declaration all the more revealing of the deepest conviction of the Presbyterian theologian in that the verb obviously slipped unconsciously from his heart and flowed spontaneously from his pen. God’s good and gracious election would “*hamper*” God’s covenant! No doubt, the daily prayers of these defenders of a conditional covenant include the

Covenant in Calvin is not a device with which to weaken, obscure, ignore, oppose, and in the end bury in utter oblivion God's decree of predestination. On the contrary, in the Reformed faith of John Calvin the covenant has its source in, serves, and is governed by the gracious election of God in Jesus Christ.

The great evil in the Reformed theology of the twenty-first century is not that some few "identify" covenant and election, to the praise of the electing God. Rather, the evil (and a great evil it is) is that many tear covenant and election apart, to the praise of willing and working man.

We covenant friends of God must live in covenant communion with Christ, enjoying the magnificent covenant blessings (chief among which is justification by faith alone), certain of our continuing in the covenant, trusting firmly in Jesus Christ, zealously performing the good works that are the demand of the covenant, and hoping without doubt for the eternal life and glory that will be ours at the coming of Christ—conscious ourselves that all of this is due to God's sovereign, gracious election and loudly testifying both to the ignorant world and to the dubious Reformed churches that the entire reality of the covenant has its source in and depends upon the electing God. That is, we ought to be conscious ourselves and testify to all and sundry that the covenant is God's covenant of divine grace, rather than a divine/human contract of (decisive) human conditions.

Then we also have confidence concerning our dear children and grandchildren that "the children of thy servants shall continue, and their seed shall be established before thee" (Ps. 102:28).

The Inclusion of Infant Children

Of vital importance to Calvin was the inclusion in the new covenant of the infant children of believing parents. Scripture teaches

heartfelt petition, "O God, keep your threatening, enslaving, oppressive, hampering will of predestination, we beseech you, far, far away from your (and our!) covenant with the church, with me personally, and with my family." Whatever else this astounding suspicion of God's election may indicate about these Reformed and Presbyterian theologians, it shows their radical difference from John Calvin.

the inclusion of infants inasmuch as the new covenant in Christ is one and the same covenant as the covenant established with Abraham, and the covenant with Abraham included Abraham's infant child and subsequent infant descendants (Gen. 17:7). "The covenant which the Lord once made with Abraham [cf. Gen. 17:14] is no less in force today for Christians than it was of old for the Jewish people."⁸¹ If the new covenant excludes the children of the godly, whereas the Old Testament form of the covenant included them, "Christ by his coming lessened or curtailed the grace of the Father—but this is nothing but execrable blasphemy!"⁸²

The New Testament abundantly corroborates the conclusive testimony regarding the inclusion of children based on the unity of the covenant. On the day of the revelation of the fulfillment of the covenant with Abraham, Acts 2:39 extends the covenant promise to the children of believers: "The promise is unto you, and to your children." "To the same point applies Peter's announcement to the Jews [Acts 2:39] that the benefit of the gospel belongs to them and their offspring by right of the covenant."⁸³ Nothing has changed in the new covenant with regard to the inclusion of children!

The incident of Jesus' reception and blessing of infant children, because "of such is the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:15-17), was extremely important to Calvin. Again and again, he appealed to the passage in Luke and to the parallel passages in Matthew 19 and Mark 10 in his defense of children in the covenant and of infant baptism. Noting that the Greek word used in Luke 18:15 refers to "infants at the breast," Calvin argued, "If it is right for infants to be brought to Christ, why not also to be received into baptism, the symbol of our communion and fellowship with Christ?"⁸⁴

In addition, there is the policy of the apostles to baptize households, which certainly included children. The repeated mention in the book of Acts of the apostles' baptizing of families renders "silly" the objection of the Anabaptists, as also of the Baptists of the present day, "that there

81 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.6.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid., 4.16.15.

84 Ibid., 4.16.7. The Greek word is βρέφη.

is no evidence of a single infant's ever being baptized by the hands of the apostles."⁸⁵ According to the Baptists, all households, or families, in apostolic times happened to lack infants and young children.

Because God includes the children of believers in His covenant and because He directs the covenant promise to them, infant children of believers may, and indeed *must be*, baptized. For Calvin, there is one, compelling ground for infant baptism: the inclusion of infants in the covenant of grace.

If the covenant still remains firm and steadfast, it applies no less today to the children of Christians than under the Old Testament it pertained to the infants of the Jews. Yet if they are participants in the thing signified, why shall they be debarred from the sign?...This one reason [for infant baptism], if no others were at hand, would be quite enough to refute all those who would speak in opposition.⁸⁶

Basic both to Calvin's understanding of the unity of the covenant in both dispensations and to his insistence on the baptism of infants in the new dispensation was his conviction that circumcision, which was administered to infants in the old dispensation, had the very same spiritual significance that baptism has today.

The promise...is the same in both, namely, that of God's fatherly favor, of forgiveness of sins, and of eternal life. Then the thing represented is the same, namely, regeneration. In both there is one foundation [namely, Christ—DJE] upon which the fulfillment of these things rests.... We therefore conclude that, apart from the difference in the visible ceremony, whatever belongs to circumcision pertains likewise to baptism.⁸⁷

Colossians 2:11, 12 expressly teaches that baptism is the fulfillment of circumcision. Here Paul teaches that "baptism is for the Christians what circumcision previously was for the Jews."⁸⁸

85 Ibid., 4.16.8.

86 Ibid., 4.16.5.

87 Ibid., 4.16.4.

88 Ibid., 4.16.11.

Rejection of infant baptism, therefore, is grave error. Calvin's attitude towards the Baptist teaching concerning the covenant and kingdom (excluding children) and practice concerning the sacrament (denying baptism to children) differed sharply from the conciliatory attitude of many Reformed theologians today. Those who reject infant baptism are "frantic spirits." Their teachings are "mad ravings."⁸⁹ By their erroneous doctrine of the sacrament of baptism, they are guilty of repudiating the sacrament itself, the pure administration of which is one of the marks of a true church. This is the force of Calvin's preferred name for them, not "*Anabaptists*," which refers to their rebaptizing those who were baptized as infants (which is bad enough), but "*Catabaptists*." This name expresses that they *oppose* the sacrament of baptism. "They ceaselessly assail this holy institution of God."⁹⁰ The implication is that only those who practice infant baptism honor the sacrament, administer it rightly, and are the true "Baptists."

In addition to corrupting the sacrament, depriving Christ of many of the members of His covenant and citizens of His kingdom (all the children), and consigning children who die in childhood to perdition (since according to the Catabaptists they all die outside the covenant and church of Christ), those who reject infant baptism are guilty of the dispensational heresy: the denial of the unity of the old and new covenants. One cannot deny infant baptism without holding that circumcision, the sign of the old covenant, had a different significance than baptism, the sign of the new covenant. And this necessarily implies two essentially different covenants.

Calvin warned the Catabaptists of his day, as he warns the Baptists of our day, that God threatens to "wreak vengeance upon any man who disdains to mark his child with the symbol of the covenant."⁹¹

Calvin's severe condemnation of the Baptist false doctrine and corresponding disobedient practice is confessional for all Reformed Christians: "We detest the error of the Anabaptists, who...condemn

89 Ibid., 4.16.1.

90 Ibid., 4.16.10.

91 Ibid., 4.16.9. See the similar warning in Calvin's commentary on Genesis 17:14: "The uncircumcised man child...shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant" (*Genesis*, 457-459).

the baptism of the infants of believers, who, we believe, ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as the children in Israel formerly were circumcised upon the same promises which are made unto our children.”⁹²

Infant Salvation

Inclusion of the infants in the covenant, signified by their baptism, meant for Calvin that the infant children are saved, are saved *in their infancy*. Regarding this crucially important truth, many Reformed and Presbyterian theologians and churches differ radically from Calvin. They hold the distinctly un-covenantal and essentially Baptist (“Catabaptist”!) position that all the children of believers are unregenerated, are to be viewed as unregenerated, and must view themselves as unregenerated until they grow up and confess their faith or have a conversion experience.⁹³ This view explains in large part the conciliatory attitude of many Reformed theologians towards the Baptist error: Despite sprinkling a little water on the babies, the Reformed theologians share the fundamental Baptist conviction that children are outside of Christ; only adults belong to Christ and enjoy His salvation.

Calvin expressly denied the popular contemporary Reformed notion that “children are to be considered solely as children of Adam until they reach an appropriate age for the second birth.” This essentially Anabaptist, or Catabaptist, notion erroneously supposes that “spiritual regeneration...cannot take place in earliest infancy.”⁹⁴

Against this notion, Calvin taught, as “God’s truth everywhere,” that God not only *can* regenerate the infants of believers in their infancy, but that He also *does* regenerate them in their infancy. Infants are alive in Christ by “communion with him,” for “to quicken them he makes them partakers in himself.” “Those infants who are to be

92 Belgic Confession, Art. 34, in Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 427.

93 If the recent book *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (ed. Gregg Strawbridge, Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R, 2003) is any indication, this position is now the majority position among Reformed theologians and churches.

94 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.17.

saved (as some are surely saved from that early age) are previously regenerated by the Lord.”⁹⁵ Towards the end of his defense of infant baptism, Calvin asserted that he had “already established...the regeneration of infants.”⁹⁶

In his response to the Anabaptist argument that infants are unable to repent and believe (something, Calvin observed, that the New Testament required of *adults* prior to their baptism in view of the apostles’ work with adults), Calvin contended that “the seed of both [repentance and faith] lies hidden within them [infants] by the secret working of the Spirit.”⁹⁷ In flat contradiction of the Reformed theologians today who make the holiness of I Corinthians 7:14 (“now are they [your children] holy”) a mere outward, formal, vague setting apart of the children unto God—the Baptist “dedication” of the children to God—Calvin explained the holiness of the text as the inner, spiritual sanctifying of the children by the Spirit of Christ in their hearts: “newness of spiritual life...holy by supernatural grace.”⁹⁸ Calvin thought that “the age of infancy is not utterly averse to sanctification.”⁹⁹

In support of the Spirit’s salvation of infants, Calvin appealed both to the regeneration of John the Baptist in his mother’s womb and to the sanctification of Jesus in His infancy.¹⁰⁰ This appeal to unborn John and infant Jesus in support of his teaching that God sanctifies covenant children in their infancy puts beyond any doubt and all possibility of contradiction that by sanctification Calvin meant real, inner, Spirit-worked, spiritual holiness. The holiness of John leaping in Elizabeth’s womb at the presence of the Christ (in Mary’s womb) and the holiness of baby Jesus were not a formal, external, “positional” holiness—a mere setting apart of the two children unto God in case God might someday will to work in them.

But the main argument of Calvin for infant salvation was the same as his chief argument for infant baptism: God’s inclusion of infants in

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid., 4.16.26.

97 Ibid., 4.16.20.

98 Ibid., 4.16.31.

99 Ibid., 4.16.18.

100 Ibid., 4.16.17, 18.

His covenant. If infants are included in the covenant, and, therefore, marked with the sign of the covenant, they receive the spiritual blessings of the covenant, *in their infancy*. For God to include them in His covenant and give them the sign of the covenant and its salvation but withhold from them the salvation of the covenant and the blessings represented by the covenant sign would be “mockery” and “trickery” on God’s part. With specific reference to the salvation of the infants of godly Israelites under the old covenant, Calvin wrote:

In early times the Lord did not deign to have them [infants] circumcised without making them participants in all those things which were then signified by circumcision [cf. Gen. 17:12]. Otherwise, he would have mocked his people with mere trickery if he had nursed them on meaningless symbols, which is a dreadful thing even to hear of.¹⁰¹

Inclusion of infants in the covenant *is* infant salvation. Infant baptism *means* infant salvation. The practice of infant baptism, professedly in obedience to the command of God, while denying infant salvation, makes God a mocker and trickster.

Closely related to his understanding of covenant membership as covenant salvation was Calvin’s understanding of the covenant promise, particularly the extension of the promise to the infant children of believing parents: “I will be the God of your (infant) children.” The promise expresses, not merely God’s willingness, or desire, to save the infants, but also the certainty of the realization of the promise in the infants’ salvation. In addition, the promise expresses that God will save the infants *as infants, in their infancy*.

Contending with his Roman Catholic adversaries, who thought that all unbaptized babies are lost, or at least not saved, and who, therefore, held that even women are permitted to baptize dying infants, Calvin quoted the covenant promise in Genesis 17:7: “I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.” Calvin then explained the covenant promise concerning the children of believers thus: “Their [our babies’] salvation is embraced

101 Ibid., 4.16.5.

in this word. No one will dare be so insolent toward God as to deny that his promise of itself suffices for its effect.”¹⁰²

This line is of extraordinary importance, not only for its refutation of the Roman Catholic doctrine that the sacrament is necessary for the salvation of covenant children (as though the promise is insufficient for salvation), but also for its exposure of two prevalent errors concerning the covenant on the part of Reformed theologians and churches. One is the common teaching that baptized infants remain, and are to be viewed as, unsaved. *Contra sed est*: “His promise of itself suffices for its effect,” *in the infants*.

The other error is the widespread teaching that the covenant promise merely expresses God’s willingness, or desire, to be the God of the children, and save them, but that the “effect” of the promise, that is, the actual salvation of the children, is not assured and accomplished by the promise itself. The “effect” of the promise, it is widely held, is conditioned upon the faith and obedience of the children. *Contra sed est*: “His promise of itself suffices for its effect.”¹⁰³

102 Ibid., 4.15.20.

103 A conditional promise is inherently powerless and, therefore, intrinsically worthless. A *divine* conditional promise is powerless and, therefore, worthless. It is an axiom in theology that *conditio nihil ponit in re* (a condition establishes nothing in reality). Significantly, Luther noted this truth in his great controversy with Erasmus. Responding to Erasmus’ appeal to a conditional sentence in one of the apocryphal books in support of conditional salvation, Luther observed that “a conditional statement asserts nothing indicatively” (Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, tr. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, London: James Clarke, 1957, 151). Regarding the conditional statement to which Luther was referring, the conditional promise, “If thou are willing to keep my commandments, and to keep continually the faith that pleaseth me, they shall preserve thee,” establishes absolutely nothing concerning either the ability of the people to keep the commandments or the preservation of the people. Similarly, the covenant promise to every baptized child, in “liberated” theology, “If you believe, I will save you,” establishes absolutely nothing concerning either the child’s actually believing or God’s saving him. That the covenant promise to children at baptism, according to Schilder, is nothing more than a conditional statement (which establishes nothing in reality) is acknowledged by S. A. Strauss in a

The inevitable objection against Calvin's doctrine of the salvation of infants by virtue of their being included in the covenant and by the power itself of the covenant promise was (and is still today) that many infants of godly parents both under the old covenant and under the new covenant proved, and prove, to be unregenerate, reprobate, and lost. Calvin's answer to the objection was that the children included in the covenant by the covenant promise are the *elect* children of Abraham and of believing parents, and the elect children *only*. This was Calvin's clear teaching both in his doctrine that the grace of salvation for all who are saved, infants as well as adults, has its source in God's eternal election and in the quotations given earlier in this article concerning the legitimate children of Abraham and concerning the objects of the covenant promise.

volume by disciples and acolytes of Schilder celebrating and promoting his teachings. Strauss explains Schilder's teaching about the covenant promise this way: "In my baptism I receive a concrete address from God, a message that God proclaims to everyone who is baptized, personally: if you believe, you will be saved" (S. A. Strauss, "Schilder on the Covenant," in *Always Obedient: Essays on the Teachings of Dr. Klaas Schilder*, ed. J. Geertsema, Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R, 1995, 28, 29). This is all that God says to every baptized child: "If you believe, you will be saved." One can hear the indignant response to this pitiful account of the covenant promise of God to the infants of believers (which establishes nothing in reality) coming down the years from the Secession (*Afscheiding*) theologian Simon Van Velzen. Van Velzen responded to what was essentially the same description of the covenant promise of God at baptism by the two Reformed ministers K. J. Pieters and J. R. Kreulen. Pieters and Kreulen described the covenant promise to all the baptized infants as Christ's testimony to them that they "can find in Me a rich righteousness, salvation, and honor in the way of faith." Van Velzen responded in amazement and indignation, if not in horror: "'Can find...in the way of faith?' Merely this? The believer says more, much more. As certainly as our children have been washed with water, they have the forgiveness of sins, for to them is promised redemption from sins by the blood of Christ, not less than to the adults (Heid. Cat., Q. 74).... Therefore they ought to receive the sign and the sacrament of that which Christ has done for them (Bel. Conf., Art. 34)" (see Engelsma, "The Covenant Doctrine of the Fathers of the Secession," in *Always Reforming*, 118, 119). Schilder and his colleagues deliberately adopted the covenant doctrine of Pieters and Kreulen as their own.

In addition, running throughout Calvin's defense of infant baptism, in chapter sixteen of book four of the *Institutes*, like the foundational theme of a symphony, is the repeated affirmation that the infants whose salvation in infancy Calvin was asserting are *elect* infants.

In distinguishing the heirs of the Kingdom from the illegitimate and foreigners, we have no doubt that God's election alone rules as of free right.¹⁰⁴

Christ was sanctified from earliest infancy in order that he might sanctify in himself his elect from every age without distinction.¹⁰⁵

If those whom the Lord has deigned to elect received the sign of regeneration but depart from the present life before they grow up, he renews them by the power, incomprehensible to us, of his Spirit, in whatever way he alone foresees will be expedient. If they happen to grow to an age at which they can be taught the truth of baptism, they shall be fired with greater zeal for renewal.¹⁰⁶

Practical Benefits

The truth of the inclusion of our children and grandchildren in the covenant, signified by infant baptism and implying their salvation in infancy, is of great comfort and practical benefit both to parents and children. One extremely important benefit of this truth is that only this doctrine accounts for the salvation of those infants who die in their infancy, something Calvin heartily believed and taught. "When some of them [infants of believers], whom death snatches away in their very first infancy, pass over into eternal life, they are surely received to the contemplation of God in his very presence."¹⁰⁷

104 Ibid., 4.16.15.

105 Ibid., 4.16.18.

106 Ibid., 4.16.21.

107 Ibid., 4.16.19. Calvin was here appealing to the salvation of infants dying in infancy, which for him was incontrovertible, in support of his teaching that elect infants receive "some part of that grace which in a little while they shall enjoy to the full." His argument was that, without the grace of regeneration, infants dying in infancy could not "pass into eternal life." The Reformed faith has made this practical implication of the doctrine of infant

Also, “God’s boundless generosity” in extending His mercy to our children and grandchildren “floods godly hearts with uncommon happiness, which quickens men to a deeper love of their kind Father, as they see his concern on their behalf for their posterity.”¹⁰⁸ Childless himself, Calvin nevertheless knew “how sweet...it [is] to godly minds to be assured...that they obtain so much favor with the Heavenly Father that their offspring are within his care.”¹⁰⁹

Then there is the huge benefit that the covenant membership and baptism of infants motivate parents diligently to instruct their covenant children in the ways of the covenant: “We feel a strong stimulus to instruct them in an earnest fear of God and observance of the law.” On the other hand, rejection of infant baptism inevitably results in “a certain negligence about instructing our children in piety.”¹¹⁰

The effect of the Baptist negligence to instruct their children in piety, beginning with the failure to instruct the children in the fundamental piety that they are included in the covenant by God’s mercy, on the one hand, and of the judgment of God upon the Baptist disobedience to God’s command to administer the sign of the covenant to the children, on the other hand, is the notable lack of a continuation of the covenant in the generations of Baptists. Baptist parents know nothing of the urgent petition of Reformed parents, “O God, cut us not off in our generations!”

The benefit for the baptized children themselves is that “being engrafted into the body of the church, they are somewhat more commended to the other members.” Later, “when they have grown up, they are greatly spurred to an earnest zeal for worshiping God, by whom they were received as children through a solemn symbol of adoption before they were old enough to recognize him as Father.”¹¹¹

membership in the covenant of grace confessional in Canons, I/17: “Godly parents have no reason to doubt of the election and salvation of their children whom it pleaseth God to call out of this life in their infancy” (Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 585).

108 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.9.

109 Ibid., 4.16.32.

110 Ibid.

111 Ibid., 4.16.9.

Presentation of their children for baptism is, therefore, a demand of the covenant upon believing parents: “Accordingly, unless we wish spitefully to obscure God’s goodness, let us offer our infants to him, for he gives them a place among those of his family and household, that is, the members of the church.”¹¹² The Reformed Church Order of Dordt makes Calvin’s (and the Bible’s) demand that infants be baptized law for Reformed churches. It grounds this law in the covenant. “The covenant of God shall be sealed unto the children of Christians by baptism, as soon as the administration thereof is feasible, in the public assembly when the Word of God is preached.”¹¹³

In light of the doctrinal and practical importance of the truth of infant membership in the covenant and infant baptism, as well as of the clear, compelling biblical witness to it, there is only one explanation of the opposition to this truth, Calvin thought: “Satan is attempting [to take away from godly parents and the Reformed church this powerful testimony to God’s grace and goodness] in assailing infant baptism with such an army.”¹¹⁴ By the twenty-first century, this army has swelled to enormous size with the addition of hosts of Baptists, fundamentalists, evangelicals, charismatics, and even, *mirabile dictu*, “Calvinistic Baptists!” Reformed and Presbyterian churches must withstand these hosts, who in their opposition to infant membership in the covenant and infant baptism are doing Satan’s work, by a sound confession of the truth of the covenant and an uncompromising condemnation of the Baptist error.

Summary

Calvin was a covenant theologian, regardless that he did not make the doctrine of the covenant the central-dogma of his theology or develop it thoroughly. There is strong evidence that Calvin saw the covenant, not as a conditional contract, but as a relationship of communion between God and His elect people in Jesus Christ. Calvin

112 Ibid., 4.16.32.

113 “The Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches,” Art. 56, in *Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches*, 397.

114 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.32.

definitely related covenant closely to the eternal decree of election; indeed, in Calvin's theology election governed the covenant. For Calvin, the inclusion of the infant children of believers was a fundamental aspect of the covenant. And the inclusion of children, signified by infant baptism, meant their salvation in infancy.

The doctrine of the covenant in Calvin's theology may not be a mere academic study for Reformed theologians and churches in the twenty-first century. The development of a doctrine of the covenant that teaches the gracious establishment of the covenant with all the physical offspring of believers alike, conditioned, however, regarding its maintenance and realization in the salvation of the children upon works of the children, that is, a doctrine of the covenant that denies that election governs the covenant, by the contemporary heresy that calls itself the federal vision, makes the study of Calvin's doctrine of the covenant a matter of spiritual, doctrinal, and ecclesiastical urgency. ●

A Review Article

Douglas J. Kuiper

The Reformed Faith of John Calvin: The Institutes in Summary, by David J. Engelsma (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2009). Pp xiii + 455. \$34.95. Hardcover. [Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.]

Within a few decades of the publishing of the 1559 edition of Calvin's *Institutes*, summaries of Calvin's work began to appear. If not the first summary, Caspar Olevianus' *Institutionis Christianae Religionis Epitome* (*Epitome of the Institutes of the Christian Religion*) was one of the first, published in 1586.

In commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Calvin's birth in 2009, more summaries have recently appeared. In 2008, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company (P&R) published the book *Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, edited by David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback. As a summary and analysis of the *Institutes*, and as a complement to them (rather than a substitute for them), that book received a good review in the April 2009 issue of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*. In 2009, the Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA) published another summary, one authored by David Engelsma, professor-emeritus of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Seminary.

The benefit of these summaries cannot be overstated. The Reformed Christian today does well to be familiar with Calvin's *Institutes*. Setting forth the doctrines of Scripture systematically, the *Institutes* are as useful for instruction today as they were in Calvin's day. Aiming at God's glory by knowing Him rightly, and aiming at piety in the child of God, Calvin's work is as practically relevant today as it was then. Polemically pointing out the errors of other professing Christians who deny foundational truths about God as set forth in Scripture, which errors are also prevalent today, the *Institutes* are as beneficial as when they were first published. Yet, the *Institutes* is a lengthy work, making a summary profitable. And, while Calvin's style is clear, the average modern reader might have some difficulty adjusting to Calvin's style.

Not *every* summary of the *Institutes* is beneficial; only *good* summaries are. A good summary is one that gives evidence that its author is intimately familiar with Calvin's great work. A general knowledge is not enough; let the summary give evidence of a clear understanding of the purpose of the *Institutes*, of their content, and of their fundamental points. Also, a worthwhile summary analyzes, critiques, and makes pertinent to the twenty-first century reader the teachings of the *Institutes*. Few summaries, if any, merely summarize; each contains commentary. The value of the summary is determined by how faithful it is to Calvin's thought, and how relevant to today it considers his teachings to be.

Using these criteria, we find Engelsma's summary of great value, and a welcome addition to other summaries being published today. For the price, the book is a bargain.

ENGELSMA'S SUMMARY

To summarize this summary is pointless. To find out what Calvin wrote in the *Institutes*, one should either read the *Institutes* themselves, or Engelsma's summary of them.

Suffice it to say that the first sixty pages of Engelsma's book are introductory, including a brief biography of Calvin; chapters on the nature, style, structure, and history of the publishing of the *Institutes*; and a summary and analysis of Calvin's prefatory address. The next 340 pages consist of the summary and analysis of the *Institutes*, which summary follows Calvin's own order in writing his great work. The last fifty pages consist of all of Engelsma's references, placed at the end of this work rather than at the end of the individual chapter, or bottom of each page. The book lacks an index in any form. Were Engelsma's work a summary only, perhaps an index would not be necessary at all; but as Engelsma repeatedly makes application of Calvin's work to today, this book ought to have had at least a brief subject index.

In his preface, Engelsma gives evidence that he will offer a worthwhile summary, demonstrating familiarity with Calvin, and giving appropriate analysis of Calvin. As to Engelsma's method, he states:

If, on occasion, a doctrine is not stated in Calvin's own words, I dem-

onstrate the truthfulness of my summation of Calvin's teaching with quotations of Calvin. The book is replete with quotations of Calvin, usually (as it seemed to me) the most important or most vivid statements by Calvin concerning the doctrine being treated. (xiii)

And regarding his purpose:

The book is also more than a summary. At times, it offers explanations of Calvin's teaching. Often, it applies Calvin's doctrine or admonition to the church of the twenty-first century. On the rare occasion, it even gives a respectful criticism of Calvin's view. (xiv)

I'm convinced that any sincerely Reformed person who reads this book cover to cover will conclude, as I do, that Engelsma has accomplished his objective.

Calvin and the Reformed Faith

By summarizing Calvin, Engelsma demonstrates that what Calvin taught in the *Institutes* is the Reformed faith.

Repeatedly Engelsma notes that Reformed churches have incorporated into their confessions the doctrines that Calvin treats: "One of the powerful influences of the *Institutes* is the inclusion of its teaching in the Reformed confessions" (91).

Calvin's polemics against Rome, Lutheranism, Anabaptists, and individuals such as Gentile, Servetus, Pighius, Bolsec, Osiander, and others indicate that Calvin was staunchly defending the Reformed faith against other branches of Christianity and Protestantism. While Calvin engages in these polemics throughout his work, all one has to do is read Calvin's refutation of Rome's arguments for justification by faith and works (237ff.) and his response to Rome's view of conditional election (278ff.) to see that Calvin is worthy of the name Reformed.

Calvin did not *invent* the Reformed faith. Indeed, drawing on the teachings of the ecumenical creeds and orthodox church fathers, Calvin shows that the Reformed faith is properly the Christian faith, and not just a branch of it. Nor should we view Calvin's work as a creed, setting the *standard* for the Reformed faith. But Calvin *defended*, *taught*, and *developed* the Reformed faith in his *Institutes*.

Areas of original insight and development in the *Institutes* include Calvin's treatment of the Holy Spirit's testimony to the authority of Scripture (71). Regarding the doctrine of the covenant, while Calvin did not develop it, he did raise "it to its due prominence. This was development of dogma" (159). This raising of the doctrine of the covenant to its due prominence includes Calvin's linking "election tightly with the covenant" (277). Calvin's treatment of Christ's threefold office, as it includes all of Christ's saving work, represents development (169ff.). Engelsma ascribes the length of Calvin's treatment of the doctrine of the church, "the largest section of the entire *Institutes*" (302), to the richness of this doctrine, its importance for the Reformers, and the fact that Calvin sets forth this doctrine antithetically; but it could be added that here also Calvin is developing the Reformed understanding of the church. He, with the other Reformers, had to do this, for Reformed ecclesiology differed radically, and still differs, from Rome's. And the influence of Calvin's doctrine of civil government in relation to the church, as this influence is evident both in the civil sphere and in Reformed church government (386ff.), would suggest that God used Calvin to develop doctrine at this point.

As a defender and teacher of Reformed theology, Calvin taught the truth of Scripture in areas that would later be more greatly debated than they were in his day. Understanding the opening chapters of Scripture literally, Calvin teaches the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, and the related doctrine of a young earth (87ff.). He taught total depravity and the bondage of the will, as our confessions set these forth. He opposed the millennial views that were already present in his day, teaching the unity of the Old and New Covenants (160ff.) and rejecting all ideas that Christ's kingdom will be realized on earth (171, 183).

Setting forth the Reformed faith, Calvin taught particular grace—though, as Engelsma acknowledges,

There are expressions in Calvin that leave the impression that there is a certain favorable care of God for every creature, including reprobate men, so that the good gifts of providence are blessings for reprobate man.... However, there are also statements in Calvin opposing the notion of providential favor to the ungodly. In fact, Calvin's preponderant teaching is fatherly goodness to believers. Good gifts to the wicked

are not expressions of grace. Rather, they are a curse and render the wicked more guilty. (110)

Although he spoke of a “general grace of God,” Calvin distinguished such from saving grace (133ff.). And, in his section on justification, Calvin rightly views the seemingly good works of the unbeliever as proceeding from an evil root (236).

That Calvin did not teach common grace as the term is used today, particularly in the Christian Reformed Church and Protestant Reformed Churches, is evident from Calvin’s view of the well-meant offer of the gospel. The very fact that Calvin treats the matter of the call of the gospel in connection with *election* makes Calvin “the sworn foe of the doctrine of the ‘well meant offer’ of the gospel that reigns supreme in contemporary Reformed Christianity...” (283).

No criticism of Calvin may leave the impression that Calvin was not thoroughly Reformed.

Engelsma’s Criticisms of Calvin

As he said in his preface, Engelsma stands ready to critique Calvin.

Some of his criticisms indicate that Calvin either began to go in a wrong direction with his doctrine, or was not consistent with his doctrine. Other criticisms reflect the fact that, while Calvin did much to develop Reformed doctrine, he did not say the last word (nor did we expect that he should have). We who have the benefit of almost 500 more years of development of doctrine can see areas of inconsistency more clearly than Calvin himself could have.

Concluding his summary of Calvin’s treatment of the Trinity, Engelsma notes that “a word...about the *family* nature of the Trinity” is lacking not only in the *Institutes* but also in Calvin’s commentaries (81). Engelsma also questions “Calvin’s doctrine of the aseity of the eternal Son” (83) and says that Calvin “did not do justice to the threeness of God” (84). With this statement, Engelsma’s chapter ends: “Calvin was overly cautious concerning the doctrine of the Trinity” (86).

With Calvin’s use of the word “immortal” to describe man’s soul,

though not Calvin's doctrine of the soul itself, Engelsma disagrees (99, 293).

In setting forth the doctrine of original sin, Engelsma notes that Calvin neither emphasizes, clearly affirms, nor develops the doctrine of original guilt (124), and then, in explaining Romans 5:12-17, "explicitly rejects the doctrine of original guilt in the sense of our responsibility for Adam's deed of disobedience" (125), which involves Calvin in a dilemma as regards the liability of all of Adam's posterity for punishment (126).

Contention that Calvin spoke inconsistently regarding a general or common grace to all men, manifest in giving natural gifts to the ungodly, is an apt criticism (135); at times Calvin confuses grace with providence.

Not only Engelsma, but also the Reformed creeds part ways with Calvin regarding his teaching that Christ's mediatorial kingship will end at Christ's return (168ff.).

Calvin rightly teaches that God loved His people from eternity, and that Christ's death satisfied God's justice regarding the sins of all God's people. But

his harmonizing of them [these two truths, DJK] is unsatisfactory. Having phrased the two truths in such a way that they are, in fact, contradictory, Calvin uncharacteristically embraces the contradiction. On the one hand, Calvin declares, God on his part was "our enemy," was "hostile to us," and even "hated" us. On the other hand, and at the same time, "by his love God the Father goes before and anticipates our reconciliation in Christ. Indeed, 'because he first loved us' [I John 4:19], he afterwards reconciles us to himself" (174-175).

Engelsma helps the reader see the problem here: "The reason for Calvin's uncharacteristic confusion, indeed theological error, here is that he overlooks that Scripture never teaches that God hates his elect people..." but always teaches that God's love for His elect is eternal, in Christ (175ff.).

Whether Christ died only for the elect, or for all without exception, Calvin does not say in as many words; yet, as Calvin taught that God bestows grace in Christ irresistibly according to His sovereign

decree of election, one can rightly conclude that Calvin taught limited atonement (179ff.).

Calvin's understanding of the spiritual character of church discipline, as opposed to the physical character of civil discipline, cannot be faulted. But had "Calvin observed these, his own and Scripture's principles, he would not have delivered the heretic Servetus over to the magistrates for execution or called upon the civil authorities in Geneva many times to jail or fine church members charged with sins by the eldership" (342). His error flowed from his adoption of "the Constantinian state church idea or, at least, the city church idea" (344). And Engelsma points out that, along with other theologians of his time, "Calvin was wrong in ascribing enforcement of the first table of the law of God to civil magistrates" (395-396).

These criticisms in no way detract from the value of Calvin's work, nor do they undermine his status as a Reformed theologian. They do remind us that what our Belgic Confession says of the writings of men in general applies as well to John Calvin's: "Neither do we consider of equal value any writing of men, however holy these men may have been, with those divine Scriptures..." (Article 7).

These criticisms notwithstanding, Calvin is relevant for today.

Calvin's Relevance for Today

Calvin is relevant for today, in the first place, because he was relevant to his own times: "Calvin was no muddleheaded, idealistic theologian, living himself in a dream world..." (394). Calvin was a pastor; he taught doctrine with application to the problems of his day, and in teaching doctrine he set forth the need to obey the law, to pray, to honor church and civil government, and in other ways to live as God calls His people to live. While much has changed since Calvin's day, the basic problems of society and God's people remain the same, and the heresies against which Calvin fought are present today, even if dressed in other clothes.

Calvin is relevant for today, secondly, because he was explicitly biblical. To read the *Institutes*, and this summary of them, is to be taught how rightly to divide the word of truth, how to understand the Scriptures.

Engelsma repeatedly drives home this relevance; he makes no false boast, when he says that his book often “applies Calvin’s doctrine or admonition to the church of the twenty-first century” (xiv). With application to the federal vision, to infant baptism, to paedocommunion, to the millennial views, to civil revolution, and to a host of other aspects of doctrine and life, Engelsma summarizes Calvin.

For this reason alone, the summary is worth more than the price of the book.

COMPARED AND CONTRASTED WITH HALL AND LILLBACK’S

I will not hide the fact that I prefer Engelsma’s book to Hall and Lillback’s. Some of the reasons for this preference are personal; others are more substantial. In the remainder of this review, I will compare and contrast the two works.

Singing Solo

An obvious difference between the two books is that Hall and Lillback’s is written by twenty different men, while Engelsma is the sole author of his book.

Acknowledging that others have written commentaries or summaries of the *Institutes* in the past, Hall and Lillback write: “What this volume offers is a chorale with many voices; we believe that the chorale is superior to a solo” (Hall and Lillback [hereafter HL] xvi).

Fact is, neither chorales nor solos are inherently better than the other. Both can be beautiful, and a mixture of good chorales and good solos in the same oratorio is lovely. That Engelsma’s book was written by him alone, in and of itself, makes it neither better nor worse than Hall and Lillback’s. But when a solo voice is a good, solid, clear voice, it is every bit as good as a choir; and if the choristers are not in harmony and in time with each other, the good solo is better than the choir.

The benefit of Engelsma’s solo, in contrast with Hall and Lillback’s chorale, is threefold. First, Engelsma writes with a consistent style. Reading his book, the reader does not have to acquaint himself with the style of a new essayist every twenty or thirty pages, and he will not find that some chapters are easier to read than others, as a consequence

of the author's writing style. The reader of Engelsma's book will soon find that Engelsma's own style is plain, lucid, and interesting—something true of *some* of the essayists in Hall and Lillback's book, but not *all* of them.

Second, Engelsma takes a consistent approach to the subject. A reader will very soon discover that Engelsma's approach is not merely a scholarly and abstract one, but one that is also warm and practical. The same cannot be said of all the writers in Hall and Lillback's book.

Third, inasmuch as the contributors to Hall and Lillback's book were each assigned a certain section of the *Institutes* to review, they limit themselves to that section, whereas Engelsma points the reader to the particular doctrine as Calvin treats it throughout the *Institutes*. As a case in point, take Calvin's treatment of the doctrine of Holy Scripture. Robert Reymond summarizes Calvin's treatment of this doctrine (*Institutes* 1.6-10) at greater length than does Engelsma (HL 44ff.). But the reader of Hall and Lillback's book is not informed that Calvin returns to the subject in *Institutes* 4.8—and returns to it, not just in passing, but further to develop the idea of Scripture's authority.

Following Calvin's Order

Calvin developed his material in four headings, following the structure of the Trinity. Book one is entitled "The Knowledge of God the Creator"; book two, "The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ"; book three, though not so titled, deals with the Spirit's application of Christ's benefits to the believer personally; and book four deals with the doctrine of the church, Christ's body, gathered by the Spirit.

In Hall and Lillback's book, the doctrines are treated, not according to the order in which Calvin treated them, but according to the classic order of the six *loci* of Reformed doctrine. This departure from Calvin's order is rather odd. Inasmuch as their book claims to summarize the *Institutes*, it would help the reader to follow the order of the *Institutes*.

Engelsma follows Calvin's own order. The reader learns what Calvin said, in the order in which Calvin said it.

More than once, this difference is noteworthy, and Engelsma pro-

vides the reader with insights as to why Calvin treated the doctrine in the place in which he did.

Calvin did not treat the doctrine of predestination until book three, dealing with the application of the benefits of salvation to God's people. In Hall and Lillback's book, the doctrine is treated early on, in conjunction with the knowledge of God, where Reformed theologians customarily would treat it. But why "Calvin placed predestination where he did in the *1559 Institutes*, he himself suggests at the beginning of his treatment of predestination: predestination is the 'well-spring' whence all salvation flows" (Engelsma [hereafter E] 268).

Calvin's treatment of the law is found in book two, in connection with the doctrine of Christ. In Hall and Lillback's book, this section is placed in the area of soteriology, suggesting that God's law is our guide to living a holy life. Why did Calvin treat it where he did? To underscore that our inability to keep the law makes Christ necessary, and to show that Christ is the one who fully kept the law. This underscores that "law is an aspect of the gospel," and helps "ward off both of the heresies that always threaten the gospel: works-righteousness... and antinomianism" (E 140). And a "more substantial reason" why Calvin treated sanctification before justification is Calvin's recognition "that in the work of salvation there is a sense in which sanctification, or newness of life, does precede justification," insofar as regeneration is sanctification in principle (E 226).

At the end of book three, before his treatment of the doctrine of the church in book four, Calvin treated matters of eschatology. The treatment of Calvin's eschatology is the last chapter in Hall and Lillback's book. Engelsma tells us why (E 290)—the resurrection and life in heaven are also a benefit that Christ earned for God's elect. This time, Cornelis Venema informs his reader of the same (HL 443).

Treating Introductory Matters More Comprehensively

Hall and Lillback's book provides a scanty background to the *Institutes*. J. I. Packer's foreword and the editor's preface are both brief. The first chapter of their book, 15 pages in length, does give a historical and literary background to the *Institutes*.

By number of pages, Engelsma's introductory material is almost

four times longer. The reader will profit from Engelsma's more detailed treatment at this point. Did you know that Calvin gave his work a singular title, not plural—*Institution*? Or that reputable scholars consider the first English translation of the book, by Thomas Norton in 1561, to be the most faithful to the original, and the translation by Ford Lewis Battles in 1960 to be poor?

One hallmark of Engelsma's writing comes out already in these chapters: to make pointed and pertinent applications to the reader. Reading this book, one not only learns intellectually, but profits in the soul, if he takes the applications to heart. Calvin was straightforward in his setting forth truth, clear in his condemnation of heresy—an example to teachers today. He was devoted to his work, loved his God, and fought for the truth—an example to all today.

Especially of value is Engelsma's assessment of Calvin's harsh language against enemies of the gospel. Many today who take issue with Calvin's harsh language, citing moral reasons, are ready to stomach, if not engage in, other practices that are morally reprehensible. "No Reformed Christian should object to Calvin's harsh language. The fact is that this kind of condemnation of error is thoroughly biblical..." (36). This view contrasts with that of J. I. Packer, as he expressed it in the "Foreword" to Hall and Lillback's work: "Calvin's...sixteenth-century controversial manners, or lack of them, led him to bad-mouth his opponents personally as he argued against their ideas, and the 1559 *Institutio* is disfigured by some over-arguing and satirical brutalities" (HL x).

More Intent on Summarizing

The subtitle of Engelsma's book indicates that he is giving a *summary* of the *Institutes*; the subtitle of Hall and Lillback's book is "Essays and Analysis." These subtitles are telling: a reader of both books will find that Engelsma's summary is more complete and detailed than is Hall and Lillback's.

While their book certainly contains summary of the *Institutes*, and that summary gives the reader the essential teachings of the *Institutes*, whole sections of chapters in Hall and Lillback's book are devoted to subsequent scholarship regarding the point of doctrine that Calvin

treats, or analyzing his doctrine as taught in his commentaries or other works.

By contrast, while Engelsma certainly refers to other works, and is not ignorant of what scholars are saying about Calvin, summarizing is his main objective, and he sticks to it.

Appealing to a Wider Audience

I judge Engelsma's book to appeal to a wider audience.

Hall and Lillback envision their work to be read by "the reading public" (HL xv); and in his "Foreword," J. I. Packer considers the essays "clear for the wayfaring man" (HL xiv). Indeed, Hall and Lillback's work is intelligible to the wayfaring man. Yet they view their volume as "a conversation among informed friends" (HL xv), suggesting a more educated audience; and they dedicate their volume "to all those who have been our seminary professors and life instructors," and list by name nine men, whose names are all preceded by the title "Dr." (HL, dedication page). The impression is given that, while the wayfaring man could read their work, it is not intended primarily for him.

Engelsma views his audience as consisting of "the burdened seminarian, the busy pastor, the elder working on behalf of the church after he has put in a full day at his occupation, and the laity carrying out their time-consuming responsibilities at home, on the job, and in the church" (E xiii). Indicative of this is his dedication: "To Ruth." Ruth is a woman of intellect and godly influence; but as a woman, a lay-woman, lacking the title "Dr." before her name, she represents all godly Reformed believers who have both a lively interest in, and the God-given ability to digest, Reformed theology.

Evaluating Calvin in Light of Sovereign Grace

Finally, Engelsma's analysis of Calvin is more faithful to the Reformed tradition, particularly the doctrine of sovereign grace, at crucial points.

Evaluating Calvin's comments regarding general or common grace, Engelsma does two things. First, he shows that Calvin did not teach common grace in the sense that the doctrine is taught today. Second, he frankly disagrees with Calvin's idea that a man's natural

gifts are the fruit of the Spirit's work in him (E 135). Michael Horton is being true to Calvin's words when he says that Calvin taught that the "Spirit is at work savingly in the elect, but also in common grace toward the reprobate" (HL 158); however, instead of readily agreeing with Calvin, Horton should have noted that these words are not consistent with what Calvin wrote elsewhere on the doctrine of sovereign, particular grace.

In dealing with Calvin's view of total depravity, Horton points out that Calvin refused "to accept a total eradication of the divine image" (HL 157). While acknowledging that Calvin used words like "vitiated," "almost blotted out," and "corrupted" to refer to the effect of man's fall on the image of God in him, Engelsma draws attention to the fact that Calvin also declared that that image was "erased" (E 101f.).

With regard to the matter of the covenant of works, and whether Adam could have attained eternal life by his own perfect obedience, Lillback says that "an elementary form of the covenant of works appears in Calvin's writings" (HL 169), while Engelsma says, "Calvin simply does not address the issue" (E 103).

In Hall and Lillback's book, Lillback strongly implies (in other of his writings he is more explicit) that Calvin viewed the covenant as conditional. Engelsma says: "In its conception of the covenant as a contract, agreement, and bargain, much of later Reformed theology departed from Calvin and ignored the covenant formula itself" (E 159). Lillback and Engelsma have a different view of the covenant, and it comes out in their respective works. Engelsma's is more in accord with sovereign grace. It is also faithful to Calvin.

This leads me to judge that Engelsma's work a more reliable summary and analysis. Engelsma does not shy away from letting the reader know what Calvin said, even when Calvin's statements are not consistent with the Reformed view of sovereign, particular, unconditional grace. But then, rather than embracing that part of Calvin, Engelsma disagrees with Calvin on those points and shows the reason for his disagreement. Some of the essayists in Hall and Lillback's book take such statements and run with them.

I began this second part of my review by speaking of Engelsma's

solo voice as clear; what I have just said demonstrates further the benefit of this clarity.

Conclusion.

In my earlier review of Hall and Lillback's book (vol. 42, no. 2, pp. 137ff.), I suggested that it has a value as a complement to the *Institutes*. I do not withdraw that opinion.

Yet, I recommend Engelsma's book even more highly to all for whom he intended it, both educated and non-educated, officebearers and lay people. The layman will find it readable; it is a better summary of Calvin's work; and its evaluation of Calvin is more consistently Reformed. Not only so, but as mentioned earlier, it demonstrates that Calvin is pertinent for today, both in his doctrine, and in his desire to promote and build up piety in the child of God. "Piety, that awed love of God in Jesus Christ taking form in obedience—a great theme of the *Institutes*—is Calvin's final word in his grand work" (E 401). ■

Book Reviews

Christ and Culture Revisited, D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008). Pp. 243 (hard cover), \$24.00. [Reviewed by Herman Hanko.]

The question of the relation between the Christian believer and the culture of the world in which he lives is an important one. It has been a topic high on the agenda of the church ever since the days of Augustine, bishop of Hippo. Indeed it can be argued that with the founding of the New Testament church, it has been a crucial question, which believers have been forced to face since Pentecost. Although Scripture itself does not use the term “culture,” Scripture has a lot to say about the relation that must exist between the world and the church while God’s people live in the world.

Indeed, the question, although not directly addressed in 1924 by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in its decisions on common grace, nevertheless was answered by that Synod’s adoption of common grace as official church dogma. These decisions, especially in the second and third points of common grace (the inner, Spirit-worked

restraint of sin in the ungodly and the resultant civic good of which the ungodly are capable) make concessions to the antithesis that have influenced the life of the CRC ever since that date. Herman Hoeksema predicted that if these two points of common grace were adopted, worldliness would enter the church; and so indeed it did. Those who promoted common grace charged Hoeksema with Anabaptism, a serious charge, but wrongly made, in their defense of a willingness of the CRC to compromise the antithesis of which Paul so eloquently speaks in II Corinthians 6:14-7:1. The subject of this book is, therefore, a subject of no little interest to the believer who is desirous to walk according to the precepts of the gospel.

D. A. Carson is a conservative evangelical who is research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. There are parts of the book that are eloquently written and are, as a result, even

deeply moving. But there are parts of the book that are written for scholars only and are of little help in the daily and pressing concerns of the child of God in the world. The latter parts of the book are, in their own way, valuable and important for Christians to read; the earlier parts could better have been published in a theological journal. And, even if one could wade his way through them, they are of little help in the day-to-day problems of life.

Let me say a few things about the more abstruse parts first of all.

A definition of “culture” is, quite obviously, extremely important and not so easy to formulate. The author gives his own definition of culture in the words of another author:

It is an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about life and attitudes towards life (85).

I cannot honestly see how this definition is of any practical help to the beleaguered child of God

who must live in this world. Surely it is more to the point (although I suppose I will be charged with being simplistic) to define culture in the language of Scripture. Scripture speaks of the “world” as its reference to culture when it admonishes the Christian, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world” (I John 2:15, 16). One could profitably quote also such passages as II Corinthians 6:14-7:1, where the culture of the world is described in graphic terms; I Peter 4:3; Revelation 18, where the world’s culture is described as Babylon and the people of God are urgently called: “Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues” (Rev. 18:4).

I know that the terms used by Scripture (world, darkness, synagogue of Satan, etc.) have to be defined. But these terms themselves give a perspective to “culture” that determines our relation to it. And the believers’ relation to culture is reflected in

and a carrying out of Christ's relation to culture.

The author begins the book with an analysis of Niebuhr's description of various views that have been promoted throughout the ages concerning the relation of Christ to culture. These views are basically five in number. 1) Christ against culture, a view first promoted by Tertullian. 2) Christ of culture; Christ represents the best of culture. 3) Christ above culture, promoted by Thomas Aquinas. 4) Christ and culture in paradox. 5) Christ the transformer of culture. A long discussion of Niebuhr's list follows, with the result that a great deal of time is spent on an analysis of modern thought from outright atheism to conservative Christianity. It is written in the context of philosophers, liberals, ivory-tower theologians, and epistemological gurus. All that, while not even very interesting, is of little value to an anxious child of God who walks his pilgrimage in God's world as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven.

Yet even in this section the author includes some nice ideas. He makes a point of emphasizing that all history must be evaluated

in the light of the end of the world (58, 59). He is not a pre- or a post-millennialist, nor does he share their views of culture. He is critical of Niebuhr's view of the necessity of transforming culture. He gives some interesting and pointed examples of how a wrong interpretation of the relation between Christ and culture can lead to a mutilation of Scripture (63, 84). He offers a vivid description of today's culture, although once again, with approval, he quotes another author who describes the sin of our modern world in this way:

We no longer feel ourselves to be guests in someone else's home [something a sojourner in this world will experience if he lives a life of holiness, HH] and therefore obliged to make our behavior conform with a set of preexisting cosmic rules. It is our creation now. We make the rules. We establish the parameters of reality. We create the world, and because we do, we no longer feel beholden to outside forces. We no longer have to justify our behavior, for we are now the architects of the universe. We are responsible to nothing outside ourselves, for we are the kingdom, the

power, and the glory for ever and ever (89).

One can profit from these observations.

It is evident, though, that the author finds the present culture worth something to the Christian because of common grace operative in the lives of wicked men. (See pages 36, 49, 73, 168.) A commitment to common grace will, of course, affect one's view of the relation between Christ and culture: Christ is favorably disposed towards modern culture in His common grace, gives much blessing to the wicked in their evil designs, restrains sin in a depraved culture, and saves such a culture from total wickedness. If Christ takes this attitude towards culture, we, His people, ought to do the same.

The last half of the book is far and away the most interesting part. After observing that various forces (seduction of secularization, mystique of democracy, worship of freedom, lust for power) shape culture, Carson enters into a fairly lengthy discussion of democracy. He observes, rightly, that a conflict between the freedom of which democracy boasts and the freedom of Chris-

tianity are bound to bring conflict (127, 128). Democracy, with its defense of freedoms, ultimately leads to greater government control of life as definitions of freedom collide. Carson sees that the freedom of democracy turns to slavery to sin while the slavery of obedience to Christ is true slavery (134ff.).

The problem of the tension between majority rule and the obligation to preserve the freedoms of the minority are easily exemplified in an issue like pornography. Suppose the majority say that pornography is bad and ban it: at what point does this jeopardize the freedom of those who think pornography is harmless and perhaps that the ban even threatens the freedom of the press? Suppose, instead, the majority say that pornography is harmless and protect it: at what point does this jeopardize the freedom of people who are convinced that it is demeaning to women and dangerous to children. Or again: an individual here and there who abuses narcotics and doses himself up with hallucinogenic drugs is scarcely a threat to public order and the common good; but

when such practices become an epidemic, the common good is threatened in many ways, and the state has an interest in intervening even though individual liberties are thereby brought curtailed. Usually legislatures and judiciaries try to adjudicate such differences in perspective by trying to determine what is in the public interest, or by trying to be sensitive to what a mythical “average community” judges to be obscene, or the like. But such devices merely expose the chasms that divide contemporary opinion, some of which are generated by debates over the preceding point—that is, whether there is such a thing as transcendent morality (134, 135).

For the author’s view of the Christian’s calling in relation to the exercise of power, one ought to read pages 143, 144. I cannot quote the entire section here, but it is worth reading if one is interested in this subject. His position can be summed up in this sentence:

...Christian communities honestly seeking to live under the word of God will inevitably generate cultures that, to say

the least, will in some sense counter or confront the values of the dominant culture (143).

A large section of the book is given over to the question of the relation between church and state. Carson rejects Abraham Kuyper’s view of the calling of believers to make every institution of society Reformed, although he makes here also an appeal to common grace (152, 168). He condemns the American and French Revolutions (186)—a view refreshing to read. He calls the persecution of the church a cultural clash (162), which I suppose it was, but only within the context of the corruption of evil cultures and the holiness of the saints. He defines the believer’s role in government and influencing culture (196). And that leads Carson, finally, to the relation between the believer under Christ, obedient to Christ, and the surrounding culture.

In this concluding section, the author evaluates various solutions that have been offered to the question of Christ and culture. Fundamentalism is condemned for being too narrow but is praised for its generosity. He would like to see once again a United States

of one hundred years ago. The Lutheran view of two kingdoms is also rejected, for it does not solve the question of the relation between the two kingdoms (212). His denunciation of Kuyper and the Neo-Kuyperians is scathing: Kuyper lost the antithesis and Kuyper's followers lost Kuyper's piety (210, 215, 216). We ought not to attempt to transform our culture, although we ought to try to influence it in various ways. We ought to abolish slavery, fight against abortion, and try to rid the culture of the world of other evils. Such is the calling of the Christian (217).

While this last concluding position is one a Reformed Christian can endorse, we ought to point to quite a different view of the relation between Christ and culture.

On the one hand, the key word is that old tried-and-true word of the historical Reformed faith: the antithesis. This word means, literally: to set over against; that is, the antithesis sets over against the culture of the world the principles of the kingdom of heaven, principles that differ in every respect from the principles operative in the world.

Those principles begin with God's eternal counsel, which is carried out in history along the

lines of the centrality of Christ's work. The antithesis begins with sovereign election and reprobation, and is realized in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, for He died to make atonement for His elect and to bring judgment upon the world and its culture (John 9:39, 12:31). In His rule in heaven, Christ is universal Lord; but the rule of Christ is antithetical, because Christ rules over His elect people by the power of His sovereign and particular grace, while He rules over the wicked by His power, so that all they do fulfills His will (Ps. 2; Phil. 2:9-11).

Thus the goal of all Christ's rule is the establishment of the kingdom of heaven in the age to come, when the wicked world is destroyed and the everlasting age of the glorious rule of Christ in heaven is fully realized. Christ's people are made citizens of the kingdom of heaven while they live in the world. They therefore live out of the principles of regeneration, the sovereign rule of Christ in their hearts, and the calling to represent Christ's universal rule in this world of sin.

The antithesis is realized by two major events, of which the latter serves the former: the gathering of the church in preparation

for her final glorification, and the development of sin in the world of wickedness until the world becomes ripe for judgment and God is justified in the punishment of His terrible wrath upon the wicked.

One more principle is involved here. While the culture of the wicked involves their evil use of God's creation, the fact remains that this is God's creation and God will never relinquish His claim to it. For the Christian, that means two things: It means that the Christian sins grievously when he refuses to use God's world. Paul calls that position the doctrine of seducing spirits and devils (I Tim. 4:1-5) and commands God's people to recognize that "every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer." God's people are not Anabaptists. Secondly, the Christian is called to be a representative in this dark and evil world by witnessing against all evil. He must condemn the evils of pornography, homosexuality,

abortion, etc. He must witness of Christ's kingdom, and power, and glory. He must do this by word and deed. He must make this witness when he is being burned at the stake and devoured by lions. He must insist by his testimony and his patience in suffering that Christ is King and Christ's kingdom shall endure. But the believer must do this on the basis of scriptural principles and as a part of his obligation to call the wicked to repentance and faith in Christ. He must fight against abortion, but on biblical grounds and not on a humanistic foundation.

In this way he lives as a pilgrim and stranger in the world, but as one who values God's creation and God's institutions (government, marriage, work) while he passes the years of his pilgrimage. He does so because Christ's relation to culture is one of severest condemnation—unless it be the "culture" of His beloved people, whom He preserves until the blessed day of the perfect culture of the kingdom of heaven. ■

John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor, by Robert Godfrey (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2009). Pp. 207 (soft cover). [Reviewed by Herman Hanko.]

Godfrey has written an excellent biography of John Calvin that should have an important place among the many other biographies that have appeared over the years. I would recommend it for reading in our high schools in any church history classes that include the history of the Reformation. It is a book that in my judgment is what a biography of a church father ought to be. It does not give mere data on Calvin's life. It makes no effort to explain his conduct in psychological terms. It does not make use of the increasingly common trite phrase, used to introduce some "new" thought the author has discovered: "Modern scholarship has uncovered the fact that...", or something similar. It is my sad experience that modern scholarship deals with insignificant trivia or human speculation supported by this vague authority called "modern scholarship."

It is a biography that recognizes how important to the life of Calvin and how crucial to the church of Christ Calvin's doctrines were. Godfrey takes the time to define these doctrines

in some detail and to point out how significant they are for the post-Reformation church. But Godfrey's work of telling us what Calvin believed and taught does not mean that the details of his life are neglected. The two are woven into one smooth-flowing narrative.

I will mention a few specifics.

In Chapter 6, "The Church and Worship," Godfrey deals with Calvin's view of corporate worship. It is an excellent chapter. Godfrey catches correctly the reformer's teachings on this important subject and relates it to the church of today. All who claim Calvin as one of their spiritual fathers would profit from this chapter.

In chapter 7, "The Church and the Sacraments," Calvin's position on the presence of Christ in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper is discussed at some length. This doctrine was especially important in the years of the Reformation because the Zwinglians tended to deny Christ's real presence altogether, and the

Lutherans did not succeed in breaking cleanly from Roman Catholic idolatry in their view of consubstantiation. Calvin was deeply committed to the unity of the churches of the Reformation and spent countless days in writing and travel in efforts to bring about this unity. The presence of Christ in the sacrament was a crucial question that was never satisfactorily solved.

Calvin's teachings of sovereign and double predestination, including election and reprobation, are fully treated and correctly presented. Godfrey even proves that Calvin related election to the doctrine of the covenant—something those who want a conditional covenant deny (125). The author makes one statement in this connection, however, that I am inclined to dispute. He claims that Calvin's emphasis on the doctrine of predestination was not because that doctrine stood at the heart of his teachings, but rather because of the many attacks against it. I have no doubt that there is some truth in this: the doctrine was continuously attacked and often in brutal and blasphemous ways that did not exclude personal attacks on Calvin himself. And certainly

Calvin answered these attacks. Nevertheless, Calvin's emphasis on God's sovereignty in salvation, rooted in God's determination to seek His own glory, led directly to the doctrine of predestination, a doctrine that Calvin discovered to be at the heart of the gospel of grace.

If anyone is inclined to think of Calvin as cold, aloof, dispassionate, hateful, self-centered, untouched by the infirmities of others, let him read "Calvin As Pastoral Counselor." Calvin's genuine concern for the suffering of others is shown with clarity in the copious quotes from Calvin's writings, something characterizing the entire book.

Godfrey points out correctly that Luther, Calvin, and Bucer wrote commentaries on the book of Romans. It is simply a fact of history that reformation in the church of Christ begins with the book of Romans—on which all true reformers preach and write, as also they did in the sixteenth-century reformation.

In this connection Godfrey calls attention to the fact that Calvin was, above all, a preacher. So also it has always been in true reformation. Reformation is not brought about by pious homilies

on moral evils (such as Erasmus attempted); it is not brought about by special outpourings of the Holy Spirit resulting in revivals—as is so commonly thought in Wales and other parts of the British Isles, as well as in America; the power of reformation in the church is preaching. It always has been and still is. Solid, biblical, exegetical preaching that brings in it the whole counsel of God is still, as it always has been, the “power of God unto salvation.” That that preaching begins with the book of Romans is not surprising, because preaching that reforms is not an insipid gracious gospel offer of God’s love for all. Nor does it present the cross of Christ as being for all men so that one can say to every man, “God loves you.” It is the proclamation of God’s glory revealed in all His sovereignty and power as the God who accomplishes all His eternal purpose. That kind of preaching moved Europe to its foundations, and that kind of preaching is still today the only hope for the church.

I find in Calvin a kindred spirit in his love for the Psalms.

Calvin found in them the only fountain of strength, encouragement in the ferocity of the battle, the weapons he needed to fight against the powers of sin and darkness, the only comfort in the sorrows of life—not the least of which is our sins, and the victory of faith that overcomes all troubles.

A few things with which I disagree need to be mentioned. I think Godfrey exaggerates when he claims that the question of authority (whether Scripture or the church) “is at the heart of the experience of the Christian community” (20). That it is an important question is correct; that it lies at the heart of our experience is another matter.

Godfrey is wrong when he says that the whole debate over predestination was brought on by Bolsec when Bolsec rose during a worship service, interrupted the preaching of “Farel,” and railed against the doctrine of predestination. The sermon was not being preached by Farel, but by Saint Andre.

The book sells retail at \$15.99. It is well worth the price. ■

Calvin, by Bruce Gordon (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). Pp. 398 (hard cover), \$35.00. [Reviewed by Herman Hanko.]

This book, written by a professor of reformation studies at Yale Divinity School, has been said to be the definitive biography of the great Genevan reformer. I am very much inclined to agree. I have read many biographies of Calvin, but I cannot remember reading one that was as interesting, comprehensive, informative, and accurate as Gordon's work. It was written in commemoration of Calvin's 500th birthday, which took place last year. It is a worthy addition to the countless books on Calvin that came out last year—and perhaps the best.

I cannot begin to do justice to the book in this short review. I urge all those who are interested in the work of the man whom God used more than any other to restore biblical truth to the church of Jesus Christ in the sixteenth century to purchase this book and read it. \$35.00 may seem to be a lot of money for a book, but many of us think nothing of spending twice that to travel to a major metropolitan center to see some sports event. Reading this book will also be more beneficial.

A few observations about the

book will have to suffice for this review.

The book contains much information on aspects of Calvin's work that do not appear in most biographies. A few instances come to mind. The author spends a great deal of time discussing the relationships that existed between Calvin and other reformers such as Farel, Bucer, Haller, Bullinger, Luther, and Oecolampadius. This is done throughout the book and adds a fascinating flavor to the biography. Gordon also speaks at some length of Calvin's (and the city of Geneva's) relationship with other cities in Switzerland: Basle, Berne, Zurich, and Neuchâtel, as well as cities throughout Europe where his influence was felt. Calvin's life and work were intertwined with the political ferment of the times.

There is much history given of Calvin's work and influence in France, and the great tragedies of the Reformation in his native land. Calvin worked long and hard to bring the Reformed faith to his native country. He spent a great part of his ministry among the French refugees in Geneva.

He was deeply involved in the whole "Nicodemite" controversy. A word of explanation is perhaps in order. The so-called Nicodemites were Reformed believers in France who, because persecution was bitter and intense, kept their faith secret. Calvin made a distinction between those who simply kept their faith a secret and those who actually practiced Roman Catholic rites, such as attendance at the mass. He was not as severe with those who simply kept their faith secret or fled as refugees from persecution as he was with those who attended and participated in the mass. These latter appealed to Naaman the leper, who bowed with the king before the idols of Syria. Calvin dismissed that argument with a wave of the hand.

Calvin has been sharply criticized for his condemnation of the Nicodemites as being unduly harsh, unsympathetic with the frailties of God's beleaguered people, and writing from the safety of Geneva, where he himself did not face the cruelties of the persecutors of God's people. But Calvin suffered terrible persecution himself, in some respects worse than that of the French Protestants.

Calvin was deeply immersed in the controversies over the presence of Christ in the bread and wine served in the administration of the Lord's Supper. On one extreme stood Zwingli and, more or less, the other Swiss reformers; on the other extreme stood the Lutherans, occupying a position very similar to that of Rome. The author claims that Calvin's position was somewhere in between the two extremes, but that Calvin was willing to modify his position slightly to bring unity between all branches of Protestantism. Calvin did gain Melancthon to his side, but was frustrated by Melancthon's unwillingness to go public with his views. After Luther died, Westphal took a radical Lutheran position and Calvin was obliged to spend a great deal of time doing battle with the extreme right wing of Lutheranism represented by Westphal.

The author gives much time to Calvin's influence throughout Europe. Although during Calvin's lifetime Bullinger's writings were read as widely as Calvin's and perhaps more widely so, after their deaths only Calvin's writings survived in any significant way. Especially interesting is the author's narrative of the struggle

in Wezel and Frankfurt between the English, Dutch, and French refugees who settled in these cities, and the Lutherans who hated the Calvinists almost as much as they hated the Roman Catholics. Involved in these struggles were the reformers à Lasco and Knox, as well as Calvin himself.

Discussions of Calvin's controversies occupy a significant and important part of the book. Calvin's controversy with Servetus, who denied the Trinity and wrote terrible blasphemies against the God of Scripture, ended in the burning of Servetus at the stake. Perhaps Calvin has been maligned for his role in this more than for anything else, but he is completely exonerated by the author. The slander of Calvin for the burning of Servetus still continues to the present, and the Internet is full of such cruel misrepresentations of Calvin and his role in the whole affair. The author makes a point of it that almost every important city in the whole of Europe, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, would have burned Servetus at the stake if they could have gotten their hands on the wretch.

A great deal of Calvin's time was consumed by defending

himself against countless enemies who attacked him unmercifully throughout his lifetime. But Prof. Gordon correctly points out that most of the time the attacks against Calvin's person and writings were surreptitiously attacks against Calvin's doctrine of predestination, and especially against his doctrine of reprobation. Not much changes over the years. How frequently in recent times have not so-called Calvinists hidden their hatred of the doctrine of sovereign predestination behind criticisms of a different kind or misrepresentations of Calvin's theology—as is characteristic of those who claim Calvin taught universal atonement. To the author's credit he represents with accuracy Calvin's doctrine of predestination in his controversies with Bolsec and Castellio especially. In fact, one of the major delights of the book is the author's willingness to present Calvin's doctrines accurately and without criticism—whatever the author's own position might be.

Calvin's personality and character come under sharp review in the book. This is done, not so much as a psychological analysis of Calvin's psyche, but more as an attempt to give us some idea

of the kind of man Calvin was. Calvin does not emerge from the many portraits drawn as a man with whom one would not like to work; nor with one with whom one disagreed. Calvin is correctly presented as intellectually brilliant, superbly educated, master of Latin and French, far superior to any of his contemporaries in theological acumen, and with immense capacity for work—even on his deathbed. But he is also depicted as one who was aware of his superiority and, in that awareness, found it impossible to tolerate deviations of any kind from his own views. He did not, to use my own phrase, suffer fools gladly.

Yet Calvin is, in a sense, the author claims, a contradiction, for he was also a man of intense piety, and one lacking in self-confidence. The author speaks of Calvin's love for the Psalms as his own spiritual biography, and describes Calvin's awareness of himself as one constantly balancing confidence in his ability with acute consciousness of his sins and imperfections. Let me quote a few statements from the Preface. The quote is rather long, but it will give the reader of this review some idea of his opinion of Calvin.

John Calvin was the greatest Protestant reformer of the sixteenth century, brilliant, visionary and iconic [not a word I would use to describe Calvin, HH]. The superior force of his mind was evident in all that he did. He was also ruthless, and an outstanding hater. Among those things he hated were the Roman church, Anabaptists and those people who, he believed, only faint-heartedly embraced the Gospel and tainted themselves with idolatry.... He never felt he had encountered an intellectual equal, and he was probably correct. To achieve what he believed to be right, he would do virtually anything. Although not physically imposing, he dominated others and knew how to manipulate relationships. He intimidated, bullied and humiliated, saving some of his worst conduct for his friends. Yet as he lay dying they gathered around the bed distraught with grief. There would be no other like him....

But what made Calvin great? It may seem odd, but working on this biography has convinced me that the answer does not lie in the events of his life. Nor is the question adequately addressed in terms

of the numerous and diverse influences that shaped his mind. They were significant, as we shall see, but there is more. What made Calvin Calvin, and not another sixteenth century writer, was his brilliance as a thinker and writer, and, above all, his ability to interpret the Bible. His coherent, penetrating and lucid vision of God's abiding love for humanity expressed in some of the most exquisite prose of his age, has continued down the centuries to instruct and to inspire. Like all great writers he transcends his time.

While undoubtedly much of what the author writes is true, these characteristics have to be balanced with other equally important truths. Calvin was not devoid of the more tender emotions. He loved his wife dearly and treated her with respect and compassion. He was profoundly grieved at the death of his son and could hardly bear the burden of his grief. He was always ready to come to the help of the poor refugees from other parts of Europe and share in their sorrow. He was a tender pastor and shepherd of the souls of those entrusted to his spiritual ministrations. He

comforted those about to die for their faith with wonderful consoling letters full of the promises of God that still bring help and joy to God's beleaguered people today. He was never too busy in his studies to help others in trouble and to entertain those from all over Europe who came to his door to meet him and have fellowship with him.

In addition to this side of Calvin's character, we must remember that Calvin was weak and frail all his life and, as he grew older, was beset by countless illnesses, including migraine headaches, kidney stones (which he had to pass by his own efforts), constipation, and poor digestion, none of which ailments kept him from his work. To me it seems incredible that such illnesses as he endured did not make him far more cranky than he actually was.

Further, he was under constant attack by so many different people, one can scarcely count them. He was banished from Geneva because he insisted that discipline as a key of the kingdom belonged to the church and not to the council of magistrates. He was hated by the old inhabitants of the city, partly for bringing so many French refugees, partly for his doctrines,

and partly for his immovable determination to conform the citizens to the Word of God in their confession and walk. The attacks made against him were not only from avowed enemies, but also from theologians he thought were his friends, and who turned against him. The attacks were vicious, unprincipled, and, as Gordon notes, often against him because of his doctrine of sovereign predestination. How Calvin survived under these constant attacks is a glowing tribute to the power of God's grace in him. Most men would have abandoned Geneva and probably their theology. To say that these incessant attacks made him irritable and goaded him to strike back is an understatement.

To add a couple of other points: Calvin was devoted in mind and will to the glory of God. If his anger at those who did not want to live lives of devotion to God sometimes spilled over in harsh words and bitter invective, it was born out of a righteous anger and deep devotion to the truth. And, in this connection, those who attacked him and the doctrines he taught were attacking God's truth. He was jealous for God's glory and the honor of Him who had saved him from sin and

death. Would God we had more men today who fearlessly and without thought of popularity and fawning devotion to themselves would become more incensed at the terrible way God's truth is despised—even in "Calvinistic" circles. A few more like Calvin and Luther (who was criticized for the same reasons) would do the church a lot more good than the insipid, wishy-washy theologians of our modern times who are more interested in their bank accounts and reputations than they are about the truth of God.

The author makes a point of it that Calvin's abiding influence was due to his superb gift of interpreting Scripture. How true this is. Calvin's commentaries are the only ones I still use in my study of Scripture.

Calvin was a sinful man. He had only a small beginning of the new obedience—as he himself realized and confessed. God used him, as he was! with all his weaknesses and failures, in a way God uses few others. To do what God did through Calvin was, from a human perspective, possible only because Calvin was Calvin. We may thank the Lord for His work through this noble servant. ■

John Calvin: *A Pilgrim's Life*, by Herman J. Selderhuis, tr. by Albert Gootjes (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity Press). Pp. 287 (soft cover). [Reviewed by Herman Hanko.]

With the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, a spate of books have come out on Calvin's life and doctrine. The book under review is, as the title suggests, a biography. I have mixed feelings about it. The author is professor of Church History and Church Polity at the Theological School in Appeldoorn, Netherlands. He is also director of the University's Institute of Reformation Research. He, as professor in a Reformed Seminary, stands in the line of Calvin, the Synod of Dordt, and the Reformed tradition. That is not always as apparent as one would like it to be.

There are scores of biographies of Calvin available, and one searches in the book for a reason to write another one. The reason is not all bad: the author is basing his material primarily on Calvin's letters, in the firm belief that things concerning Calvin's character and activities can be learned from these letters that cannot be learned elsewhere. I presume that may be true, but it does tend to give a one-sided view of Calvin.

At any rate, we should list some of the good points about the book, first of all.

Above all, it is a fascinating book, easy to read and extremely interesting. Once having dipped into it, one finds the book hard to lay aside. This is an attractive feature and recommends it for general reading. Anyone, including high school students with an interest in their heritage, will find it worthwhile.

The book has some fascinating insights into Calvin's life and thought. In a chapter entitled "Pilgrim," the author writes:

The road to heaven is not an easy one. It is a narrow road, as depicted in a painting of two clearly separate roads that could and can be seen in many Christian homes. On the one side is that terrifying yet seductively easy broad road that leads to destruction. On the other is the very promising but difficult narrow road that leads to eternal life. The painting brings to mind two concepts that were fun-

damental to Calvin's speech and thought: labyrinth and abyss. For Calvin, these are the two forms of the ultimate experience of misery.

Apart from the fact that the painting, which I have seen, has the two roads depicted, of which our Lord spoke in Matthew 7:13, 14, it is difficult to see how this painting reminds me that "fundamental to Calvin's speech and thought" are the concepts "labyrinth and abyss." But even if this were so, it is an exaggeration to say that these two concepts are "fundamental to Calvin's speech and thought," because they "are the two forms of the ultimate experience of misery." It almost sounds like medieval mysticism and its "dark night of the soul." Calvin was no mystic. But the idea is intriguing and interesting, for the author emphasizes throughout the book that Calvin was indeed a pilgrim—in the actual sense of the word, as his journeys took him from Paris to Geneva, but also in the spiritual sense of the word, for Calvin was a pilgrim of God throughout his life from the time of his conversion till his death.

In an eloquent passage, Sel-

derhuis describes Calvin's commitment to Scripture.

Calvin saw his task as that of a watchman on the walls of Zion, and his actions can really only be understood in this way. He had a mission that he did not for a minute doubt. In a letter to Renée Ferrara, he wrote that the Lord had revealed to him in the Scriptures that God had called him to office and had also given him the program that went along with that office. This was how Calvin could work as he did. As professor, pastor and bishop he constantly buried himself in the Bible in a most remarkable way. He read the Bible as his own biography—not an autobiography, for then it would no longer be God's Word. It was not he, nor any other human being, who had written it. According to Calvin, God used men who served as secretaries or amanuenses to write down his messages. These writers did leave their marks in the nature and style of what they wrote, but the contents of the messages were entirely from God, and as a result the Word is both trustworthy and sure. Calvin clung to the Bible closely, not only because he so often encountered himself

in it but also because he saw it as the one tangible but unmovable thing on earth (68).

Let it be underscored that Calvin was not wrong in seeing himself in the Bible. Scripture tells us (I Cor. 10:11) that the histories of those whose lives are recorded in the Old Testament were given to us as our examples. And surely anyone who reads and loves the Psalms sees in them his own spiritual biography.

Chapter 5, entitled “Preacher” and dealing with Calvin’s work as preacher of the Word and church organizer, is perhaps the most outstanding chapter in the book. It is well for everyone called to be a preacher of the gospel to read that chapter.

Selderhuis’ defense of Calvin’s role in the Servetus affair is superb and historically correct, in spite of many efforts to smear Calvin with black paint because of his purported responsibility for Servetus’ death by being burned at the stake.

The author includes many interesting sidelights that are intended to shed light on Calvin’s character. These sidelights are too numerous to include them all in this review, but one inter-

esting example is the author’s contention that when Calvin with his supporters began to gain the ascendancy in Genevan affairs in the 1550s, Calvin made a decision to leave Geneva because he was weary from the struggles. It was another visit by Farel that persuaded him to stay—just as Calvin’s original decision to work in Geneva had been made under the duress of Farel’s threats of God’s fearful judgments on him if he would not stay.

Another valuable part of the book is the author’s determination to show that Calvin was not the hard and emotionless person he is pictured to be, but that he was, in fact, extremely emotional, especially with the death of his own child and wife and the death of friends and colleagues. And so, the author claims, and we gladly receive his assurance on this point, Calvin had the same struggles to find rest with God that we have under the same sad circumstances.

But there are things about the book that are disturbing.

There have been biographies of Calvin written that explain the whole of Calvin’s life and work in terms of psychological quirks or wrong motives. These

biographies are worthless. While Selderhuis' book is not that bad, there is nonetheless too much psychological speculation in it about the inner workings of Calvin's mind.

A few instances of this side of the book will suffice. As a thread running through the entire life of Calvin was his need for a father figure, according to Selderhuis. This began with his relation to his true father, but continued throughout his studies, especially in Paris, and continued on through his work in Geneva and Strasbourg. He needed a father figure so that he had someone to tell him what to do at critical junctions in his life. This strikes me as far-fetched and an attempt to impose on Calvin a psychological need that was contrary to Calvin's nature.

Selderhuis, in his description of Calvin's identification of himself with Old Testament figures, makes much of it that Calvin identified himself with Old Testament prophets and even compared himself with David. As I said earlier, this is not all bad, for we are to use these figures described in the Old Testament as examples. But Scripture points out that this need to identify ourselves with Old Testament figures is in the

spiritual area of our calling before God. Selderhuis tends to make a psychological comparison (66).

Another example is Selderhuis' insistence that Calvin was banished from Geneva by the council because of his stubbornness and his refusal to admit wrong for fear of being mocked the rest of his life (83). It is certainly true that Calvin refused to bend to the will of the council, the ruling body in Geneva, but his refusal was rooted in his firm conviction that the council was demanding of him something contrary to the Word of God. Selderhuis sometimes fails to put his "stubbornness" in the context of Calvin's determination to be faithful to God. The very strong impression is left that it was a psychological defect that lay behind Calvin's exile.

On page 198 the author suggests that Calvin's problems were centered in feelings of guilt that he did not make a good impression with others or that he did not work sufficiently hard. This is a vain speculation. It is true that sometimes in his letters Calvin said some things that might suggest such things, but letters are very personal, written on the spur of the moment, and often cannot serve as firm ground on which to

deduce one's character. I would hate to have someone psycho-analyze me on the basis of my letters.

The underlying fault here seems to be that the author does not take sufficiently into account Calvin's determination to defend God's honor and glory no matter what the cost, and Calvin's own struggle with those in Geneva who persecuted him outrageously. He was treated shamefully by his fellow citizens and by the council. That he endured it all is a measure of Calvin's commitment to the gospel. His outbursts, though undoubtedly he was a sinner, are not the point of Calvin's life. We ought not to make of them psychological deficiencies. Great men in the history of the church who were used by God to defend the truth in critical times were often men with whom it was difficult to work, especially if a colleague was less than trustworthy. One need mention only Athanasius, who was banished five times for his ferocious defense of the divinity of Christ; Augustine, who was wearied by the bombardment of Pelagians and Semi-pelagians; Luther, whose life was made miserable by countless enemies; Gomarus, who often stood alone

against the deadly heresies of Arminius; Hoeksema, who was defrocked by his church for standing for the truth of sovereign and particular grace. All of these have been called stubborn men.

And that brings me to the last criticism I have to make. Although Selderhuis makes almost nothing of Calvin's doctrine, the few remarks he makes are denigrating. A man's biography (as its perfect record is recorded in heaven) must include his spiritual position on the truth of God revealed in Scripture. This is, after all, Christ's evaluation of a man's work. A biography, insofar as that is possible for us mortals, ought to do the same. Selderhuis omits what is most important—or worse, wrongly interprets it.

The short description of Calvin's doctrine of predestination is found on pages 37, 38. It is, though extremely brief and incomplete, nevertheless accurate. He is highly critical, however, of some of Calvin's adversaries and of some who followed him, for their distortions of Calvin's position. The author writes:

Predestination is but a small part of the whole discussion of providence but nevertheless

has been the specific focus of attention. The image of an arbitrary, merciless God as tyrannical as Calvin himself, of a theological system that filled psychiatric wards and led people to commit suicide, cannot be left unmentioned in this book. Unfortunately, many who came after Calvin did indeed make a real mess of things. Opponents deliberately misrepresented his views; many of his own followers foolishly brought their church members to a state of mental despair through their preaching and pastoral work.

This may be true in some rare instances, but many of these wrong conclusions of Calvin's view were charges made by Arminians who hated the doctrine of predestination (see as proof for this the *Conclusion* to the Canons of Dordrecht). Further, such charges have been made throughout time against firm defenders of sovereign predestination, beginning with Augustine. (Here the author makes a mistake. The author writes: "A stumbling block for both friends and foes, it must be dealt with at some point since many consider this doctrine distinctive

of Calvin. As the mother of the doctrine of election...." This is not true. Augustine, over 1,000 years earlier, had taught sovereign election and reprobation. Calvin was not the "mother" of predestination.)

Concerning reprobation the author writes:

That God decided not to lead all people to faith means that there were people he did not choose, people he left under judgment and thus actually condemned. This is exactly why Calvin spoke of a *decretum horribile*. The term has nothing to do with horror, but everything to do with the shivers. It is not a 'horrible decree,' but a decision that causes us to tremble and shiver all the same. This decision also humbles us. Calvin often spoke of a *humilitas*, expecting this as the basic attitude of humanity before God.

The author points out that Calvin refused to have fellowship with those who denied the truth, as did the de Fallais family (Calvin's close friends) when they chose Bolsec's view of predestination rather than Calvin's. The author calls this "petty" and

explains it in terms of the fact that Calvin was usually sick and had, as a result, a tendency to over-react (196). Yet Bolsec taught a conditional predestination, similar to what the Arminians taught and condemned by the Synod of Dordt. The author seems to indicate that he is sympathetic to Arminian teaching.

In his discussion of Calvin's condemnation of the Nicodemites, especially his friend Gerard Rous-sel (Reformed believers in France who hid their faith and even participated in the mass, because of their fear of persecution), Selder-huis claims Calvin was too strict (50).

The author is mistaken when he writes: "Calvin tried to persuade [the Anabaptists on account of their doctrine of perfectionism, HH] that Luther's view of the redeemed as *simul iustus et peccator*—that a believer remains a sinner—was true not only for the individual but also for the church." If there is one thing *simul iustus et peccator* does not mean, it is "that a believer remains

a sinner." That is almost saying that justification is *on the basis of faith*. The Latin words mean literally (and Luther's emphasis throughout all his writings was actually on that truth) "at the same time righteous and a sinner." That is, God imputed the perfect righteousness of Christ to sinners—not to believers, but to sinners. Freely, graciously, and wondrously, He imputes the righteousness of Christ to those who are yet wholly in their sins.

It is not true that Calvin's view of the Lord's Supper was a compromise between Luther's view and Zwingli's view (94) and was an attempt to mediate between the two positions (154). It is possible that Calvin's view relied heavily on the studies and conclusions of Peter Martyr Vermigli, but Calvin did not develop his views as compromises, but always in the firm conviction that what he taught was the truth of Scripture. Calvin was, above all, a biblical theologian and a man of the Word. ■

John Calvin and Roman Catholicism, by Randall C. Zachman, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008). Pp. 224 (soft cover). [Reviewed by Herman Hanko.]

We are given, between soft covers, the papers presented at the Calvin Studies Colloquium held in 2007 at the University of Notre Dame. Claiming in a rather boastful way that “a good deal of the best scholarship on Calvin has been done by Roman Catholics,” the book is quite convincing proof of the error of that claim. Its avowed goal is ecumenical; that is, the book is an effort to bring Protestantism and Roman Catholicism closer in the hopes of ultimate union.

The merit of seeing that discussion [of Calvin and the RC Church] from the vantage point of time and free from the controversial context in which it was first undertaken is not only a fruitful step forward but also a firm foundation for building further strategies for finding a greater unity among the churches now so lamentably separated (7, 8).

As a result, Calvin takes quite a beating. One can expect this, for the various chapters were written by those heavily weighted

towards Roman Catholicism. While the church affiliation of all the contributors is not listed, the ones who are identified in their church affiliation are either Roman Catholics, Anglicans, or Episcopalians.

A few examples of the strong Roman Catholic bias will be enough information to give our readers sufficient information to decide whether they want to purchase and read the book. I am not, by the way, suggesting that the book is on my “banned books” list; it is valuable to read in order to learn the drift of modern Protestantism in the direction of Rome and to learn that Rome has not budged one theological inch in its position. To return to Rome means to become Roman Catholic in the fullest sense of the word.

The point of the book’s Introduction is to show that Calvin was, after all, not that far from the Romish Church when he engaged in his reformatory work. Calvin, so the author claims, “thought of himself as belonging to the ‘orthodox and evangelical tradition.’”

One of the concerns of this volume will therefore be to assess the degree to which Calvin might be seen as a Catholic theologian, as surprising as such a claim might appear to be at first glance (9).

With little concern for the significance of the material in the general thesis of the book, the author of chapter 1 evaluates the biographies of Calvin from Bolsec to Richelieu. Bolsec's biography (Bolsec was a bitter enemy of Calvin, banished from Geneva for publicly attacking Calvin's doctrine of predestination) is given a fair amount of space, while in fact it is filled with lies and slander of the worst sort. Bolsec, e.g., claimed that Calvin was a fornicator of the worst sort. Yet the author rather brazenly writes: "What is significant about [Bolsec's biography] is not that [it] was hostile but that [it was] published as a full-scale biographical account..." And again, "Whether Bolsec's works are factually true or false is not something that needs to concern us here...." But why not? Anyone who chooses may heap any abuse on Calvin's head? And it doesn't matter? It's not important? Strange reasoning.

Calvin and the Nicodemites comes under the scrutiny of another contributor. The chapter dwells mostly with du Tillet's return to the Roman Catholic Church. duTillet was at one time a close friend of Calvin and, in fact, financially supported Calvin for many years. duTillet criticized Calvin's call to the ministry as not being official. But the general point of the chapter is that Calvin was too harsh in his condemnation of the Nicodemites for worshipping according to Roman Catholic rites, even partaking of the mass, while secretly they were Protestants.

Two chapters are devoted to a discussion of how Catholics and Protestants got along with each other in Geneva and in the Netherlands. I must admit that the chapter angered me. The writer here spoke at some length of the persecuting of Roman Catholics by denying them the Mass, but there is no mention made of the thousands of Protestants who were tortured and slaughtered in a most cruel fashion by the Roman Catholics. The author admits that

for Catholics the specific incidents of mistreatment did not really comprise persecution per se as much as they mani-

festated a general state of persecution that true Christians had to endure from heretics. The heretical [Protestant, HH] regime did this by outlawing the Mass, which conferred grace, by banning priests, who dispensed the sacraments, and by confiscating properties that supported the priesthood (141).

However true on occasion this may have been, why does the author not mention the martyrs of Christ who were burned at the stake, roasted alive, had their tongues cut out, and were hanged on gallows? The answer is: the Protestants were “heretics” and had no right to live. And so it is yet today.

One more example will have to do. In one of the most aggressively Roman Catholic chapters of the book, the writer pens his words because the editor asked him “to assess the degree to which Calvin might be seen as a Catholic theologian” (145). The author writes:

Calvin’s concept of religion is binary: religion exists among humans in two forms, either false or true. False religion, he contended, was a mere human invention, an

extension of the natural world; true religion was derived straight from God and was therefore divine or genuinely supernatural. Calvin’s binary understanding was quite traditional and Catholic, one might argue, but his conception of false religion was strikingly modern and certainly un-Catholic, as we shall see. At first sight his thinking on false religion might not seem like too radical a departure from traditional Catholic teaching, but if one digs deeper, it does not take too long to realize that Calvin is turning his back on a millennium and a half of Christian theology (147).

Using Calvin’s rejection of the authoritative value of tradition and insisting on the sole authority of Scripture, the writer charges Calvin with erring badly when he accused the Roman Catholics of idolatry, and committed the grave mistake of rewriting history according to his notions (147).

Anyone who thinks that Rome has changed and that, by changing, it has made itself worthy of being a safe haven for Protestants is deluding himself and must answer to Christ for leading people back to an apostate church. ■

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