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# THE CATHOLIC CALVIN

J. Todd Billings

In what sense, if any, might John Calvin be considered a catholic theologian? For many, this question is deeply counterintuitive—and for good reason. For much of his life, Calvin was openly and vehemently anti-Roman Catholic. In the *Institutes*, Calvin calls the Roman Catholic Mass a “sacrilege,” a device of Satan to defile and annihilate the Lord’s sacred Supper. Put into the delicate tone of sixteenth-century polemics, “this Mass . . . however decked in splendor, inflicts signal dishonor upon Christ, buries and oppresses his cross, consigns his death to oblivion, takes away the benefit which came to us from it, and weakens and destroys the Sacrament.”<sup>1</sup> Calvin helped to consolidate a movement in Geneva in which the vestiges of Roman Catholic practices were overcome through ecclesial and civil regulation and control.<sup>2</sup> In the context of such a movement, there was no room for ambiguity about his differences from the Catholicism of Sadoletto, or of the Council of Trent. Calvin concedes that “we by no means deny that the churches under his [the pope’s] tyranny remain churches,” with “traces of the church” still present.<sup>3</sup> Yet, in these churches, “Christ lies hidden, half buried, the gospel overthrown, piety scattered, the worship of God nearly wiped out.”<sup>4</sup> Clearly, there is a J. sense in which Calvin was deeply and passionately anti-Roman Catholic.

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1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559, ed. J. T. McNeill and F. L. Battles (Louisville: Westminster, 1960), 4:18:1. All references to the *Institutes* in the present article are to this 1559 edition, with the exception of footnotes 13 and 16 below, which refer to the 1536 edition.

2. For an account of how religious identity was shaped in early Geneva in relation to Roman Catholic influence, see Randall Zachman, ed., *John Calvin and Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), ch. 3.

3. *Institutes* 4:2:11.

4. *Institutes* 4:2:12.



But there is a more subtle way in which to consider the question. In what sense did Calvin as a theologian maintain continuity with catholic theological traditions of the church? Here, the question is not simply about early modern Roman Catholicism, but the "universal," catholic stream of Christianity in a broader historical sense. Was Calvin, who is said to be a bold advocate of *sola scriptura*, a revolutionary thinker who returned to the dynamism of biblical revelation, over and against the Aristotelian dogmatic slumbers of medieval Catholic Scholasticism?<sup>5</sup> Did Calvin advocate a biblicism that subverts the classical attributes of God as extrabiblical speculations? Questions like these reveal a bias toward a Calvin who was not just opposed to the Roman Catholicism of the sixteenth century, but was ostensibly against major streams of early catholic thought as well. This portrait, which has been popular among many recent Protestant theologians, is not just a historical portrait, but one that bears the reflection of its creators, as we shall see.

The divergence about Calvin's "catholicity" has two closely intertwined issues at its root: one historiographic issue and one systematic-constructive issue. I will briefly rehearse these in the following two sections before moving to more direct examples of John Calvin's catholicity and its relevance to contemporary theological discussion.

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#### HISTORIOGRAPHIC ISSUES FOR "THE CATHOLIC CALVIN"

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The historiographic question is whether historical change in theology tends to be rapid and dramatic, or gradual and integrative. Connected with this is whether the history of theology is full of theological geniuses who are quickly misunderstood and distorted by their heirs, or whether change within a tradition tends to be more gradual and incremental. After a Barth-inspired renaissance of Calvin studies in the mid-twentieth century, it became popular to see Calvin as the dramatic, revolutionary Reformer who returned to the Bible in dramatic contrast to medieval Scholasticism, and also in contrast to Reformed Scholasticism after Calvin. The decline after Calvin began even among Calvin's contemporaries such as Theodore Beza, who allegedly turned away from Calvin's humanism, leading the Genevan academy into a narrow form of Scholasticism instead. In the words of Jack Rogers, Beza, unlike Calvin, "moved in the Aristotelian scholastic direction."<sup>6</sup>

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5. Although rarely recognized, "*sola scriptura*" is a slogan that was not used by the Reformers, but dates to the post-Reformation era. See Tony Lane, "Sola Scriptura? Making Sense of a Post-Reformation Slogan," in *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, ed. David Wright and Philip Satterthwaite (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 297-327.

6. Jack Rogers, "The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible," in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 58.

Two of the most prominent examples of this form of argument are from Basil Hall in "Calvin against the Calvinists" and Brian G. Armstrong in *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*. Hall argues that the placement of predestination within a section on soteriology in the 1559 *The Institutes* was in dramatic contrast to later Scholastics who treated it as an aspect of the doctrine of God, thus creating a system grounded in predestination and metaphysical speculation. Armstrong grounds his case for dramatic discontinuity in Calvin's "humanism" against the "Scholasticism" of the later Reformed tradition.

In contrast to these historiographies of rapid, dramatic change, scholars such as Heiko Oberman, David Steinmetz, and Richard Muller have posited accounts of Reformational theology that has areas of broad continuity between medieval Scholasticism, Reformation theology, and post-Reformation Scholasticism. There were changes, certainly, but the changes tended to be incremental and were often combined with areas of deep continuity. Heiko Oberman did groundbreaking work to show key areas of continuity between late medieval thought and Luther in particular.<sup>7</sup> Steinmetz has shown continuity between Calvin and medieval theology in his biblical interpretation, as well as in his utilization of Scholastic methodologies.<sup>8</sup> Finally, in numerous works Richard Muller has shown Calvin's indebtedness to medieval theology in both method and content, as well as significant areas of continuity extending from the medieval period through the Reformation to the post-Reformation period.<sup>9</sup> In the process, Muller has given detailed responses to the arguments of Hall and Armstrong. In response to Hall, he shows how neither Calvin nor the Reformed Scholastics made predestination a central doctrine from which others are deductively derived. Instead, both share an approach that each *locus* of doctrine should emerge from biblical exegesis in light of engagement with the tradition. In response to Armstrong, Muller points out that key points of emphasis of humanism continue in Reformed Scholasticism, and that "Scholasticism" and "humanism" were potentially compatible methods which could be utilized for various doctrinal purposes rather than each being connected to material theological claims.

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7. For example, see Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (1963; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

8. See David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); David Steinmetz, "The Scholastic Calvin," in *Protestant Scholasticism*, ed. Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1999), 16–30.

9. See Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 16, 57–62, 67–73, 98. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).



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SYSTEMATIC-CONSTRUCTIVE ISSUES FOR  
"THE CATHOLIC CALVIN"

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Closely related to the historiographic issue is a systematic-constructive one: Calvin's theology is frequently contrasted with later Reformed thought in order to propose a way to be "Reformed" that diverges from Reformed creeds and confessions, which are "tainted" by Scholastic influence. Titles like *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession* by Holmes Rolston display this approach—assuming dramatic betrayal of Calvin's insights by Reformed Scholasticism. "Calvin was essentially a freedom fighter," Rolston says. Nodding to his historiography of the theological genius followed by rapid decline, he continues by saying that "disciples are never quite up to the insights of their masters, and the legalisms from which Calvin had escaped had in the century following settled back in across his church."<sup>10</sup> In a similar way, Charles Partee recently set forth his vision for appropriating from Calvin rather than later Reformed Scholastics and Reformed confessions in his lengthy 2008 book, *The Theology of John Calvin*. For Partee, Calvin should be preferred to the Reformed Scholastics, whose theology is reflected in the Westminster Standards of his own Presbyterian church: "Calvin's theology is grounded on Christian convictions, not philosophical (or theological) principles. His exposition is more confessional than argumentative, and while his use of reason is constant, his confidence in reason is unwavering. . . . To put the point briefly and sharply, Calvin is not a Calvinist because union with Christ is at the heart of his theology—and not theirs."<sup>11</sup> As part of this account, Partee resists the idea that Calvin's theology needs to be supplemented by that of other Reformational or post-Reformational theologians. He does not need the supplement of thinkers like "Ursinus, Zanchi, and Polanus" because "Calvin pitches a complete, if not perfect, game."<sup>12</sup> As a result, this approach reads Calvin for systematic-constructive purposes, largely in isolation from the thought of Calvin's contemporaries and the later heirs of the Reformed tradition.

Examples of this approach not only set Calvin over and against Reformed Scholasticism, but they downplay Calvin's continuity with medieval Scholasticism as well. What is obscured in this approach? Part of

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10. Homes Rolston, *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1972), 6.

11. Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 27.

12. Partee, *Theology of John Calvin*, 27.

what is obscured is the catholic Calvin—a Calvin who shares much in his theology with patristic, medieval, Reformational, and post-Reformational voices. Even though historical theologians today tend to side with an Oberman-Steinmetz-Muller approach on historiographic questions, many Reformed systematic theologians continue to draw upon this noncatholic Calvin as a theological model in their exposition of the Reformed faith. The points on which they depart from the Reformed tradition in favor of Calvin tend to be places in which they seek to move away from certain patristic and medieval catholic streams of thought. They construct a non-catholic Calvin who is “on their side” on such matters. But such a portrait of Calvin requires them to obscure central features of Calvin’s theological project, in which he seeks to occupy a catholic theological space.

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### RECOVERING THE CATHOLIC CALVIN

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From his early years of joining the Reform movement, Calvin sought to make the case that the Reformation was a restoration of the biblical Christianity of the patristic period. Calvin insisted that “if the contest were to be decided by patristic authority, the tide of victory would turn to our side.”<sup>13</sup> Along with this claim, Calvin offers a polemic in his early work against the “schoolmen.” Alexander Ganoczy, a Roman Catholic Calvin scholar, has determined that at this stage in his career Calvin’s rhetoric was more lofty than his knowledge: the “schoolmen” he refers to are only Gratian and Peter Lombard.<sup>14</sup> Trained in law, Calvin was essentially self-educated in theology. Over time, he would read more of the “schoolmen” and as much patristic material as he could access. On some points of his teaching, this effected little or no change. On other points, it brought about a type of recatholicizing of the Reformation movement.

One example of this recatholicizing is the shift in Calvin’s thought with regard to ordination as a sacrament, recently chronicled by Randall Zachman.<sup>15</sup> In the first edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin insists that in the laying on of hands, the bishops act “like apes, which imitate everything wantonly and without any discrimination,” for they “mock Christ” in daring to “affirm that they confer the Holy Spirit.”<sup>16</sup> For Calvin, a sacrament by definition

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13. John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536 edition, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 5–6.

14. Alexander Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, trans. David Foxgrover and Wade Provo (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 174–78.

15. See Randall Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 313–19; Randall Zachman, “Revising the Reform: What Calvin Learned from a Dialogue with the Roman Catholics,” in *John Calvin and Roman Catholicism*, ed. Randall Zachman (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) 165–91.

16. John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536 edition, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 169.



requires grounding in a command of the Lord and a promise of grace with an accompanying external sign. At first, Calvin can find no such command and promise, and concludes that the Roman Catholic rite reflects the height of presumption. Yet, over a period of time in which Calvin's knowledge of catholic sources grew considerably, he changed his mind.

Calvin ends up inferring the dominical command from the early Christian practice of the laying on of hands. "Although there exists no set precept for the laying on of hands, because we see it in continual use with the apostles, their very careful observance ought to serve in lieu of a precept."<sup>17</sup> Although Calvin does not consider ordination an "ordinary sacrament" because it is not shared by all believers, Calvin moves from seeing the practice of the laying on of hands as an apelike repetition of tradition to a sign commanded by the Lord that confers grace when properly conducted. When rightly administered, the laying on of hands becomes the sign through which grace is given by the Spirit. While Calvin did not give ordination the full status of an ordinary sacrament, the change in Calvin's account from the first edition of the *Institutes* is significant. In spite of the fact that Calvin's polemical opponents in Roman Catholicism would see this change of direction as a movement in their direction, Calvin reconsiders his anti-Catholic polemic on the laying of hands for ordination, thereby bringing the Reformation movement back a step toward its catholic heritage. Because the timing of these changes corresponded to several colloquies that Calvin held with Roman Catholics, Zachman surmises that "Calvin's experience of dialogue with Roman Catholics may well have led him to make . . . substantial revisions in his previous theology," recatholicizing aspects of early Reformational thought, in a sense.<sup>18</sup>

A more wide-ranging example of the catholic dimensions of Calvin's thought appear in his book *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will*. This book shows Calvin's debt to patristic theology, his strong commitment to the notion that grace restores rather than destroys nature, and his willingness to draw upon Aristotelian philosophy to clarify his theology. This book has been neglected by scholars until recent years—perhaps betraying an assumption that Calvin's appropriation of earlier catholic theology was unimportant for understanding Calvin's own thought.

Unlike Luther's book on the bondage of the will, Calvin does not seek to make his case primarily on biblical grounds. Instead, responding to Albert Pighius's claim that he is in sharp discontinuity with the Church Fathers, Calvin meets Pighius on his own terms and gives a detailed argument for his points of continuity with various Church Fathers including Irenaeus, Basil, and, most of all, Augustine. Calvin grants that he is not in continuity with all that is said in the patristic writings, but neither is

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17. *Institutes* 4:3:16.

18. Zachman, *John Calvin and Roman Catholicism*, 16, cf. 186. For Calvin's reconsidered views on the laying on of hands, see *Institutes* 4:19:28, 31.



Pighius. Instead, he assumes that the Church Fathers are not monolithic on these issues and that he can trace significant commonality in the patristic writings that are, indeed, compatible with his position. In addition, Pighius claimed that Calvin's affirmation of the bondage of the will to sin before regeneration means that the will itself is "annihilated" rather than restored in redemption. Calvin takes up this doctrinal objection as he defends his position.

Calvin's rebuttal to Pighius is telling. Calvin describes how his theology is in continuity with various patristic writings in his affirmation of the goodness of creation before the Fall and in his understanding that redemption involves the restoration rather than the annihilation of the good creation. In order to make his continuity with key patristic writings clear on creation and grace, Calvin makes ad hoc use of Aristotelian philosophy to make his point. The *substance* of human nature is good—it is created good by God and remains good in this fallen world. However, with the Fall, this good *substance* is joined with the *accidental* characteristic of sinning.<sup>19</sup> Sin makes humans less than who they were created to be. It separates them from God, from neighbor, and from their true selves. Nevertheless, the primal human nature is still good after the Fall. In light of this, when the Spirit comes to believers in the gradual process of sanctification, the Spirit is not *annihilating* their true "nature" and "will," but restoring it. The accidental characteristic of sinning is gradually lessened as the created goodness of the human is restored. When one dies to "the old self" in sanctification, it is not the death of the created nature. Rather, dying to the old self and living into the new creation by the Spirit is part of the restoration of God's good creation—a nature created to be in communion with God.

Calvin's use of Aristotelian language here not only shows that he was not allergic to the use of pagan philosophy for his doctrinal ends (in contrast to the "Calvin versus the Calvinist" portrait above), but also shows that his theology of redemption is, in many ways, deeply catholic. Why is it "catholic"? Because Calvin's goal in these distinctions is to show that redemption restores nature rather than destroying the good, created nature that God has given to humans. Combining his Aristotelian distinctions with language from his commentaries and the *Institutes* produces a vision of redemption for Calvin that looks something like this: human beings were created good, "united" to God; created in the image of God, they found their righteousness not in themselves, but in "participation in God."<sup>20</sup> When the Fall takes place, humans become alienated from themselves and from God. That is a simultaneous movement, since

19. For Calvin's ad hoc use of the substance/accident distinction in this way, see John Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will*, trans. G. I. Davies, ed. A. N. S. Lane (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 46–48, 75, 84, 144, 186, 213.

20. *Institutes* 2:1:5; *Institutes* 2:2:1.

knowledge of God and self are always connected.<sup>21</sup> Fallen human beings still retain the traces and residue of the divinely given image of God.<sup>22</sup> Yet a fallen human will cannot “freely choose” God on its own power— independent of God—because that would reinforce the very nature of sin as autonomy from God. If the *imago Dei* in need of restoration is a “participation in God,” then it would be impossible for this restoration to happen independent from God. If humanity’s primal need is to be united to God, then there is no way to achieve union with God apart from God. Specifically, this re-union with God must involve the regenerating power of the Spirit—the Spirit that restores the human will precisely in enabling a voluntary response of faith.<sup>23</sup> Redemption reunites believers with God through Christ by the Spirit. This takes place through two aspects of union with Christ: justification, wherein believers are reckoned righteous by God as those who wear the garments of Christ, and sanctification, the long process of growing in holiness that is simultaneously a restoration of one’s created goodness and a participation in the glory of God in Christ. Restoration and participation are inseparable for Calvin, for that which is truly human is found only in communion with God.<sup>24</sup>

Such a portrait of Calvin’s thought is more “catholic” than many contemporary Reformed theologians would find recognizable. Why did Calvin bother to write this short book, which is loaded with more than three hundred patristic citations, more than any other work besides the *Institutes*, which was much larger?<sup>25</sup> Why does he enter into a polemical dispute in which he makes philosophical, definitional distinctions from Aristotle to argue his point? Calvin did so because of his concern to be as clear as possible in his identification with a longer, larger, catholic heritage. The catholic character of Calvin’s thought is integral to his theological project.

For example, one of Calvin’s early goals was to distribute the sermons of John Chrysostom to the laity in their own vernacular language.<sup>26</sup> In the sixteenth-century context, this was a bold idea: reading the Church Fathers was ordinarily reserved for scholars. Yet, although Calvin believed that the Bible, as distinct from tradition, was the final authority in matters of church teaching, he was convinced that Church Fathers like Chrysostom needed to be read and appreciated by an audience much larger than

21. *Institutes* 1:1:1.

22. *Institutes* 2:2:17.

23. See *Bondage and Liberation of the Will*, 121, 230.

24. On this point, Calvin draws upon a theme in Augustine related to the Incarnation. Because the humanity of Christ does not merit the descent of the eternal Word, but is animated because of the initiative of the divine Word, Augustine (and Calvin) infer that divine agency both precedes and upholds human agency at every stage of redemption. See *Bondage and Liberation of the Will*, 129–30.

25. Tony Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 151. Calvin has 310 patristic citations in *Bondage and Liberation of the Will*.

26. See Irena Backus, “Calvin and the Greek Fathers,” in *Continuity and Change*, ed. Robert J. Bast and Andrew C. Gow (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 254–59.



the established circles of scholarship. Calvin was not alone with his concern to reflect the ancient theology of the church—other Reformers such as Johannes Oecolampadius, Martin Bucer, and Theodore Beza showed considerable interest in patristic studies, and Reformed scholars continued an interest in appropriating from patristic and medieval theology in the generations after Calvin. Calvin's interest in preserving catholicity, through engaging patristic and medieval theology, was deepened and made more sophisticated in Reformed Scholasticism after Calvin.<sup>27</sup>

Another example of the catholicity of Calvin (and Reformed orthodoxy) is the place of the classical attributes of God. Recent Reformed theologians often use a "Calvin against the confessions" argument to argue against a place for the classical attributes of God in Reformed theology. They often claim that Calvin had little if any use for the classical attributes. The editors of *Reformed Reader*, vol. 1, display a typical view on this point when they write: "In keeping with his high view of the majesty and glory of God and his concomitant reticence to speculate concerning God's essence, Calvin never provides any highly refined reflections on the attributes of God. Instead he links his understanding of God squarely to the witness of scripture as apprehended in human experience."<sup>28</sup> Guthrie, in his widely used introduction to Reformed theology, makes a similar move. After listing the way in which "our Reformed forebearers" (after Calvin) affirmed the classical attributes of God, he says "we cannot follow" this approach. After claiming that the classical attributes are philosophical speculations rather than dynamic and biblical, Guthrie says, "We must follow the advice of Calvin himself rather than the example of his followers who wrote many of the classical Reformed confessions." He then gives a quotation from Calvin that advises against extreme theological speculation.<sup>29</sup>

Yet, whatever speculation Calvin was advising against, he was certainly not against an affirmation of key classical attributes of God. Indeed, Calvin unequivocally affirms the classical attributes of God in a basic

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27. In *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, Lane corrects earlier scholarship that tended to see Calvin's patristic citations as analogous to a modern footnote or source. For Calvin, the patristic writings are cited for largely polemical purposes. At times he draws heavily upon a patristic writing with very few citations, and in other places Calvin will use numerous citations, but for the sake of identifying with that author's position. For example, Calvin tends to cite Athanasius as an authority to identify with Nicene Orthodoxy. But at times Calvin will draw upon the work of authors such as Cyril of Alexandria and give few, if any, citations. See especially Lane, *John Calvin*, 77–81, and Backus, "Calvin and the Greek Fathers" on Calvin's use of Cyril. On the increasing sophistication of patristic scholarship in Reformed circles, see Irena Backus in *Historical Method and Confessional Identity in the Era of the Reformation (1378–1615)* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 193–242.

28. John Leith and William Stacy Johnson, eds., *Reformed Reader: A Sourcebook in Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 1:75. See also Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 89–90.

29. Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 103–4.



form. The reason that these affirmations are often overlooked is that they occur in the course of his biblical commentaries, not in the *Institutes*. For example, while Calvin only has a brief discussion of the relation of the divine essence to divine attributes in the *Institutes*, he expositis the theme in *Harmony of the Last Four Books of Moses*:

The verb in Hebrew is in the future tense, "I will be what I will be"; but it is of the same force as the present, except that it designates the perpetual duration of time. This is very plain, that God attributes to himself alone divine glory, because he is self-existent and therefore eternal; and thus gives being and essence to every creature. Nor does he predicate of himself anything common, or shared by others; but he claims for himself eternity as peculiar to God alone, in order that he may be honored according to his dignity.<sup>30</sup>

In passages like these, Calvin displays assumptions common both to the medieval Scholastic tradition, and to Reformed Scholastics after him on the aseity, essence, and attributes of God. Drawing upon Calvin's commentaries, Paul Helm has recently given a detailed account of the conventional medieval distinctions that Calvin utilizes in his doctrine of God.<sup>31</sup> This concern to ground his doctrine of God in the classical attributes is most concisely provided by the French Confession of Faith, of which Calvin was the primary author, fully endorsing its contents: "We believe and confess that there is but one God, who is one sole and simple essence, spiritual, eternal, invisible, immutable, infinite, incomprehensible, ineffable, omnipotent; who is all-wise, all-good, all-just, and all-merciful."<sup>32</sup>

For systematic theologians, it is convenient to think of Calvin as a man of one book, the *Institutes*.<sup>33</sup> But that is simply not the case. Part of the reason that it is not the case is that Calvin himself was not formally trained in theology. He did not write the *Institutes* as a complete summa of doctrine, but as a collection of theological reflections on the central loci, or topics, of Christian teaching. His ordering of these loci appears to be organized partly by a rhetorical reading of Paul's "gospel" in Romans, and partly by the Trinitarian structure of the Apostles' Creed. The *Institutes*

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30. Calvin's comments on Ex 3:14, from *Harmony of the Law*, part 1, Calvin Translation Society translation of *Calvin's Commentaries* (hereafter CTS), 73–74. For a commentary passage expositing divine immutability, see Calvin's comments on Num 23:18 in *Harmony*, CTS, 210–12.

31. Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), ch. 1.

32. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 6th ed. (1931; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 3:359–60. For more on Calvin and the French Confession, see Wulfert De Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin, Expanded Edition: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 128–29.

33. For example, consider the statement of Alister McGrath: "In dealing with any given topic in the 1559 edition, the reader can rest assured that he or she will encounter everything Calvin regarded as essential to grasping his position on the topic." See Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 147.

was not a complete "summa" of theology, but a set of "common places" (*loci communes*) intended to be read side by side with his commentaries.<sup>34</sup> There is no great break when later Reformed theologians, from Johannes Cocceius to Richard Baxter, restore the discussion of divine attributes to its more catholic placement within a systematic doctrine of God. Calvin, and Reformed orthodoxy after him, share a quite "catholic" doctrine of God, rearticulating and defending the classical attributes of God in light of Scripture and the thought of their particular contexts.

Not only Reformed systematic theologians, however, find the emergence of a Calvin with deeply catholic thought troubling. In the circles of Radical Orthodoxy, Calvin has been a favorite foil for reenacting John Henry Newman's protest against the "dry" and "cold" Reformed doctrine of justification. Allegedly, Calvin's Reformational account of justification as imputation inevitably displaces the centrality of love to replace it with faith.<sup>35</sup> Even if it sounds like Calvin has a theology of "participation in Christ" and participation in God, Calvin's Reformational, forensic emphasis indicates a dualism between God and creation in Calvin's thought rather than the possibility of participation.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, certain Roman Catholic thinkers like to use Calvin as an example of the Nestorian-tending division of the divine and human in certain areas of Protestant thought.<sup>37</sup> Calvin is seen as the quintessential example of one who cannot think the divine and human in communion, in union together.

The problem with these critiques is that while they may respond to certain popular conceptions of "Calvinism," they do not hold up to a close examination of Calvin's own writings. While Calvin's doctrine of salvation—and justification in particular—certainly involves a forensic declaration, this fits with the overall framework of his theology of union with Christ. "Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short because he deigns to make us one with him."<sup>38</sup> The doctrine of imputation, for Calvin, does see Christ's righteousness as a gift *extra nos*, outside of ourselves. But the very point of imputation is

34. See Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, ch. 6.

35. See John Milbank, "Alternative Protestantism," in *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, ed. James K. A. Smith and James H. Olthuis (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 32–35.

36. See Graham Ward, "The Church as the Erotic Community," in *Sacramental Presence in Postmodern Context*, ed. L. Boeve and L. Leijssen (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters, 2001), 179–88; also see Simon Oliver, "The Eucharist before Nature and Culture," *Modern Theology* 15 (1999): 342–47.

37. See Kilian McDonnell, *John Calvin, the Church, and the Eucharist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), intro. and ch. 1.

38. *Institutes* 3:11:10.



that believers come to possess this righteousness by faith—here images of oneness and union are at the core.

Calvin clarified his thought on these issues as he sought to differentiate his theology of union with Christ from that of Andreas Osiander. Osiander was a Roman Catholic who converted to Lutheranism and subsequently developed a doctrine of salvation that denied the forensic character of justification—resulting in his being disowned by early Lutherans. Osiander argued that believers are righteous because of the indwelling and infusion of Jesus Christ, the righteous one, into believers. This was an attempt to revisit the Reformation problem of justification, affirming with Luther that believers are justified by a righteousness *extra nos*, but denying the “legal fiction” of a forensic notion of justification. Osiander argued that “justification” and “sanctification” are two words describing the same process. Both refer first and foremost to the internal process of renewal in the believer, not to God’s free decision to pardon apart from human works. In Osiander’s soteriology, the claim of 2 Pet 1:4 that believers become “participants in the divine nature” became a key idea. For Osiander, this happens through the indwelling presence of Christ, the righteous one.

Calvin undoubtedly had disagreements with this portrait drawn by Osiander. But it is important to keep in mind why Calvin even bothered to differentiate his position from Osiander’s: it is because Calvin was accused of being “Osiandrian” by his Lutheran critics. Calvin, like Osiander, is emphatic in his account of the indwelling of Christ. Calvin, like Osiander, frequently uses terms like “participation,” “communion,” “ingrafting,” and “union” to speak about how believers relate to Christ.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, in his commentaries, Calvin insists that believers are incorporated into Christ to such an extent that they become “one substance” with Christ himself.<sup>40</sup> While Calvin only uses “substance” language negatively in the 1536 *Institutes* because of his polemic against transubstantiation, he later deletes these passages and comes to say that Christ’s substance is received in the Supper.<sup>41</sup> Once disassociated with the theory of transubstantiation, Calvin insists that in the sacraments one does not receive only the signs but also the substance signified—Jesus Christ; moreover, at the heart of the Christian life is a mystical union with Jesus Christ himself.<sup>42</sup> In these various ways, Calvin is emphatic that the Christian truly participates in Jesus Christ.

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39. See Dennis Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), ch. 5.

40. See Calvin’s commentaries on 1 Cor 11:24 and Eph 5:31, and Calvin’s sermon on Gal 3:26–29.

41. J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 82–83.

42. See *Institutes* 4:17:11 and *Institutes* 3:11:10.



Yet Calvin disagrees with Osiander's particular account of "essential righteousness." Calvin agrees that Jesus Christ is the source of the Christian's righteousness and that this righteousness is accessed by participation in Jesus Christ. But with Osiander's rejection of a forensic dimension of justification—a legal metaphor for the judgment of God—Osiander has severed a deep scriptural connection: that the cross of Christ brings about the forgiveness of sins. According to Calvin's analysis, Osiander's soteriology would be basically intact without the cross of Christ.<sup>43</sup> In the Incarnation and Ascension, Jesus Christ embodies a new and righteous humanity, which then indwells human beings by the Spirit. While Calvin embraces this soteriological trajectory, it remains incomplete if taken by itself. Human beings are not merely empty cups waiting to have righteousness poured or "infused" into them. While Calvin affirms the language of "infusion," by itself it is not a sufficient term for describing the union of believers with Christ. Human beings need more than filling and restoration; they need cleansing. They first need forgiveness—the full forgiveness of being clothed with the righteousness of Christ. They need to be "declared righteous" and pardoned as they take the first steps on the long path of growing in holiness by the power of the Spirit. Calvin believes that sinners need not only the Incarnation and Ascension of Christ but also the "wondrous exchange" that takes place through the cross as well.<sup>44</sup>

In this way, Calvin's account of salvation as union with Christ has irreducible catholic and Reformational dimensions. On the one hand, the frequent polemics against Western theology that often target Calvin's soteriology as cold and merely forensic are simply not accurate. Andrew Louth contends that Western theologies tend to miss the arc of salvation from creation to deification, inclined instead to view "the created order as little more than a background for the great drama of redemption, with the result that the Incarnation is seen simply as a means of redemption, the putting right of the Fall of Adam."<sup>45</sup> Such statements cannot apply to Calvin in any straightforward way. As a catholic thinker, Calvin does not hesitate to say that created humanity finds its primal identity in union and communion with God, and continues to "participate" in God by the *imago Dei*. United to Christ by the Spirit, believers are "participants not only in all his benefits but also in himself (Christ)."<sup>46</sup> In the restoration and fulfillment of redemption, "we are united to God by Christ," for "we can only be joined to Christ if God abides in us."<sup>47</sup> In commenting on 2 Pet

43. See *Institutes* 3:11:9.

44. *Institutes* 4:17:1.

45. Andrew Louth, "The Place of Theosis in Orthodox Theology," in *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, ed. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffrey Wittung (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 35.

46. *Institutes* 3:2:24.

47. Calvin's Commentary on 1 John 4:15, in *John 11–21 and First Epistle of John* in *Calvin's Commentaries on the New Testament*, ed. David and Thomas Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 293–94.

1:4, Calvin claims that "the end of the gospel" is "to render us eventually conformable to God, and, if we may so speak, to deify us."<sup>48</sup> While Calvin certainly does not have a Palamite version of soteriology and deification, he is a quite conventional catholic thinker in an Augustinian tradition in being willing to speak about deification at the final end as long as a creator-creature distinction is sustained.<sup>49</sup>

Yet Calvin refuses to think that this vision of transformation in Christ renders God's declaration of believers as righteous superfluous or unnecessary. To the contrary, in Calvin's logic, if the Christian moral life is to overcome the moral calculus so deeply characteristic of human pursuits, there must be a recognition of God's pardon declared upon sinners who are in Christ. If the life of sanctification is to be one of gratitude rather than drudgery or self-righteousness, believers need to be clear about God's pardon being freely given in justification, an act that reveals God to be a gracious Father rather than an angry tyrant.

In this way, human beings are moved from passivity to activity in sanctification. The ground and source for growth in Christ is the Holy Spirit. But although the Holy Spirit deserves the credit for progress in the Christian life, these actions also belong to believers as human beings. For example, after stating that "to pray rightly" is a "gift" from God, Calvin clarifies that "these things are not said in order that we, favoring our own slothfulness, may give over the function of prayer to the Spirit of God, and vegetate in that carelessness to which we are all too prone."<sup>50</sup> Prayer takes effort. It is hard work. The humanity that is united to God is an active humanity, not one that waits around for the Spirit to do all of the work. Rather than suggest that the human is passive in prayer, Calvin argues that the emphasis upon prayer as "gift" should lead us to "seek such aid of the Spirit." For although "the prompting of the Spirit empowers us so to compose prayers," this does not suggest that we should "hinder or hold back our own effort."<sup>51</sup> When humans act "in Christ" and "by the Spirit," they are active, restored, and redeemed. When humans seek to

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48. Calvin's Commentary on 2 Pet 1:4 in *Calvin's Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Edinburgh: Printed for the Calvin Translation Society, 1855).

49. For an account that displays Calvin's quite traditional exegesis of most passages connected to deification by patristic authors, see Carl Mosser, "The Greatest Possible Blessing: Calvin and Deification," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55, no. 1 (2002): 36–57. For a counterpoint, see Jonathan Slater, "Salvation as Participation in the Humanity of the Mediator in Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion: A Reply to Carl Mosser," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58, no. 1 (2005): 39–58. While Slater sees less continuity between the Church Fathers and Calvin, this is largely due to Slater's assumption that a patristic notion of deification necessarily obscures the distinction between creator and creature, in both soteriology and Christology. But that is a misreading of the most common teachings about deification by patristic writers. For an account that shows commonality between Augustine and key Greek fathers on this point, see "Deification, Divinization," in *Augustine through the Ages*, ed. Allen D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 265–66.

50. *Institutes* 3:20:5.

51. *Institutes* 3:20:5.



act on their own power, "in themselves," in autonomy from God, they demonstrate their alienation from God and from their true selves. Full humanity is humanity united to God.

In the end, the catholic Calvin is one which disrupts the "either/or" dichotomies that dominate much in contemporary theological discourse. It is a portrait of Calvin that is inconvenient for many of his Reformed followers and for his non-Reformed detractors as well. While there is no doubt that Calvin and his followers in Reformed orthodoxy were antagonistic to their Roman Catholic contemporaries, their theological vision was not formed by building a theology on wholly new grounds. Rather, the early Reformed tradition sought to be rooted in Scripture, the Church Fathers, and the best in medieval theology and method, as they perceived it. Calvin and Reformed orthodoxy did not always agree with these pre-Reformation authors. But their teaching ended up being profoundly shaped by pre-Reformation theological voices. Indeed, as Zachman has shown in Calvin's own theological development, in some ways he was a recatholicizing influence for early Protestantism—an approach shared by many later Scholastics. As such, scholars such as Ganoczy and Tamburello have found Calvin to be a rich source for study in light of contemporary Roman Catholic concerns.<sup>52</sup> For although Calvin was not Roman Catholic, he was, in many ways, a catholic theologian. In particular, compared to many modern Reformed theologians who dismiss central claims in premodern catholic theology, Calvin and the Reformed Scholastics were on the catholic side of the divide. Before *sola scriptura* became an excuse to marginalize pre-Reformation exegesis and theology, there was another way of being Reformed. Ironically, while that earlier way often presented polemics against their Roman Catholic contemporaries, it also drank from the same catholic stream that many in the Reformed tradition have now left in search of new waters.

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52. Ganoczy considers Calvin in light of Vatican II at the end of his significant biography, *The Young Calvin*. Dennis Tamburello treats Calvin as a fruitful dialogue partner in light of contemporary Roman Catholic sacramental theology in "Calvin and Sacramentality," in *John Calvin and Roman Catholicism*, ch. 8.