

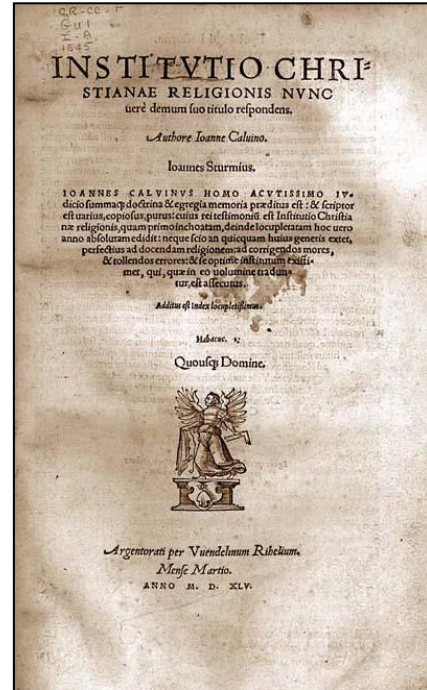
John Calvin

Dr. Gannon Murphy

Calvin on Grace and Christology

Like Luther, Calvin held ‘philosophers’ mostly in disdain, describing them variously with such terms as ‘stupidity,’ ‘silliness,’ ‘madness,’ and as those who ‘wander and stumble’ and ‘profane’ (I.5.11). Scholastic theology, which (as the Reformers in general saw it) had come to dominate the teachings of the church of Rome, and had thus blurred the salvific clarity of Scripture and even that of the church’s own tradition as found in the patristical literature.

In this light, Calvin’s work, like Luther’s, was decidedly Augustinian. Indeed, some have even referred to the overall Reformation project as an ‘Augustinian revival.’ In Calvin, this led to a theological trajectory concerned not with questions surrounding the nature or essence of God, but of human standing before God. And the universal Reformed consensus in this regard was the human being *as sinner*, totally in need of the unmerited grace of God for his or her salvation.



Cover page from Calvin's Institutes (1545).

Fallen Humanity, Sin, and Grace

Calvin clearly taught a doctrine of original sin, beginning with a consideration of the ‘Fall’ of the first man, Adam, and the manner in which all humans have sinned ‘in’ the first man. But what was Adam’s sin? In a word, Calvin identifies *unfaithfulness* as the primordial sin and after it, ‘ambition and pride, together with ungratefulness’ (II.1.4). Primordial man aspired to more than God had granted him, thereby spurning God’s own faithfulness and providential care.

Nevertheless, the Fall was not an ‘accident.’ Rather, it was divinely-ordained by God as a constituent part of His plan for redemptive history. Thus, ‘...the Fall of Adam is not presupposed as preceding God’s decree in time; but it is what God determined before all ages’ (II.12.5). But why would God predetermine such a terrible thing? Calvin answers simply that God ‘willed to heal the misery of mankind.’ (II.12.5). The Fall, therefore, was not merely something ‘known’ of God to happen by virtue of the Divine omniscience, but was calculatedly and designedly appointed by decree of the Divine will.

Original sin, as it affects humans today and throughout history, is a hereditary depravity (*pravitas*) which the first man passed on to all his posterity and is a curse under which humans now labour and find unceasing misery (*miseria* is a frequently recurring term in the Latin *Institutes*). Humans, without grace, remain under the law and, as sinners by (corrupted) nature, remain under a curse in the absence of the unmitigated grace of God which alone frees human beings from the corruption and wages of sin.

It is extremely common to hear Calvin's position regarding human sin described as, 'total depravity.' Calvin, however, never used this formulation and the term, as applied to Calvin's theology, is misleading, as though what Calvin meant was that humanity was *entirely* or *utterly* bad, that is, as bad as man could be and with no spark of the Divine goodness remaining. This is not, however, what Calvin taught. Rather, original sin is 'total' in the sense that it extends to all of the constitutive human faculties, or, 'into all parts of the soul' (II.1.8). There is not a portion of the human person that is not affected by sin and, therefore, in this sense (only), it is 'total.'

The totality of sin as it affects human nature and our standing before God as sinners, however, is not construed by Calvin to be an *imputation* of someone else's guilt (i.e., Adam's). While we are 'so vitiated and perverted in every part of our nature that by this great corruption we stand justly condemned and convicted before God,' this is 'not liability for another's transgression. For, since it is said that we became subject to God's judgment through Adam's sin, we are to understand it not as if we, guiltless and undeserving bore the guilt of his offence but in the sense that, since we through his transgression have become entangled in the curse, he is said to have made us guilty' (II.1.8). Human guilt, then, begins in the corruption of the original human nature, created altogether 'good,' but now held under sin which is subsequently committed according to this corruption. Humans, then, are not sinners because they sin, but sin because they are sinners.

As we shall see in greater detail in the next unit, it is because of humanity's bondage to sin that predestination is part and parcel to Calvin's understanding of the Divine plan of redemption since humanity, by corrupted nature, cannot obey God's commands and therefore save itself. Rather, a Mediator is needed, and this is the fundamental locus of the second part of Calvin's *Institutes*.

Christ the Mediator

Like Luther, Calvin neither departed nor added to the traditional Chalcedonian christology of the fifth century holding, as it were, that Christ enjoins two natures, fully Divine and human. Nothing in Calvin's writings ever questions the more 'metaphysical' formulations of early, historic Christology. Where Calvin makes a more important and unique contribution is with regard to his giving greater form to the designation of Christ according to the three-fold office (*triplex munus Christi*) of *prophet*, *priest*, and *king* (II.15). Though this is not a totally new development with Calvin (Luther also gave it expression), he gave it a more classic, systematic form which also serves as a central feature of his overall doctrine of Christ. The designation is more concerned (as all the Reformers

tended to be) with the existential matter of salvation, rather than the more 'speculative' modes of earlier theologies.

Calvin describes Christ's activity as Mediator to involve each of these offices. As he has already shown redemption to be necessary in Book I, Book II of the *Institutes* focuses upon the Old Testament first revealing to us our futile plight for salvation based on autonomous merit, whereas the New Testament has revealed to us the atoning work of Christ which provides for us the redemption we cannot attain for ourselves.

Christ fulfils the three central offices seen in different individuals throughout the Old Testament and sums them up in himself. As *prophet*, Christ announces that the kingdom of God has come upon all humanity in his own person. As *priest*, he makes final atonement for human sins. As *king*, Christ reigns supreme over the redeemed, calling them into communion with himself as one people, constituted nevertheless of Jew and gentile, male and female (i.e., 'all tribes, tongues, and nations').

Calvin further stresses here, that the work of Christ involved a ministry of *active obedience*. When it is asked how Christ has abolished sin and bridged the chasm between God and humanity, Calvin answers, '[Christ] has achieved this for us by the whole course of his obedience' (II.16.5). So, when the proper time had come under God's superintendent wisdom, Christ the Son was sent to humankind and made to be 'under the law,' to be in total obedience to it, and to redeem those who are also under the law, but in disobedience to it. From the moment of his birth, through to his baptism, ministry, and ultimate death, Christ was actively redeeming humankind (II.16.5). Nevertheless, Calvin places special emphasis on the efficacy of the cross, in which humans are 'acquitted' in virtue of 'the guilt which made us liable to punishment [and] transferred to the head of the Son of God' (II.16.5).

Union with God

The ultimate question for Calvin, as we have seen, is how humanity—as universally under the curse of law and sin—is to be reconciled to God. The answer is found in Christ the Mediator. Calvin, however, elaborates on this reconciliation, summing the doctrine up in terms of the believer's union with God. Strangely, this is a feature of Calvin's theology that is often neglected, despite the fact that it forms such a central, catalyzing emphasis for him.

Though he designates this 'mystical union' (*unio mystica*) with Christ as categorically 'incomprehensible by nature' (IV.17.1), Calvin nevertheless writes that 'to that union of the head and members, the residence of Christ in our hearts, in fine, the mystical union, we assign the highest rank, Christ when he becomes ours making us partners with him in the gifts with which he was endued. Hence we do not view him as at a distance and without us, but as we have put him on, and been ingrafted into his body, he deigns to make us one with himself, and, therefore, we glory in having a fellowship of righteousness with him.' (3.11.10, emphasis added). Calvin further draws upon this 'oneness' language saying, 'Christ does not so much come to us as become encumbered

with our nature to make us one with him.’¹ Further, this union is not merely a matter of ‘forensic’ justification, but is an indwelling: ‘The phrase *in ipso* (in him) I have preferred to retain, rather than render it *per ipsum* (by him) because it has in my opinion more expressiveness and force. For we are enriched in Christ, inasmuch as we are members of his body, and are engrafted into him: nay more, being made one with him, he makes us share with him in every thing that he has received from the Father.’²

In sum, Calvin’s doctrines of grace and Christology portray humanity as fallen sinners in need of redemption; Christ as sole Mediator who sums up in himself the threefold office of prophet, priest, and king; who atones for human sin and reconciles humanity back to God. This work of grace through Christ, and the benefits it confers on those who receive it, is summed up in terms of union with God.

The Text: Our reading comes several places in Calvin’s *Institutes*, including II.1 concerning human nature and original sin; II:12,13,15,16 concerning the nature and work of Christ the Mediator, and lastly, IV.17.1-2 concerning the Christian’s union with Christ, which Calvin expounds further upon in his discussion of the outward means of grace, in this case, Holy Communion.

Further Reading

Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin* (trans. Geoffrey Bromiley). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995.

B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993.

Paul Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Donald McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

David C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*. Reprint of 1963 edition: Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1987.

Questions for consideration

1. What was it that Calvin disdained about ‘philosophy’ / ‘philosophers’?
2. In what ways was Calvin’s theology in continuity/discontinuity with Augustine?

¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries*, trans./ed. Joseph Haroutunian (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958) 598.

² John Calvin, *Commentary on Corinthians*, vol. 1, trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999).

3. How does Calvin understand the 'Fall'? How did it come about and what are its implications?
4. Compare Calvin's understanding of original sin with earlier/later theologies.
5. How does Calvin's understanding of the three-fold office of Christ inform his reading of Scripture?
6. What does Calvin mean by saying the salvation is to be made 'one' with Christ?