

## Calvinism as Renaissance Artifact

by  
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I should like in this paper, through a particular case, to make a general point that seems to me insufficiently appreciated by both historians and theologians, for rather different reasons but with much the same result. This is that theology is a human activity which is often remarkably sensitive to its historical context, and which can therefore tell us a good deal about the past; and conversely that theological discourse can often be understood only with some knowledge of the circumstances surrounding its expression.

Calvin is useful to make this point, first of all because he is widely perceived as the source of a movement of great importance in the formation of modern civilization. Indeed, he has left his mark on the popular mind in unlikely places, as was impressed on me by a recent experience in Venice. I accompanied some friends who lived there to their favorite outdoor cafe, and they introduced me to their favorite waiter, a young man named Carlo, who was always curious about the people he waited on. One of my friends told him that I was an American professor, and he added--rather mischievously--that I was working on John Calvin. Carlo looked blank at this fascinating datum, until my friend said, "You know--Giovanni Calvino." Suddenly Carlo's face lit up, and he exclaimed, "Oh! He was the one who made the big mess up there!"

In spite of this remarkable name recognition, Calvin has been little studied by general historians. (Indeed, it might be observed that theologians have rarely been of much interest to historians, unless they could also be shown to have some extra-theological significance). I am not well informed on such matters, but it is my impression that even Marxist historians have been insufficiently interested in theology to bother to expose it as superstructure. Historians have, on the whole, left Calvin to theologians or to Calvin specialists, who have been little concerned to depict him as a historical figure--as a child of his age.

The reasons for this historiographical neglect are complex. It must be acknowledged in the first place that historians have rarely dared to tackle major figures in cultural history. Perhaps we have been intimidated into leaving such personages to specialists. Or perhaps we have assumed that intellectual and artistic distinction is so exceptional that those who possess it are somehow elevated above historical processes altogether, are less representative of their time and less likely to be informative about it than second-raters.

That this is a mistake is suggested by one of the greatest twentieth-century works in cultural history, Lucien Febvre's remarkable study of Rabelais, with its profound remarks about the sixteenth-century

mind.<sup>1</sup> It may be that distinguished thinkers can isolate themselves from the historical life swirling about them, though I think this a possibility that can easily be exaggerated. But it seems to me more likely for distinction of mind to be accompanied by unusual sensitivity to its surroundings and unusual ability to comment on their significance. I also think that some theologians have particular talents along these lines. I am quite sure that this was the case with Calvin.

But something else has kept historians away from theology and theologians: a pronounced and often unexamined secularist bias, a tacit assumption that theology has little to do with the real world that concerns historians, but only with another kind of world, "up there," perhaps, that may or may not be "real" but is certainly irrelevant--i.e., unrelatable except in corrupted forms--to real life. Although this secularist bias is now being challenged by some very good historians,<sup>2</sup> it has meanwhile subtly collaborated, I suspect, with a tendency among some theologians to think of theology as an activity that stands apart from other disciplines and above them. In this view too, theology is concerned with higher truths, eternal truths, absolutely different in kind from the transitory realities of our lower historical world, from whose influence theologians--at least when they are doing theology--are also insulated. The result, at any rate, has been the persistence of a kind of two-tiered intellectual universe, a realm of eternal truths above and of contingency below, corresponding to the pre-Copernican cosmology we have otherwise left behind. But it may also be that this separation of spheres has been aided, in the case of Calvin, by the disagreeable image left us by some of his followers: of themselves, as harsh, rigid, inhuman, and unlovable, but also of Calvinism and therefore of Calvin himself as the source of this strange ideal for the human personality.

One of the most important and also misleading aspects of this image is the support it gives to the depiction of Calvin as a systematic theologian, as the great systematizer of the Protestant Reformation. This representation of Calvin is also usually accompanied by a quite unexamined assumption that system is a Good Thing in itself, and especially a Good Thing in theology. "System" can, of course, mean quite different things. It can mean no more than the temporary ordering of concepts for purposes of instruction. Every good teacher knows how to do this, and Calvin was a very good teacher indeed. But people who think of Calvin as a systematic thinker usually mean something else: that he made intelligible, in a definitive way, the "real" connections and implications of the gospel, more or less as God himself intended us to understand them, so that we can rely absolutely on Calvin's guidance. It may also be true that Calvin sometimes inadvertently encouraged this

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<sup>1</sup>Le problème de l'incroyance au XVIe siècle. La religion de Rabelais (Paris, 1942), recently translated by Beatrice Gottlieb, The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: the Religion of Rabelais (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).

<sup>2</sup>Among them my Berkeley colleague, Henry F. May.

view of his accomplishment, though I doubt that he would have cared to defend it. In any case, much in what he said would seem to preclude it. And I will argue that, except in the most practical and pedagogical sense, Calvin was not a systematic theologian; that, however skillful he may have been in ordering theological concepts for pedagogical reasons, he deeply abhorred theological system-building as a kind of violence committed by presumptuous and sinful men against the Holy Spirit; that those who understand Calvin as a systematizer in this sense can only do so by misreading him, or reading him in oddly selective ways; and finally that a better grasp of sixteenth-century culture would make such an interpretation of Calvin largely impossible.

I say largely impossible because this view of Calvin is not quite wrong. Like other major thinkers of the sixteenth century, and indeed for some time before, Calvin was complex and eclectic, engaged in an effort to marshal and manage a bundle of contradictory intellectual impulses and resources. Some of these, if isolated and fully developed, were systematic, though they often pointed in contradictory directions. Scholars have wasted a lot of time arguing that Calvin was "really" a Stoic or a Neoplatonist because they did not realize that every sixteenth-century intellectual was something of both, as well as of a good deal else. In fact the bits and pieces of different systems in Calvin's thought make him not more systematic but harder to classify, less coherent. In addition, when Calvin was put on the defensive, as often happened, he sometimes succumbed to the temptation to take refuge in systematic constructions of a kind that he ordinarily distrusted.

The systematic Calvin was mostly, however, another historical artifact: the artificial construct of his followers of the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when human insecurity and the yearning for social and political order received symbolic expression in a great wave of system building of the kind that Calvin sought to avoid. It is characteristic, of course, of the philosophy and natural science of this period, and we can also see it in Roman Catholic theology; but it is more striking in Lutheranism and Calvinism because they had originally been opposed to this kind of theologizing. In this development the attitudes, the methodology, even the vocabulary of medieval scholastic theology, long under attack first by Renaissance humanists and then by Protestant Reformers, were everywhere revived.

The notion of a systematic Calvin, then, seems to me to have a product of the need of his followers for those "indubitable principles and self-evident truths" that Francois Turretini, one of Calvin's most distinguished successors as chief pastor of Geneva in the seventeenth century, required in theology.<sup>3</sup> But even the scholastic method of generating such truths was not enough by itself. It required validation itself by an appeal to past practice. The consequence illustrates a curious feature of the history of Protestantism. It had arisen out of a sense of the impossibility of holy men in this life; but by the seventeenth century it was making saints of its own founding fathers.

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<sup>3</sup>Quoted in John W. Beardslee, ed., Reformed Dogmatics: J. Wollebius, G. Voetius, F. Turretin (New York, 1965), 12.

So Calvin, who had sought to demolish systematic theology, had to be remade in the image of his systematizing sons--who, however, were largely ceasing to read him. They found Turretini more congenial.<sup>4</sup>

There is a kind of a priori argument against the notion of a systematizing Calvin. It is that some cultural situations appear to support efforts to systematize, while others do not: not only in theology but in every kind of activity. Thus the thirteenth century seems to have been relatively favorable for system-building, and so was the seventeenth. But the period between, which the sixteenth century brought to a climax, was not only inhospitable to systematic thought but attacked it and everywhere undermined the possibility of it. Even the Copernican Revolution must be understood in this light: its first effect was to challenge the marvelous coherence of a traditional, comprehensive, utterly systematic cosmology that had also been systematically related to theology. Copernicanism really did make "a big mess up there." In the sixteenth century systematic thought survived only in small, relatively isolated pockets. What characterizes the great figures in the cultural expression of this period is their complexity, their exuberant variety, their resistance to reduction to system. We argue about them, we find them continuously fascinating, because they always elude our grasp. This is also to say that they are impossible to embalm: they remain alive--Erasmus, Thomas More, Machiavelli, in the earlier century; Raphael and Michelangelo; Montaigne, Cervantes, and Shakespeare.

I should like to present Calvin to you in this company. The accomplishments of these figures depended not on their systematic coherence but on their ability, somehow and not without strain, to manage contradictory forces, to triumph over variety without denying it. Stephen Greenblatt's elegant description of More's Utopia seems to me also to characterize the thought of Calvin: "It functions as a playground in which a shifting series of apparently incompatible impulses can find intense expression without flying apart or turning violently on each other."<sup>5</sup> Calvin's Institutes--and his commentaries and sermons and polemical tracts and letters--may also be seen as a kind of playground. Need I say that this is not to deny their deep seriousness? But a systematic Calvin, as that term is usually understood, would be an anomaly and an anachronism.

But Calvin himself can help us to understand his thought as a historical artifact, above all by the convenient manner in which he identified himself as a participant in the great controversies of his age. He did so in numerous passages that are often overlooked precisely because, since they attach him quite precisely to particular concerns of

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<sup>4</sup>Turretin's Institutio theologiae elencticae, first published in 3 volumes in Geneva, 1680-83, remained the basic text in theology (in Latin) for students in the Princeton Seminary until the later nineteenth century, when it at last gave way to Charles Hodge's Systematic Theology, also in three volumes (New York, 1871-73).

<sup>5</sup>Renaissance Self-Fashioning: More to Shakespeare (Chicago, 1980), pp. 56-57.

time and place, they have seemed to most of his readers "irrelevant" to his supposedly perennial significance. These are passages in which he attacked the Scholastic theologians, the scolastici, and thereby identified himself with a particular community of discourse of major concern to cultural historians that was antagonistic to them.

Calvin attacked the Schoolmen for a long series of unlovely traits: for immodesty, presumption, subtlety, curiosity, and disputatiousness; for pretending to know things of which they were ignorant; for intellectual dishonesty, therefore, and incomprehensibility, and for barbarism and ignorance. He contrasted them at some length with the Fathers. The Fathers, he believed, had been opposed in their own day to exactly the same thing. "All the fathers with one heart," he wrote in the dedicatory epistle of the Institutes, had "abhorred with one voice" and had "detested the fact that God's Holy Word has been contaminated by the subtleties of sophists and involved in the squabbles of dialecticians. . . . What, if the fathers were now brought back to life, and heard such a brawling art as these persons call speculative theology, there is nothing they would less suppose than that these folk were disputing about God."<sup>7</sup>

I also want to quote here a somewhat longer passage (from Calvin's commentary on First Timothy) where the biblical text denounces people who have a "craving for controversy and for disputes about words." Here, Calvin says, St. Paul "had in mind the kind of question that today is dealt with in the schools of the Sorbonne, to make a display of intellectual ability. There one question leads to another, for there is no end to them when everybody indulges his vanity in seeking to know more than he ought, and these give rise to infinite quarrels. As in hot weather thick clouds cannot be dispersed without thunder, so these thorny questions are bound to break out in disputes. . . . If anyone investigates carefully the kind of questions that are of burning concern to sophists, he will find that they do not arise from anything real, but are concocted out of nothing . . . the sophists . . . have no concern for edification and turn God's Word into trivialities and a source of ingenious discussions."<sup>8</sup> These figures are, in a word, the system builders. Their discourse reflects, not real human concerns and practical needs, but professional pressures to perfect the system,

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<sup>6</sup>It is of particular interest that even a scholar as sensitive to the historical element in Calvin's thought as Ford Lewis Battles did not regard Calvin's references to "Scholastics" and "Scholasticism" as significant enough for inclusion in the index to his excellent edition of the Institutes, although he did list "Sophists," an epithet that--like other humanists--Calvin sometimes applied to the Scholastics.

<sup>7</sup>Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. Ford Lewis Battles (London, 1961), 1, 22; hereafter cited as Inst. and by book, chapter, and section.

<sup>8</sup>Comm. I Tim. 6:4. All references to Calvin's commentaries are to the editions included in his Opera in the Corpus Reformatorum. The translations are my own, though I have referred to other translations.

complete it, make it airtight and--not altogether incidentally--to promote the reputations of those engaged in these tasks.

I have quoted here at some length because I want to place, side by side with these passages from Calvin, two others. I would like to keep the names of their authors in suspense for a moment, although I know that many of you will be able to identify them. Here is the first:

This prattling of the dialecticians will never come to an end. It throws up summaries and definitions like bubbles, matter indeed for endless controversies; but for the most part these people know nothing of the real truth of the things they talk about. . . . The best way to deal with this brood, with their studied air of insouciance and empty curiosity, is to launch at their heads some such invective as this: "You wretched creatures, why this everlasting labor for nothing, this expense of wit on silly subtleties? Why, in total oblivion of the real basis of things, will you grow old simply conversant with words, and with whitening hair and wrinkled brow, spend all your time in infantile babble?"

And here is another text along somewhat the same lines:

I do not so much admire those things, the so-called metaphysics, and the modes of signification, and other things of the sort, which recent theologians consider like a ninth sphere just now discovered, or admire like the epicycles of the planets; nor do I think it of great importance whether they are known or not. Perhaps there are difficulties that it would be better to ignore, since they impede our knowledge of better things. I will not bring any arguments to support this, though I could do so; but I will cite the ancient theologians, Cyprian, Lactantius, Hilary, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, who not only have not discussed these things in their books but have not even mentioned them. Out of ignorance, perhaps? But how could that be? ...the writings of the fathers were most cultivated (latinissimi), while the modern (theologians) are almost barbarians.

I will keep you in suspense no longer. These quotations come from the two most original and influential among the Italian humanists. The first is from Petrarch's Secretum and is part of a long denunciation of scholastic theology by "Franciscus," to which "Augustinus" replies, "I agree that nothing half so severe enough can be said of this monstrous perversion of learning."<sup>9</sup> The second is from Lorenzo Valla's Encomion on Saint Thomas Aquinas.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>In Francesco Petrarca, Opere, ed. Giovanni Ponte (Milan, 1968), although I generally follow the translation of William H. Draper (London, 1911), pp. 29-30 for the quotation.

<sup>10</sup>In Lorenzo Valla, Scritti filosofici e religiosi, ed. Giorgio Radetti (Florence, 1953). My understanding of the Encomion has been guided by Salvatore I. Camporeale, "Lorenzo Valla tra Medioaevio e Rinascimento: Encomion s. Thomae--1457," Memorie Domenicane, n. 7 (1976), 1-140.

It is no part of my argument that Calvin was familiar with either of these works. This is possible, but I care so little that I have made no attempt to look into the matter, although I doubt that the attempt to establish a direct connection would be successful. What I want to suggest here is that, in his attacks on the scolastici, Calvin identifies himself, clearly and decisively, with the attitudes of Renaissance humanism. Developing first in Italy, these were undoubtedly mediated to Calvin through Erasmus, whose works he knew well and towards whom (unlike Luther), Calvin rarely expressed hostility. Further: once we have accepted Calvin's identification of himself with Renaissance humanism, I think that much else about him, both in the substance of his discourse and in Calvin's intentions, fall into place. Difficult questions--questions simply ignored or begged in the received version of Calvin as systematist--can then be answered.

First of all this identification helps us to recognize the degree to which Calvin abhorred systematic theology as a matter of principle. He saw himself as a biblical theologian, working with and following texts, not coercing them with logic. He contrasted what he described as "the most beautiful economy of the Scriptures" with the philosophical discourse favored by the Schoolmen, noting with some irony that the Holy Spirit "did not adhere so exactly or continuously to a methodical plan."<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, his repudiation of system had its positive corollary in his recognition of the "paradoxes" at the heart of the gospel, which, he noted, "are contemptuously rejected by the common understanding of men," and which he listed with something like defiance: "That God became a mortal man, that life is submissive to death, that righteousness has been concealed under the likeness of sin," and so on.<sup>12</sup> It is hard to understand how anyone who has read Calvin could still maintain the systematic nature of his theology. His writing is filled with powerful imagery, unexpected imaginative insights, psychological aperçus, rhetorical elaborations, digressions and repetitions that were intended to serve a polemical, instructional, or other practical purpose. Calvin expressed himself in the style of Renaissance humanism.

A second major consequence follows for our understanding of Calvin once we have identified him as a humanist. Humanism, as a movement, had always displayed a remarkable sensitivity to the concrete historical circumstances in which it had unfolded. It was, broadly speaking, a self-conscious reform movement, concerned to reform not all times but its own time, sometimes in narrower, sometimes in broader ways. It did so with a sense of urgency that was a major element in its rejection of speculative system-building, which seemed a kind of luxury that the times could ill afford. The times called for action! And humanism's major instrument of reform was rhetorical discourse, i.e. language with the power to stimulate human beings to appropriate action.

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<sup>11</sup> Inst. III, vi, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Comm. John 18:38; see also comms. Luke 2:12, Rom. 3:5, I Cor. 1:21.

These aspects of the humanist program are all directly relevant to understanding Calvin. Like other humanists he felt keenly the urgency of the times. "How many," he will exclaim, "are the distresses with which Europe has been afflicted for the past thirty or forty years! [He could vary somewhat the duration of the crisis]. How many are the chastisements by which she has been called to repentance! And yet it does not appear that these have done any good." He embroidered on the disasters: wars, famines, pestilence, vices of every kind.<sup>13</sup> And the central motive force of Calvin's life was not to set forth a true theology for the ages, but to remedy the particular evils of his own age. He aimed, not to state truths--he rarely made truth claims--but to galvanize other human beings to appropriate action, to induce activity, to obtain results. His instrument for doing so was rhetorical discourse; he was a deliberate, self-conscious rhetorician, who combined the eruditio of his biblical and patristic studies with the persuasio of an earlier humanist tradition to achieve practical results.<sup>14</sup> Calvin was less concerned to understand the world--he had little confidence that this was humanly possible--than to change it. He believed that this was what Christianity was about.

His concern to achieve results explains his introduction into theology of a characteristic humanist preoccupation with what is required for this purpose in the real historical world: power, energy, passion. The cliche that Calvin comprehended God largely as power is true enough, but it is only one dimension, by no means original with Calvin, of a dynamic rhetorical theology with characteristically humanistic epistemological, anthropological, and other implications.

Basic to this rhetorical theology is Calvin's understanding of spiritual reality not as something ideal that can be contrasted with the material, but as power and activity, which ought to interpenetrate all levels of existence. His vocabulary in discussing spirit commonly employed a language of warmth, movement, coming alive, quickening vivificatio];<sup>15</sup> the language of energy and vitality associated also with Machiavelli. Thus, since God is pure spirit, he must for Calvin be all activity, power in action. So, he declared, God's virtue [virtus--another Machiavellian word] "consists in motion and action." He "can never rest; he sustains the world by his energy, he governs everything, however remote."<sup>16</sup> This was why Calvin could not endure Aristotle's conception of God as unmoved mover.<sup>17</sup> Calvin's God is always in action. And this is how we experience him: in his mighty acts.

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<sup>13</sup>Comm. Is. 9:10.

<sup>14</sup>For this analysis of the stages in the development of Italian Renaissance humanism, see Camporeale, cit. n. 11.

<sup>15</sup>For what follows I am particularly indebted to Margaret R. Miles, "Theology, Anthropology, and the Human Body in Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion," Harvard Theological Review, 74 (1981), 303-323.

<sup>16</sup>Comms. Ezek. 1:24, 10:17; cf. comm. Gal. 6:10.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. comm. Ezek. 10:17.



Correspondingly, human beings, spiritual because of their creation in God's image and likeness, must also be active. "Men were created to be employed in some work," Calvin asserted, "not to lie down in inactivity and idleness;"<sup>18</sup> and again, "We should apply, to use all the talents and advantages with which God has endowed us."<sup>19</sup> As Calvin saw it, rest is for the wicked, not for the saints.

These conceptions lead us directly to Calvin's understanding of sin, what sin basically consists in, how it displays itself in us. Sin is of course manifested in death, the total collapse of vitality, but also in a whole series of premonitory experiences. The death that came into the world through sin has already seized on us all; we are already partly dead. We experience this as drowsiness when we should be alert, as dullness when we should be attentive, as coldness when we should be warm and passionate, as apathy when we should feel concern, as sloth when diligence is required, as weakness when we need strength.<sup>20</sup> In this conception we can perhaps detect more than a hint of acedia, that vague spiritual malaise of medieval monastic existence that, by the thirteenth century, was also spreading among the laity.<sup>21</sup> Petrarch had felt it too.<sup>22</sup> But these conceptions also point to the significance for Calvin of rhetoric, which, as Quintilian had pointed out, is an art designed to excite warmth in the coldest hearts, stir up the feelings, and impel action.<sup>23</sup> (I have found similar language in Ignatius Loyola).

From this standpoint, then, if we follow out what I take to be Calvin's line of thought, just as sin leads to paralysis and death, so salvation is manifested as recovery of the capacity for action and life. As its etymology suggests, salvation consists in the recovery of health and vigor. The aim of the Christian ministry must therefore be to restore the dying to activity and life. And this is its only purpose. The ministry is an utterly goal-oriented and practical affair.

It was, of course, Calvin's objection to the old church, as he perceived it, precisely that it was failing in this respect. Its doctrine, frozen by truth-claims that were in fact mistaken, had become cold, lifeless, and ineffective. It "tortured the mind with empty

<sup>18</sup>Comm. Gen. 2:15.

<sup>19</sup>Comm. Ps. 127:1.

<sup>20</sup>Among numerous examples, see comms. Dan. 9:13, Is. 44:21, Matt. 26:75, Ps. 84-7 and 119:33; Inst. III, i, 3 (dullness, coldness, apathy, sloth, weakness).

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Siegfried Wenzel, The Sin of Sloth: 'Acedia' in Medieval Thought and Literature (Chapel Hill, 1960).

<sup>22</sup>This is one of the vices for which he condemns himself in the Secretum.

<sup>23</sup>Institutio oratoria.

subtleties and speculations" instead of teaching "what is beneficial or expedient."<sup>24</sup> It was incapable of inducing warmth, enthusiasm, and action.

But for Calvin it was crucial to the identification of right doctrine--this came close to being his only criterion of truth in theology--that it could produce practical results, that it could engender that warmth, enthusiasm, and action appropriate to the needs of his time. This principle governed his approach to Scripture, which he described as "the school of the Holy Spirit, in which, as nothing is omitted that is both necessary and useful to know, so nothing is taught but what is expedient to know."<sup>25</sup> Calvin praised what he found in Scripture not so much because it was true (a point on which he might have thought it presumptuous for human beings to judge) as because it proved useful. The doctrines he discovered or uncovered in Scripture are not so much truths as they are statements about how the spiritual world operates: in this case how God's energy is communicated or transfused into human beings, and what the consequences of this transfusion should be. Such practical knowledge was, for Calvin, the only kind accessible to human beings. Here too he thought Catholicism in error insofar as it claimed access to "the real truth of things."

Here we can recognize once again the significance of Calvin's identification of himself with the humanists of the Renaissance. He understood the Reformation as a great effort, mediated by language, to transfuse the power of the Spirit into human beings: not truth, which belongs to God and is beyond the capacity of human beings, but the ability to act. And this, for Calvin, was a supremely rhetorical task: a task of communicating by words what was appropriate to an audience, in its particular historical circumstances, what was needed to induce love, action, obedience, and service. His model was God's own communication by way of Scripture, a communication in which God, the best of orators, conveys to human beings what is useful and to the purpose, adapting his message, in accordance with the rhetorical principle of decorum, to times, places, and other circumstances. From this standpoint Christ was himself the great accommodation to human capacity, a revelation of God not as he is in himself, but as he is to and above all for human beings--which is all we can know,<sup>26</sup> all we need to know--as a stimulus to love, obedience, and action.

Here, I think, lies the central principle for understanding Calvin's theology, the key to reading his intention, and the solution for a good many of the problems and controversies surrounding his theology, which was directed not to all time but to his own. Here is

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<sup>24</sup>Comm. Phil. 1:10.

<sup>25</sup>Inst. III, xxi, 3.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Ford Lewis Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Our Capacity," Interpretation, 31 (1977), 19-38. Among other passages in Calvin, cf. Inst. II, vi, 4 on the incarnation as God's accommodation to us.

the principle, in the most succinct statement that I have found: "It would be really a frigid way of teaching if the teachers did not determine carefully the needs of the times and what suits the people concerned, for in this regard nothing is more unbalanced than absolute balance."<sup>27</sup>

I should like to close by offering two examples of what Calvin taught, suggesting in each case how differently they appear when they are understood as expressions of a rhetorical theology directed to practical results rather than as elements of a systematic theology intended for the ages. The first is Calvin's teaching on predestination, which so often in later periods has seemed terrible and repugnant. Calvin himself readily admitted that this teaching was beyond all comprehension. He recognized in it a "frightening darkness."<sup>28</sup> But the point of the doctrine was primarily how it functioned within the believer. It was in practice a source of enormous relief for people consumed with anxiety about their salvation, paralyzed by it, half dead with fear, to know that the absolute power of God guaranteed their salvation. The only alternative to this doctrine in Calvin's time was to make human beings, however cold, apathetic, inattentive, unreliable, and weak they were, responsible for their own salvation. "Here," Calvin wrote of predestination, "is our<sup>29</sup> only ground for firmness and confidence," that is our only strength.<sup>29</sup> Predestination was true chiefly in the sense that it functioned as a liberation into life, but only, of course, if one avoided speculating about it, avoided converting it into a body of truth claims (and when Calvin became defensive about it, he did not always avoid treating it in this way himself).

My second example is Calvin's teaching about the consequences of original sin, which was often expressed in extreme, unbalanced language, of a kind that has often been taken to mean that he held God's image and likeness in human beings to have been not merely damaged but totally obliterated by the fall. Indeed, he argued explicitly against the claim that "some vestiges" of God's image had survived the fall. "Therefore," he wrote, "let us hold this as an undoubted truth which no siege engines can shake [a piece of rhetorical manipulation of the reader, if there ever was one!], that the mind of man has been so estranged from God's righteousness that it conceives, desires, and undertakes only that which is impious, perverted, foul, impure, and infamous. The heart is so steeped in the poison of sin, that it can breathe out nothing but a loathsome stench. If some men occasionally make a show of good, their minds nevertheless ever remain enveloped in hypocrisy and deceitful craft, and their hearts bound by inner perversity."<sup>30</sup> But here again, I would argue, we have another situation in which, for Calvin, a

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<sup>27</sup>Comm. Matt. 3:7.

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<sup>29</sup>Inst. III, xxi, 1.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. comm. John 17:22.

balanced statement would have been unbalanced in respect to the needs of the time, which called for repentance and humility. For a more "balanced" statement we would need to turn to other passages in his writings that at least imply a very different view: for example, Calvin's rebuke to Job for cursing the day of his birth on the ground that Job, long after the fall, had been created in God's image and likeness.<sup>31</sup> I hope I have said enough, then, to suggest that an understanding of the historicity of theological discourse may be essential to a proper interpretation of its substance.

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<sup>31</sup>Serm. Job \_\_\_\_\_ For the fullest and most balanced statement of Calvin's position on this question that has come to my attention, see his sermon on John 1:1-5, col. 480.