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**Divine Sovereignty:  
Absolute or Limited by Human Freedom**

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The title of this article presents us with a clean option: is God’s sovereignty “absolute,” or is it limited by human freedom? Presumably one takes one side or the other. Naturally, an argument would be requisite as to why the choice has been made, but the framework of a simple choice seems unobjectionable on the face of it. The question, to be sure, is an important one to Christians and to all those who ponder the existence and character of God. It touches directly on the problem of evil, which for many cultures around the world remains the most vexing theological problem. On this issue, most of my students have already made up their mind: God’s sovereignty is of course limited by God’s creation of free human beings; that’s the only conceivable reason why evil exists. They find it unintelligible that John Calvin and his followers could have found the absolute sovereignty of God, if this is what they indeed held, to be comforting. Perhaps nowhere else does the clash of hermeneutical horizons so resound in contemporary ears like a clanging cymbal than when US citizens, particularly those who are white and middle class, those for whom personal choice is the very meaning of existence, encounter the Calvinist/Augustinian doctrine of predestination, with

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<sup>1</sup> He has written “Faith and Justification: Commencing Salvation” (with Rev. Bosela Eale) in *Chalice Introduction to Disciples Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008).

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its assertion that Absolute Sovereignty has the final choice on everything.

In this paper, our choice—for we can hardly stop putting ourselves in the position of people who must make a choice—would seem to be a choice between embracing the paradigm of human beings as autonomous agents of choice and hanging tough to a teeth-gritting Calvinism that spurns human free will in favor of complete divine sovereignty. Something like subcultures devoted to the latter choice indeed persist today, even if they inevitably fall into the category of an albeit counter-cultural “lifestyle choice”—just the kind of thing the internet was made for! Our (late) modernity shrugs its shoulders at even this lifestyle choice and plays on.

But is this framework of a choice, which all began with our title, what the business of theology is all about? Are we to replicate on these pages the binding of ourselves to the pro and con, the left and right, the us and them that funds our fractious society? Are we to be surprised, then, when a large swath of the world’s privileged turns away from the violence of argument to the apparent harmlessness of self-indulgent stupor? Instead of indignation, those of us who care passionately about the classical arguments of theology ought to respond to the bemused indifference of our fellow consumers with a certain sheepishness (appropriate for Christians!), for even our fellow Christians are largely unable to comprehend why we believe so much hangs on which side you come down on reason and revelation, freedom and bondage, sovereignty and accommodation. Our theology of big choices has made us the vestigial heirs of what Thomas and Alexander Campbell called “a party spirit”; this is not a good party spirit that takes joy in fellowship, but rather a divisive spirit founded mainly on the drive of the ego to “stake out a position.” How can we theologians, who have received a calling, if not a *daemon*, that sets us apart from our fellow Christians who find sufficient joy in active service to God and neighbor, seek to be intelligent about our faith, particularly in light of such vexing questions as the problem of evil, without getting sucked into this party spirit? Must we rather give in to the indifference that finds all such matters dubious, and finds the only true certainty in the immediate gratification of a consumer lifestyle?

I believe theology at its best has never been about carving up the Christian life into manufactured intellectual decisions and doctrinal choices. The great dogmas of the church, of course, were deemed necessary responses to heresy; yet there is merit to the position that the heretics were those who insisted too strenuously on consistency and gnosis.<sup>3</sup> Neither was theology classically concerned only with the defense of God’s mystery and total ineffability—at the extreme, this would result in the impotence of the intellect. Theology at its best has carefully perched itself between the need to speak decisively and even divisively, and a speech that is deferential to the multiple realities of the Christian faith that escape being drawn up and written down: the unfathomable mystery of God, to be sure; but also the beauty of Scripture, whose job is more to inspire than define; the active life of faith amid the subtleties of love and service; the power of the liturgy rendered in symbols sublime beyond words; and the diversity within Christian fellowship, the pluralism of which is born not solely of the universal sin which we are called to pardon in love, but also the irreducible diversity of the gifts of the Spirit (I Cor. 12). Theology must find a way to decisively address matters of intellectual importance while recognizing how much of the Christian faith lies beyond its parameters. It must know when to fall silent before the mystery of God and the embrace of love; and perhaps how to speak in a way that celebrates and promotes the diversity of Christian faith in its multiple permutations that lie beyond discourse and its decisions.

Happily for those of us who call ourselves Reformed, John Calvin is a valuable resource in the search for such a theology. To be sure, there is a modicum of merit in the old stereotype of Calvin as coldly rationalistic; but no doubt most of its validity would apply, if at all, to the scholasticism that soon followed in Calvin’s train.<sup>4</sup> Calvin was painfully aware of his own short temper when it came to opponents; to the likes of Pighius, the “Sorbonnists,” Osiander,

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance, Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *The Way to Nicea: The Dialectical Development of Trinitarian Theology*, a translation by Conn O’Donovan from the first part of *De Deo Trino* (London : Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> This point is made nicely by Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology From Zurich To Barmen* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998). Richard Muller has sought to revise the perceived disjuncture between Calvin and the Calvinists; see Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Socinus, Servetus, he was rarely too charitable. It is no easy matter to say how far a theologian of any particular era must go in prophetically denouncing another's "position," thereby removing them from the personal embrace of love between sinners. Protestants have been inclined to say Luther justly did so when he saw demons behind the theology of his opponents; perhaps Calvin inherited the mantle of this lonely prophet, or at least a share of his spirit. But the more one attends to Calvin's theology—both in its schematic division of labor among genres,<sup>5</sup> its employment in the *Institutes* of *loci communes* method, its spirituality, its pastoral concern for conscience, its rhetorical nature, its refusal of speculation—the more one sees that Calvin was no cold-hearted scholastic but someone who sought to nurture the faith on a personal dimension, with the judicious imposition of an intellectually corrective heavy hand only when necessary.

What has yet to be fully appreciated about Calvin's theology, something so promising for the balance I am proposing between intellectual decisiveness and pluralism, is its dialectical character. The dialectical character of Calvin's theology has been often noted and variously described and accounted for.<sup>6</sup> Yet however one locates it, Calvin's dialectical theology shows itself when he maintains differing if not opposed pronouncements on doctrinal issues. This is no rhetorical device, nor is it a philosophical use of dialectic that trades on assertions of paradox for their own sake or for the sake of a higher *Aufhebung*; rather, it is a dialectic profoundly theological in character. It may be that Calvin's refined dialectical sense provides a clue to the dialectical nature of the Christian faith generally. Wilhelm Niesel has pointed out that Calvin employs the Christological language of "distinct but not separate" across many loci;<sup>7</sup> this suggests a common dialectical fabric at work in both Calvin's

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<sup>5</sup> See Richard Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), chaps. 6 and 7.

<sup>6</sup> The study that decisively formulated the issue was Hermann Bauke, *Die Probleme der Theologie Calvins* (Leipzig: Verlag der J.C. Hinrichs'schen Buchhandlung, 1922). See also Edward A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956); Benjamin Charles Milner, Jr., *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970); Ford Lewis Battles, "Calculus Fidei," In *Calvinus Ecclesiae Doctor*. International Congress on Calvin Research (Kampen, Netherlands: J. H. Kok, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> Niesel, 247f.

theology and the classic Christian creeds. We shall keep this dialectical element in mind as we consider several recent nuanced views pertaining to the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom.

Several classic 20<sup>th</sup> century interpreters of Calvin have detected in his theology a opposition between the divine and human; confusingly, this is often described as a “dialectical” interpretation of Calvin.<sup>8</sup> If divine and human in Calvin were set against each other in this way, it would seem that God’s absolute sovereignty could only be affirmed at the price of human freedom. Two recent interpretations of Calvin, however, have responded to this supposed dialectical opposition of humanity to divinity in a way that highlights neglected resources in Calvin’s theology: Philip Walker Butin has called attention to how Calvin’s trinitarian theology allows for genuine human response; and J. Todd Billings has traced Calvin’s nuanced theology of human participation in the divine. Both studies challenge the grave opposition between divine sovereignty and human freedom.

Philip Walker Butin’s *Revelation, Redemption, Response: Calvin’s Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship*, takes issue with the “dialectical” interpretation of Calvin (found in Ganoczy and others) that finds its classical expression in the formula: *finitum non capax infiniti* (“a finite thing is not capable of infinity”). Butin believes that paying close attention to the trinitarian structure of Calvin’s theology brings out the complementary possibilities of the divine-human relationship. He identifies the Trinity as the “root metaphor or central theological theme” in Calvin’s theology.<sup>9</sup> While conceding that Calvin never uses the term, Butin finds ample evidence in Calvin’s theology of a trinitarian *perichoresis* (mutual in-dwelling of the Persons); accordingly, each person of the Trinity has its distinct properties and is associated with particular economic actions, but nonetheless all three exist in one another and hence all three work together. In three central exegetical chapters, Butin examines how Calvin highlights the

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<sup>8</sup> See Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, trans. David Foxgrover and Wade Provo (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 186-7. See also Kilian McDonnell, *John Calvin, the Church, and the Eucharist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

<sup>9</sup> Philip Walker Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response: Calvin’s Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 123f.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit respectively in the economic acts of revelation, redemption, and human appropriation of salvation, while at the same time manifesting the interpenetration of the three persons.<sup>10</sup>

This creates a multiform picture of divine action and hence divine sovereignty. What is most interesting for our context is chapter six on the Holy Spirit and human response. Through his doctrine of the Holy Spirit, Calvin breaks the stalemate between divine sovereignty and human freedom. In Butin's words: "Calvin's trinitarian paradigm for the divine-human relationship thus provides a perspective that enables him to avoid the otherwise implicit logical dilemma that would require that a given action be attributed exclusively either to God or to human beings."<sup>11</sup> In our response to God and in the renewal of the image of God in us, i.e. our sanctification, there is a synergy of sorts between human action and divine power that subverts the notion that divine sovereignty is in antithesis to human freedom: "In redeemed humanity, divine and human action need no longer be dialectically opposed; rather, they may be reconfigured by grace into a concursive relationship by which human action is most human precisely when and because it is most thoroughly motivated by the Spirit of God according to the pattern of redemption in Christ."<sup>12</sup> The Holy Spirit is not an "alien force that imposes itself on human beings in opposition to their humanness." Rather, it is the "Spirit of Christ, who is the epitome of humanity and the authentic embodiment of the human image." The compatibility of divine sovereignty and human freedom has been established and revealed in Christ, and the Spirit of Christ opens to us this same possibility of "the incorporation into the divine life."<sup>13</sup>

The Spirit works in us in a way not opposed to our own freedom. Yet we cannot speak only of the Spirit. Butin carefully follows Calvin in speaking of the perichoretic structure of the Trinity, so that the Spirit does not act independently of Christ. Indeed, "The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectively unites us to himself."

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<sup>10</sup> See *ibid.*, chapters 4, 5, and 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 85. I am unaware of Calvin ever using the language of the Spirit "motivating" human action.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

Neither can the work of the Spirit be separated from the Father. The entire dynamic is nicely summed up in Butin’s citation of III.1.2:

God the Father gives us the Holy Spirit for his Son’s sake, and yet has bestowed the whole fullness of the Spirit upon the Son to be minister and steward of his liberality.... For there is nothing absurd in ascribing to the Father praise for those gifts of which he is the author, and yet in ascribing the same powers to Christ, with whom were laid up the gifts of the Spirit to bestow upon his people.

Butin has shown that we cannot responsibly frame the question of “divine sovereignty,” for Calvin at least, without speaking of the interpenetrating work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Doing so has led him to the remarkable conclusion that the work of the Spirit is compatible with human freedom.

If Butin’s study finds its key concept in the perichoretic trinitarian structure of Calvin’s theology, J. Todd Billings’s *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* makes the theme of “participation” in God the center of a novel systematic approach to Calvin. Like Butin, Billings is seeking to extricate Calvin from the hands of less charitable interpreters—in this case, the contemporary critics of Calvin in the Radical Orthodox camp who argue that Calvin allows no room for a free human response to God’s “gift,” because for Calvin that gift can only be “unilateral” and not a mutual giving between God and human beings. In response, Billings uses updated studies of Calvin<sup>14</sup> to show that divine sovereignty and human freedom are not opposites, but are reconciled in human participation in Christ. In response to Calvin’s Radical Orthodox critics, Billings wavers, perhaps helpfully so, between an apology for Calvin that emphasizes how human beings are empowered by participation in Christ and a retort to his Radical Orthodox critics that questions the very terms of their “gift” discourse and their lack of a doctrine of sin.

After carefully tracing the development of Calvin’s notion of divine participation through the various editions of the Institutes, Billings addresses the heart of the systematic question in chapter four:

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<sup>14</sup> J. Todd Billings’s *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Billings study is impressive for its careful genetic account of Calvin’s doctrine of participation, its examination of Calvin’s relation to church fathers as well as contemporary opponents, and its thorough appropriation of Richard Muller’s approach to the coordinated division of labor between the different genre of Calvin corpus.



“What is the place of believers *qua* humans in Calvin’s theology of participation in Christ? ...Are believers simply ‘passive’ as they experience salvation as an ‘external transaction,’ as Gift theologians allege about Calvin, or are they somehow more ‘active’?”<sup>15</sup> In responding to this question, Billings is highly attuned to Calvin’s *duplex gratia*, the “twofold grace” of justification and sanctification, as well as to the trinitarian structure of the concept of participation. This brings significant nuance into his interpretation of Calvin. Billings seeks a middle ground, for instance, between a strongly forensic account of salvation, whereby God’s grace remains an external imputation of forgiveness, and an account of salvation emphasizing a transformation inherent in the believer. In short, an explanation of the role for human initiative in Calvin’s theology must strike a balance between justification and sanctification.

Despite claiming to avoid either extreme, Billings on my reading favors the organic aspect of salvation over the forensic—as one would expect in a study of the concept of participation. The union with Christ—as engrafting, adoption, and the “wondrous exchange” between believers and Christ—is front and center in his treatment of justification. To be sure, one can hardly say too much about the importance of union with Christ in Calvin’s soteriology. It is certainly fair to give the union with Christ the first place in Calvin’s soteriology; from that union, believers receive the two gifts of justification and sanctification. However, the role of faith receives a rather peripheral mention here. Yet it is through faith and not just by the action of the Spirit that we are united with Christ: faith is the “formal cause” of salvation (III.xiv.17), in Calvin’s curious appropriation of Aristotle. Besides being the mode of our union with Christ, faith is also a negation of self; faith is precisely the “empty vessel” that Calvin correlates to imputation (III.xi.7). Because of the emphasis on union with Christ, participation in God, and the organic dimension of soteriology, imputation in Billings’ account is made secondary to the union with Christ: “The first grace of imputation takes place not through the distance of believers from Christ, but through their becoming one with Christ by faith...”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 107.



In the Union with Christ model that Billings represents, faith unites us to Christ, and from that union the two graces of justification and sanctification flow to us. These graces are distinct but inseparable, since they are one in Christ; they are, as Calvin often says, received *simul* (at the same time). In this model, justification and sanctification are clearly united. Therefore salvation is not at all reducible to the forensic dimension: it is not about God ‘winking’ at our sin or simply declaring us to be something we are not. We grasp and are united with Christ’s righteousness in faith. Billings highlights the “wondrous exchange” that happens through our union with Christ.<sup>17</sup> He quotes and interprets a key passage from Calvin:

“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.” The first grace of imputation takes place not through the distance of believers from Christ, but through their becoming one with Christ by faith; imputation takes place together with the engrafting on to the vine of Christ and adoption as children of a gracious Father.<sup>18</sup>

Whether Calvin’s soteriology is fundamentally forensic and imputation-based or not is a matter of long-standing dispute.<sup>19</sup> Billings is without question making the forensic element secondary to the union with Christ. This interpretation makes for an internally coherent presentation of Calvin’s soteriology.

Unfortunately, that does not make it a sufficient interpretation. The reason the dispute has raged on is because there are many passages that do not fit neatly into the union with Christ model. Besides, there are good theological reasons for Calvin to employ an alternative model of justification that is primarily forensic and imputation-based. This model is implied whenever he is pressed to affirm the distinction between justification and sanctification, as he does in his attack on Osiander, for as we saw the union with Christ model excels only at holding justification and sanctification together, not at distinguishing them. Osiander, according to Calvin, is mistaken

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 107, 130.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 107. The quote is from *Institutes*, III.xi.10.

<sup>19</sup> See Walter E Stueremann, *A Critical Study of Calvin’s Concept of Faith* (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1952), 180-87.

to affirm a substantial union or participation with Christ through faith. Indeed, the quote Billings cites above comes from the midst of Calvin's attack on Osiander. Here he is defusing Osiander's charge that "faith is [merely] reckoned righteousness" (III.xi.10). Calvin wants to say more than that, but not to go as far as Osiander's view that "faith is Christ" (III.xi.7), meaning faith brings the presence of substantial righteousness. Instead, "by faith we come empty to him to make room for his grace in order that he alone may fill us" (III.xi.10). Faith is the "formal cause," as Calvin says elsewhere, of our substantial participation with Christ but is not immediately fungible with this participation. It is an emptiness that is ready to be filled, but not already full. "Union with Christ" could easily end in Osiander's view, so that faith is our union with Christ and from that union we receive at once justification and sanctification.

The problem with Osiander's otherwise very consistent view arises from experience. Contrary to the union with Christ model, we do not always experience justification and sanctification together, if ever. The element of experience is clear when Calvin reclaims imputation against Osiander:

Osiander objects that it would be insulting to God and contrary to his nature that he should justify those who actually remain wicked. Yet we must bear in mind what I have already said, that the grace of justification is not separate from regeneration although they are things distinct. *But* because it is very well known *by experience* that the traces of sin always remain in the righteous, their justification must be very different from reformation into newness of life. (III.xi.11)

The newness of life progresses only gradually, so that we remain "liable to the judgment of death" before God. But God justifies us all at once, "so that we may appear in heaven as if endowed with the purity of Christ." In this justification that stands in distinction to sanctification, Christ is still central in our justification, but not as a substantial righteousness that we participate in. Christ's role in justification points back to his assuring us of God's fatherly kindness, demonstrated above all by Christ's atoning sacrifice. While the union with Christ model has justification and sanctification received simultaneously, it is clear that Calvin for experiential reasons has to at times draw a stronger distinction between them, specifically in the

temporality by which they reach us.<sup>20</sup> By failing to do so, Osiander’s version of union can only “enfeeble our assurance of salvation” (III.xi.11).

In a careful section on the subject, Billings recognizes Calvin’s affirmation of a forensic view of justification in opposition to Osiander.<sup>21</sup> Billings does not emphasize the strongly experiential concern that is driving the issue, although he acknowledges that Calvin rejects the medieval *viator* soteriology that “keeps the conscience in fear and anxiety.”<sup>22</sup> He places more emphasis, however, on Calvin’s concern to uphold the Trinity by recovering the distinct role of the Spirit, neglected by Osiander, and to uphold the Chalcedonian distinction of natures in Christ, against Osiander’s obscuring of the role of Christ’s humanity—including the importance of the cross.<sup>23</sup> Somewhat oddly, however, Billings is forced to concede what seems to be for Calvin a non-negotiable distinction (seemingly the “dialectic” of Ganoczy) between God and humanity that makes Calvin resist a stronger sense of participation or deification. This looks like an irrational insistence on Calvin’s part, a stubborn self-tethering to the forensic camp with no greater theological rationale. While Billings’ nuanced reading has helped insulate him against the charge, Calvin thus remains vulnerable to those critics who reject his ‘dialectical’ opposition of God and humanity.

I cannot quibble with Billings too much; he is very fair and thorough. He has wisely steered clear of what he calls the ‘Anti-legal’ school of Calvin interpreters who, likely out of admirable ecumenical motives, are inclined to leave behind Calvin’s forensic doctrine of justification and hence much of his theology’s Reformation-shaped character. Yet in making participation and union

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<sup>20</sup> Krusche has found the principal distinction between justification and sanctification to lie in their different temporal modes; see Werner Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heilige Geist nach Calvin* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957), 281.

<sup>21</sup> Billings, 53-63. He also critiques the account of Julie Canlis, “Calvin, Osiander, and Participation in God,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 6:2 (2004), 169-84, because she fails to appreciate the importance of imputation for Calvin.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60. By making Calvin out to be only conceding the centrality of the cross to Scripture, Billings here reveals a weakness in his account; he has neglected the importance of Calvin’s treatment of the atonement in Book II of the *Institutes*.

with Christ still so central to Calvin, though qualified by an inscrutable insistence on a gulf between God and humanity, Billings has not done all he could to render Calvin either coherent or compelling. What appears in Billings to be an inexplicable element of forensic justification in fact calls into question the sufficiency of the union with Christ model. If our union with Christ is a *fait accompli*, then whence the gulf? The union with Christ model has the advantage of theoretical elegance, and no doubt it captures the main thrust of Calvin's soteriology. Yet it is not adequate to the experiential complexity of the Christian life, particularly the dialectics of the human experience of God that, welling up within Luther's inner turmoil, set off the Reformation in the first place. We do not only experience in Christ both the Father's unmerited grace and the Spirit's transforming work in us; we also experience our continuing total sinfulness and God's continuing acceptance of us despite it. The experience of our sinfulness is not simply a failure of faith to believe in the Spirit's work or in our union with Christ, though it is that also. But this experience is coordinated with an unsettling affirmation, showing up in Calvin from time to time, that God's infinite righteousness could never be reconciled to our human capacities. "For even if someone satisfied the law, not even then could he stand the test of that righteousness which surpasses all understanding."<sup>24</sup>

One can hardly blame interpreters of Calvin for not embracing this perplexing side of Calvin's thought; it is not clear that Calvin himself knew what to make of it. The absolute righteousness of God is an expression coming from the experience of God by the Reformers; prior to Calvin, Luther's dialectics of Law and Gospel lead him to extreme pronouncements of the hiddenness of God. This perplexing element of divine hiddenness or absoluteness in Calvin, moreover, lends to his theology a peripheral but affecting contingency. This is the most mysterious warrant for Calvin's imposition of a limit to theory and speculation. Were the Gospel pure light to us, our speculation would simply carry us ever higher into the

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<sup>24</sup> III.xii.1. Calvin proceeds to "pass over" this righteousness of God's heavenly scales, for it is "incomprehensible." Here as elsewhere (III.xii.5, xiv.9, xvii.9) when Calvin sounds this theme, he is referring to Job. Susan Schreiner has examined the genesis of this theme in Calvin's sermons on Job. See Susan Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Calvin's Exegesis of Job from Medieval and Modern Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

grace of God; to the contrary, Calvin spies in these heights dangers and labyrinths. This contingency in Calvin's theology of grace is why we cannot rise beyond a simple faith in Christ. It is why we cannot know God's essence but must rest content with God accommodated in Christ. Calvin's doctrine of God is charged with a dynamism between God *a se* and God revealed in Christ, although he will always emphasize the latter: we are not to fear that God's will could be different than what Christ has revealed.<sup>25</sup>

The subtlety of this dynamism is not to be underestimated, particularly when its trinitarian shape comes into the fore in Book III. Butin and Billings have attended to the role of the Spirit in Book III as the agency of God working through and with human beings, and effecting the participation of human beings with Christ. Yet concomitantly with the effecting of the grace of Christ, Calvin's doctrine of the Holy Spirit also traces a return to the hiddenness of God, a theme that reaches its crescendo in the doctrine of election. The introduction to Book III displays both sides of this dynamic. As noted by Billings, the first note sounded by Calvin is that Christ "had to become ours and dwell within us...[for] all that [Christ] possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him." The union with Christ is thus sounded, and in this case the Spirit is seconding Christ's work: "The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself." The Spirit is Christ's own power, and so everything that will follow in Book III is in this regard the extension of the work of Christ in Book II. And yet alongside this Spirit of Christ is the secretive power of the Spirit: "Yet since we see that not all indiscriminately embrace that communion with Christ which is offered through the gospel, reason itself teaches us to climb higher and to examine into the secret energy of the Spirit..." This note of secrecy and the role of "reason itself" echoes the element of experience discussed earlier. This "secret watering" of the Holy Spirit is in a sense an additional work of God's to the work of Christ.

It may be that Calvin associates this secret watering with not only the Spirit but also the Father. He continues in this section by drawing a parallel between the Trinity (here, "Father, Word, and Spirit") and

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<sup>25</sup> See Brian Gerrish, "'To the Unknown God': Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God" in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), 144. Gerrish cites III.xxiv.3-6.

the “three witnesses on earth” from John’s gospel: water, blood, and the Spirit. The implication is that the “secret watering of the Spirit” is the Father’s work, not the work of the Word.<sup>26</sup> This impression is bolstered by Calvin’s citing of I Peter 1:2, which reads in full: “...who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood.” Still, when it comes to election, Calvin associates God’s “secret” work either with simply “God” or, particularly in III.xxiv, with the Holy Spirit: “the advancement of every man in godliness is the secret work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>27</sup>

The temptation to simplify this “secret” element of the Spirit must be resisted. The Spirit is not at all confined to this secretive role, but is also “‘the spirit of adoption,’ because he is the witness to us of the free benevolence of God with which God the Father has embraced us in his beloved only-begotten Son to become a Father to us” (III.i.3). On the main, Calvin clearly sees a unified work of the Trinity; on this score, Butin and Billings are completely correct.

Yet Calvin cannot let go of the secondary if not speculative question: why do some embrace the gospel and others do not? That the question is of theological significance to Calvin is clear, and lands us right back in the issue before us: divine sovereignty. Because Calvin refuses to posit that divine sovereignty is limited by human freedom, he must inquire into the secret work of the Holy Spirit by which God effectually unites some, but not all, to Christ. Once more, this is not the main theological track of Calvin’s thoughts. The main point is that God lowers himself to human comprehension through Christ, and through the Spirit effects a participation in Christ for the elect. In this case, there is in principal no conflict between human and divine freedom.

Yet experience provides us with data that do not fit this primary model. For one, we remain sinners and thus subject to God’s wrath. There is no ‘good’ reason for this; we ought to be wholly converted

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<sup>26</sup> This is echoed in III.xxiv.3, where Calvin counsels us not to remain fixed to the “outward Word” but to “climb higher” to appreciate God’s “secret grace,” here pictured as water flowing abundantly for us to drink. However, Calvin does not mean to draw a line between God’s secret will and God’s Word. Cf. III.xxi.1: “He has set forth by his Word the secrets of his will that he has decided to reveal to us.”

<sup>27</sup> III.xxiv.13; see also xxiv.14. Cf. III.xxi.1, 3; xxiii.8, 12; xxiv.3. Calvin assigns election specifically to the Father only when commenting on the Fourth Gospel, as in III.xiv.6.

to lives of righteousness, but our will remains in conflict with God's will. Experience forces us to conclude that our union with Christ will be incomplete (as regards sanctification) until we are no longer "in the flesh." Secondly, not all embrace the gospel even when they hear it. If this is not due to the superior free will of Christians, then it must lead us toward the mystery of election. It must be said that this mystery is not the principal use of election for Calvin; again, the main point is to provide believers with unshakeable confidence in their adoption through Christ. Yet it represents in a secondary way the "climbing higher" (III.i.1, III.xxiv.3) into the secret will of the Father.

In short, Calvin is a thoroughly trinitarian theologian, as Butin and Billings argued; it is just that his doctrine of the Trinity is a bit more complicated than they recognized. With this in mind, we may return to the search for a dialectical statement about sovereignty that balances definition and decisiveness with pluralism. We have now added specificity to the dialectical structure of Calvin's theology: it is specified on one hand by the subtle but essential distinction between justification and sanctification as the definitive structure of human salvation, and on the other by Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity, which is no less subtle. At the heart of the two dialectical poles, and acting together as a center of gravity, is the union with Christ and the united work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. At the periphery, and mingling with the dark matter of experience, is the disjuncture of justification and sanctification made plain by the continuing problem of sin, and the secret work of the Spirit at the behest of the hidden will of God. The presupposition of this turn to the secret work of the Spirit is the absolute sovereignty of God, and its evidence is the inexplicably variegated effect of the gospel—received by some, rejected by others.

Based on this sketch of the structure of Calvin's theology, one must conclude that at its center, Calvin's theology is about the overcoming of the opposition between divine sovereignty and human freedom. Christ is the center of this story. In Christ God has brought human freedom into its perfection through the perfect obedience of Jesus. The final act of obedience, the cross, is also the expiation that appeases God's wrath, and allows us to be assured of God's Fatherly goodwill and the non-imputation of our sins. In Christ, then, we know both the unity of the Trinity in mercy and the true image of God



that is intended for humanity. God is in every way disposed toward humanity, and humanity is capable of divinity. Thus far, human freedom and divine sovereignty are perfectly consonant. Of what purpose is this consonance? It allows for real sanctification, so that our identity remains not forever alienated and divided from God, but is a growing into oneness with God. We can be effective and responsible agents of God's will in the world, focusing no longer on questions about who we are, but on what must be done.

Calvin, however, views salvation too concretely and existentially, and, we might add, too dialectically to see a simple identity of our being with Christ. As we noted, Book III avers that Christ's death would be no benefit unless we make it our own, and this requires a further action of the Holy Spirit. Thus enters some ambiguity about the relation of human freedom and divine sovereignty. In terms of justification as a "wondrous exchange," we receive from Christ both forgiveness from sin and the imputation of, or even participation in, Christ's righteousness. In sanctification, especially as mortification and vivification, the Spirit enacts the real effects of Christ's death and resurrection in our very lives. Yet, the more we look at ourselves and not just to Christ, the more apparent is the continuing conflict between divine sovereignty and human freedom. We remain sinners, and if we descend into our conscience we shall "be besieged by the terrors of hell" (III.xiii.3). Moreover, God's forgiveness in Christ Calvin at times counterposes to an absolute righteousness of God that we could never satisfy. Of what purpose is this divarication of God's sovereignty and our will? For one, we ought never to become complacent and self-congratulatory. All our efforts remain flawed both in intention and effect. Moreover, Christ's work alone applies to all humanity; our work is always of finite significance, limited in scope and effect. We cannot give up hope in the kingdom to come that is an infinite work of God.

Finally, the failure of many even to embrace the promise of mercy in Christ suggests the complete opposition of divine sovereignty and human freedom: freedom includes opposition to God's will. Yet Calvin at a deeper level refuses this opposition; even human freedom to reject God must be at some level God's own will. Here we tentatively approach the secret will of God and the secret watering of the Holy Spirit, which inexplicably leaves some parched

for the gospel. Of what purpose is this overwhelming of human freedom by divine sovereignty? It prevents us from dismissing as irrelevant to God's story certain uncomfortable facts about our world. More positively, it can encourage us to see lives lived to very different purposes than our own as perhaps fulfilling some deeper divine purpose; we are not responsible to what this purpose may be, but neither are we to despise it. Whether or not Calvin used it this way, it can also lead us to a respectful tolerance toward those who reject the gospel for various reasons. This tolerance is not the center of the gospel summons: we remain here at its periphery. Nor does this tolerance at all require us to forfeit the primary commitment to the gospel as the truth. This is not a worldly tolerance, conceded to keep the peace; it is a *theological* tolerance, one based on the confession that God's ways are beyond us. We are free from having to condemn, even in the face of a 'choice' that we cannot but refuse out of loyalty to Christ.