

Church History (29): The Theology of John Calvin

With regards to Calvin's theology, I intend to limit our consideration to three subjects: Christology, Predestination, and the Lord's Supper.

I. The Theology of John Calvin

1. *Christology*. "It is interesting, and I think significant, that scholars searching for a one-word description of Calvin's theology, preaching, and thinking have been drawn, in many cases, to the word *Christocentric*. It infers that, in all his concerns, Calvin allowed nothing and no one to displace the Lord Jesus Christ from His supreme place in every sphere" (Alexander).¹ "Calvin never lost sight of this Christological foundation. In his *Commentary on Colossians*, he set forth what may well be taken as the orienting focus of his entire theological program. 'Paul returns to a full description of Christ. For the only remedy for the Colossians against all the snares by which the false apostles endeavored to trap them was to grasp thoroughly what Christ was. For how comes it that we are carried about with so many doctrines, but because the power of Christ is not perceived by us? For Christ alone makes all other things suddenly disappear. Hence there is nothing that Satan tries so hard to do as to raise up mists to obscure Christ; for he knows that by this means the way is opened for every kind of falsehood. Therefore, the sole means of retaining as well as restoring pure doctrine is to set Christ before our eyes, just as He is with all His blessings, that His power may be truly perceived'" (George).²

(1) The person of Christ. "As in the case of the Trinity, Calvin follows traditional orthodoxy when he discusses the person of Christ and His work. In Christ there are two natures in a single person" (Gonzalez).³ "He who was the Son of God became the Son of man—not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person. For we affirm His divinity so joined and united with His humanity that each retains its distinctive nature unimpaired, and yet these two natures constitute one Christ."⁴ Contrary to Menno Simons (and many other Anabaptists), Calvin maintained with the orthodox, that Christ's humanity was taken from the substance of the virgin Mary. This was in contrast to Simons, who believed Christ's humanity was from heaven (as was His divinity). "It is manifest that the man Christ is not originally from earth, but from heaven, for according to His eternal divinity, if that should have been left thus unchanged, as the learned say, He cannot be called the son of man. From which it forcibly follows that the whole Christ Jesus, God and man, man and God, is from heaven and not of earth" (Simons).⁵ It's for this reason, Calvin gave an entire chapter in his *Institutes*, to prove the fact, that "Christ Assumed the True Substance of Human Flesh."⁶ For Calvin, as Christ derived His humanity from Mary, He was the Seed of the woman and true descendent of Adam. "When Paul named Him 'Son of David,' and then immediately added 'according to the flesh' (Rom.1:3), he surely designates His human nature by this. Thus in the ninth chapter, after calling Christ 'blessed God,' he asserts separately that He descended from the Jews 'according to the flesh,' (Rom.9:5). Now, if He had not truly been begotten of the seed of David, what will be the point of this expression that He is 'the fruit of her womb' (Lk.1:42)?"⁷ Thus, while Christ assumed true humanity in the incarnation, He was never confined to that humanity, but remained the all-present Son of God. "Though the Word in His immeasurable essence was united with the nature of man into one person, we do not imagine that He was confined therein. Here is something marvelous: the Son of God descended from heaven in such a way that, without leaving heaven, He

¹ Eric Alexander, *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine, and Doxology*, 109

² Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 223-224

³ Justo Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 3:149

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.14.1

⁵ Minno Simons, *Complete Works*, 2:151

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.13

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.13.3

willed to be borne in the virgin's womb, to go about the earth, and to hang upon the cross; yet He continuously filled the world even as He had done from the beginning!"⁸

Like Zwingli, Calvin argued that the ubiquity (omnipresence) of the divine had not been communicated to the body of Christ, and that He could not therefore be present in heaven and on several altars at the same time. Within this context, he pointed out that, although the divinity of the Second Person was fully present in Jesus, it was not circumscribed by His humanity. His wondrous descent was such that He was still in heaven while He was also in Jesus; and when He was being born from the Virgin's womb, He was still filling the entire universe. This is what later theologians came to call the *extra calvinisticum*, and it became a characteristic emphasis of Reformed Christology.⁹

(2) The work of Christ. "Calvin discusses the work of Christ in terms of three offices—*triplex munus*. Christ is at once prophet, king, and priest. The very title 'Christ' signifies this triple office, for it means 'anointed,' and in the OT kings, prophets, and priests were anointed" (Gonzalez).¹⁰ "Paul Wells has written that 'John Calvin is undoubtedly the greatest theologian of mediation through Christ.' He adds, 'It was Calvin who developed the threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest and king as a way of presenting the different facets of the accomplishment of salvation'" (Alexander).¹¹ "In order that faith may find a firm basis for salvation in Christ, and thus rest in Him, this principle must be laid down: the office enjoined upon Christ by the Father consists of three parts. For He was given to be prophet, king, and priest. It is to be noted that the title 'Christ' pertains to these three offices: for we know that under the law prophets as well as priests and kings were anointed with holy oil. Hence the familiar name of 'Messiah' was also bestowed upon the promised Mediator."¹²

(a) Prophet. "In His prophetic office Christ was anointed by the Spirit to be the herald and witness of the Father's grace. He fulfilled this office not only by His teaching ministry on earth but also in the continual preaching of the gospel" (George).¹³ "We must note this: He received anointing, not only for Himself that He might carry out the office of teaching, but for His whole body that the power of the Spirit might be present in the continuing preaching of the gospel."¹⁴ (b) Priest. "Christ did not merely proclaim God's reign as Prophet; He also brought it with Him as King" (George).¹⁵ Calvin describes Christ's priestly work as entailing reconciliation and intercession. "As a pure and stainless Mediator, He is by His holiness to reconcile us to God. But God's righteous curse bars our access to Him, and God in His capacity as judge is angry toward us. Hence, an expiation must intervene in order that Christ as priest may obtain God's favor for us and appease His wrath. Thus Christ to perform this office had to come forward with a sacrifice. For under the law, also, the priest was forbidden to enter the sanctuary without blood, that believers might know, even though the priest as their advocate stood between them and God, that they could not propitiate God unless their sins were expiated." (c) King. For Calvin, Christ's kingly office lies largely in His provision and protection of the church. "Thus it is that we may patiently pass through this life with its misery, hunger, cold, contempt, reproaches, and other troubles—content with this one thing; that our King will never leave us destitute, but will provide for our needs until, our warfare ended, we are called to triumph. Such is the nature of His rule, that He shares with

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.13.4

⁹ Justo Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 3:152

¹⁰ Justo Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 3:152

¹¹ Eric Alexander, *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine, and Doxology*, 111

¹² John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.15:1-2

¹³ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 228

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.14.2

¹⁵ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 228

us all that He has received from the Father. Now He arms and equips us with His power, adorns us with His beauty and splendor, enriches us with His wealth."¹⁶

(3) Union with Christ. For Calvin, all of the blessings of salvation come to us in Christ. "First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from Him, all that He has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what He has received from the Father, He had to become ours and to dwell within us."¹⁷ Thus, union with Christ is central to Calvin's theology. "Put in simple terms, the doctrine of union with Christ teaches that the Holy Spirit joins believers to Jesus by faith, and that by virtue of this spiritual bond we receive both Christ Himself and all His benefits. Calvin believed this doctrine to be of the highest importance, one of the great mysteries of the gospel" (Ryken).¹⁸ Christ is in us by His Spirit, and we are in Him by faith. "He unites Himself to us by the Spirit alone. By the grace and power of the same Spirit we are made His members, to keep us under Himself and in turn to possess Him. But faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit."¹⁹ "God takes the gracious initiative to join us to Christ by the Holy Spirit, giving us the very faith that established a double bond with our Savior" (Ryken).²⁰ For Calvin, it's through the work of the Spirit in giving us faith, "that we come to enjoy Christ and all His benefits."²¹

These benefits include justification and sanctification. "By partaking of Him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's Spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life."²² "The double benefit of justification and sanctification provides an immediate answer to the Roman Catholic objection that Calvin and the other Reformers wrongly divided these doctrines, or removed good works from their proper place in the Christian life. On the contrary, Calvin's doctrine of union with Christ unifies his theology of salvation" (Ryken).²³ "As Christ cannot be torn into parts, so these two which we perceive in Him together and conjointly are inseparable—namely, righteousness and sanctification. Whomever, therefore, God receives into grace, on them He at the same time bestows the Spirit of adoption, by whose power He remakes them to His own image."²⁴

But for Calvin, union with Christ doesn't merely result in salvation, but also communion. "In addition to serving as a fundamental principle of theology, union with Christ is an abiding source of true joy and lasting hope in the Christian life. To be united to Christ is to have a loving relationship with Him of growing intimacy. Thus, our union with Christ is the basis for our communion with Christ—our living fellowship with our risen Lord" (Ryken).²⁵ "We ought not to separate Christ from ourselves or ourselves from Him. Rather we ought to hold fast bravely with both hands to that fellowship by which He has bound Himself to us. Christ is not outside us but dwells within us. Not only does He cleave to us by an indivisible bond of fellowship, but with a wonderful communion, day by day, He grows more and more into one body with us, until He becomes completely one with us."²⁶

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.15:4

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1

¹⁸ Philip Ryken, *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine, and Doxology*, 191-192

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.3-4

²⁰ Philip Ryken, *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine, and Doxology*, 192

²¹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1

²² John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1

²³ Philip Ryken, *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine, and Doxology*, 197

²⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.6

²⁵ Philip Ryken, *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine, and Doxology*, 198

²⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.24

2. *Predestination*. "Calvin introduced the subject of predestination as a problem occasioned by the preaching of the gospel. Why, he asked, when the gospel is proclaimed, do some respond and others not? In this diversity, he said, the wonderful depth of God's judgment is made known. For Calvin, predestination was from first to last a pastoral concern" (George).²⁷ "We shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God's free mercy until we come to know His eternal election, which illumines God's grace by this contrast: that He does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation but gives to some what He denies to others."²⁸ "It is precisely because God does not elect all but only some that those who are elect can truly know how free God's grace is. The key doctrinal point is that such an election destroys any notion of human merit as a basis for salvation, thus undergirds the idea of justification by grace through faith, and thereby sets assurance on the solid ground of God's action, not on the human response" (Trueman).²⁹ For Calvin, and others like Luther and Bullinger, since our election was in Christ, we can only be assured of our election in so far as we fix our minds and hearts upon Christ. "For the elect, assurance is to have primarily a Christological foundation. According to Calvin, Christ is the mirror in which believers are to contemplate their salvation and thus find certainty of their election" (Trueman).³⁰ Henry Bullinger, in the *Second Helvetic Confession*, said the same thing: "Let Christ, therefore, be our looking glass, in whom we may behold our predestination. We shall have most evident and sure testimony that we are written in the book of life, if we communicate with Christ; and He is ours and we His by a true faith."³¹

First, if we seek God's fatherly mercy and kindly heart, we should turn our eyes to Christ, on whom alone God's Spirit rests. If we seek salvation, life, and the immortality of the Heavenly Kingdom, then there is no other to whom we may flee, seeing that He alone is the fountain of life, the anchor of salvation, and the heir of the Kingdom of Heaven. Now what is the purpose of election but that we, adopted as sons by our Heavenly Father, may obtain salvation and immortality by His favor. Accordingly, those whom God has adopted as His sons are said to have been chosen not in themselves but in His Christ; for unless He could love them in Him, He could not honor them with the inheritance of His Kingdom if they had not previously become partakers of Him. But if we have been chosen in Him, we shall not find assurance of our election in ourselves; and not even in God the Father, if we conceive Him as severed from His Son. Christ, then, is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election. For since it is into His body the Father has destined those to be engrafted whom He has willed from eternity to be His own, that He may hold as sons all whom He acknowledges to be among His members, we have a sufficiently clear and firm testimony that we have been inscribed in the book of life if we are in communion with Christ.³²

Timothy George suggested, Calvin's doctrine of predestination can be summarized in three words: "*absolute, particular, and double*."³³ Predestination is absolute in the sense that it is not conditioned upon any finite contingencies but rests solely on God's immutable will" (George).³⁴ "Predestination is particular in that it pertains to individuals and not to groups of people. Of course, Calvin was aware that

²⁷ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 241

²⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.1

²⁹ Carl Trueman, *Between Wittenberg and Geneva: Lutheran and Reformed Theology in Conversation*, 107-108

³⁰ Carl Trueman, *Between Wittenberg and Geneva: Lutheran and Reformed Theology in Conversation*, 108

³¹ The Second Helvetic Confession, Chapter 10: Of the Predestination of God, and the Election of the Saints

³² John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.24.5

³³ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 241

³⁴ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 241

God elected Israel as His special covenant people. Yet not every single member of the nation was elected to salvation, as Paul pointed out (Rom.9:1-16)" (George).³⁵ "Finally, predestination is double; that is, God to the praise of His mercy has ordained some individuals to eternal life and to the praise of His justice has ordained others to eternal damnation" (George).³⁶ While Calvin at times used the phrase "double predestination," he preferred the terms "election" and "reprobation." For Calvin, election was positive and unto eternal life, whereas reprobation was negative and unto eternal death. Election was the choice of God to elect some as objects of His mercy, and reprobation was the choice of God to reject others as the objects of His wrath. Calvin quotes Augustine with approval: "Since in the first man the whole mass of the race fell under condemnation, those vessels of it which are made unto honor are vessels not of their own righteousness but of God's mercy, but that other vessels are made unto dishonor is to be laid not to inquiry but to judgment."³⁷ Calvin himself then said: "Because God metes out merited penalty to those whom He condemns but distributes unmerited grace to those whom He calls, He is freed of all accusation—like a lender, who has the power of remitting payment to one, of exacting it from another." He then returned to Augustine: "The Lord can therefore also give grace to whom He will because He is merciful, and not give to all because He is just judge. For by giving to some what they do not deserve He can show His free grace, and by not giving to all, He can manifest what all deserve."³⁸

3. *The Lord's Supper*. In contrast to Rome, and in keeping with the majority of Reformers, Calvin believed in only two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's supper. He defined a sacrament as follows: "It seems to me that a simple and proper definition would be to say that it is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of His good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith: and we in turn attest our piety toward Him in the presence of the Lord and of His angels and before men."³⁹ For Calvin, sacraments are covenantal signs that seal to our hearts the promises of God.⁴⁰ Thus, sacraments become means of grace, by the ministry of the Spirit who works faith in our hearts. "The sacraments properly fulfill their office only when the Spirit, that inward teacher, comes to them, by whose power alone hearts are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened for the sacraments to enter in. If the Spirit be lacking, the sacraments can accomplish nothing more in our minds than the splendor of the sun shining upon blind eyes, or a voice sounding in deaf ears."⁴¹

Without doubt, the greatest difference between Calvin and Luther, concerns the nature of Christ's presence in the Supper. For Calvin, Christ is uniquely present in His divine nature, and yet, because His divine and human nature are ever joined in one person, there was a sense in which worthy partakers, partook of the whole Christ. "As we commune with His divine nature, we commune with the whole Christ because His divine nature is still united with His human nature" (Sproul).⁴² Herman Bavinck summarized Calvin's view: "In contrast to Rome and the Lutherans, Calvin emphasized from the very beginning and ever anew that the communion of believers with Christ, also according to His human nature, is spiritual in nature, and this comes about, not because Christ comes down physically, but because we lift up our hearts spiritually to heaven, where Jesus Christ, our advocate, is at the right hand of His heavenly Father."⁴³

³⁵ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 242

³⁶ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 242

³⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.11

³⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.11

³⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.1

⁴⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.5-6

⁴¹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.9

⁴² R.C. Sproul, *Amazing Grace*, 90

⁴³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:576

(1) The elements remain signs or symbols. For Calvin, the elements never change. They remain substantially bread and wine. "If it be asked whether the bread is the body of Christ and the wine His blood, we answer, that the bread and the wine are visible signs, which represent to us the body and blood, but that this name and title of body and blood is given to them because they are as it were instrument by which the Lord distributes them to us."⁴⁴ This means, there is no grace in the elements themselves. "There is no virtue in the visible sign that it can establish our conscience in a full assurance of salvation. This virtue it has not of itself, but by the will of God, because it was instituted for this end. There is a wide difference between Him and them (signs). The power and efficacy of a sacrament is not contained in the outward element, but flows entirely from the Spirit of God."⁴⁵

(2) There is a real connection between the sign and reality. For Calvin, though the elements never substantially change, they really represent the body and blood of Christ. The whole Christ, both natures in one person, is represented by and in the elements. "The reality is indeed offered along with the sign, and the bread is named body because it not only represents but also presents it to us. But whether or not we receive the gift depends upon our faith" (Walker).⁴⁶ "If he representation which God gives us in the Supper is true, the internal substance of the sacrament is conjoined with the visible signs; and as the bread is distributed to us by the hand, so the body of Christ is communicated to us in order that we may be made partakes of it."⁴⁷

We hold, that in this ordinance the Lord does not promise or figure by signs, anything which He does not exhibit in reality; and we, therefore, preach that the body and blood of Christ are both offered to us by the lord in the Supper, and received by us. Nor do we thus teach that the bread and wine are symbols, without immediately adding that there is a truth which is conjoined with them, and which they represent.⁴⁸

(3) The Supper is a covenant meal wherein Christ nourishes the soul by faith. "To summarize: our souls are fed by the flesh and blood of Christ in the same way that bread and wine keep and sustain physical life. For the analogy of the sign applies only if souls find their nourishment in Christ—which cannot happen unless Christ truly grows into one with us, and refreshes us by the eating of His flesh and the drinking of His blood."⁴⁹

Now Christ is the only food of our soul, and therefore our Heavenly Father invites us to Christ, that, refreshed by partaking of Him, we may repeatedly gather strength until we shall have reached heavenly immortality. Since, however, this mystery of Christ's secret union with the devout is by nature incomprehensible, He shows its figure and image in visible signs best adapted to our small capacity. Indeed, by giving guarantees and tokens He makes it as certain for us as if we had seen it with our own eyes. For this very familiar comparison penetrates into even the dullest minds: just as bread and wine sustain physical life, so are souls fed by Christ. We now understand the purpose of this mystical blessing, namely, to confirm to us the fact that the Lord's body was once for all so sacrificed for us that we may now feed upon it, and by feeding feel in ourselves the working of that unique sacrifice; and that His blood was once so shed for us in order to be our perpetual drink.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 2:171

⁴⁵ John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 2:84

⁴⁶ C.S.M. Walker, *John Calvin: A Collection of Essays*, 136

⁴⁷ John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 2:172

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 1:169

⁴⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.10

⁵⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.1