

CALVIN'S CENTRAL DOGMA AGAIN

by

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For a long time there was general agreement that the doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of God and its logical corollary, double predestination, represented the essence (one might say, the "hard core") of Calvin's theology. The former was usually regarded as the basic principle and the latter as the distinctive application of Calvin's "central dogma." References to Calvin focused on the issue of the truth or error of his view of predestination, but the accuracy of this interpretation was seldom questioned. Indeed, the evaluation of Calvin as the theologian of "salvation by predestination alone" is still widely held in popular circles.

However, this consensus has come under increasing scholarly attack in the absence of compelling textual evidence that Calvin was attempting to devise a logical system, and by those who reject the concept of rationality, developed and maintained in the era of Reformed Orthodoxy, as adequate for Christian faith and life today. Doubtless, the Kantian revolution and the resulting suspicion of all metaphysical systems contributed to this reappraisal, as did renewed interest in the rhetorical tradition, but in any case Calvin is now being interpreted by scholars more as a biblical and less as a philosophical theologian. Thus many recent Calvin studies ignore or reject the possibility of finding a "central dogma" in Calvin's thought.

This means that Calvin's theology may be approached from various directions. For example, in recent major studies, Torrance expounded Calvin's anthropology,¹ Parker and Dowey dealt with the knowledge of God,² Krusche with pneumatology,³ Willis with Christology,⁴ and Stauffer worked on Calvin's sermons.⁵ None of these studies claims to present Calvin's "central dogma" but only a centrally important doctrine which is taken to illumine Calvin's entire theology. It is probably true that no "central theme"--as opposed to a "centrally important theme"--is likely to commend itself to all those who are familiar with Calvin's writing. Nevertheless, this admirable caution does not obviate the fascination nor indeed the importance of attempting to identify some kind of irreducible insight.⁶

Not only does the abandonment of a "central dogma" in the older and "strong" sense leave Calvin's theology unfocused for non-specialists, but no one can start everywhere at once. In short, it is difficult, if not impossible, to approach Calvin's theology without a point of view, and some points of viewing are more adequate than others. That is to say, various "centrally important themes" may be considered and the one judged to be the most comprehensive can be justifiably called Calvin's central dogma--not in a final and absolute sense, but in a heuristic and relative way. The value of the search for a central doctrine or theme in Calvin need not be its complete accuracy, but its usefulness in the initial presentation of and continuing reflection on Calvin's theology until such time as the complexity of his thought can be more fully appreciated.

The purpose of the present essay, then, is not to announce that the one long-lost key to Calvin's thought has been found. There are special keys to unlock various rooms for particular viewing, and there may well be several master keys, but this essay holds up one which seems to open many doors. This suggestion is based on three convictions. First, that Calvin did not produce a deductive "system," therefore it is futile to seek a basic principle in the philosophical sense. Second, that the Institutes of the Christian Religion is a summary of Calvin's thought and, therefore, contains not only the traditional topics of theology but also Calvin's essential and "systematic" point of viewing. Third, in Calvin's shaping of his material for exposition, a root metaphor or central theological theme may be discovered, in the sense that the reader can find a clarifying organization without being required to prove that the author deliberately and consciously put it there as an organizing principle. As a matter of fact, the older quest for Calvin's central dogma did not, in the main, contend that Calvin himself expounded the doctrine of God's sovereignty (and predestination) for this purpose, but only that it was correct for interpreters to do so.

That Calvin offered his own summary of theology in the Institutes is scarcely to be questioned, although Stauffer's magisterial work on Calvin's sermons demonstrates necessary and important modifications of the view of Calvin the theologian in terms of Calvin the preacher. Moreover, if Calvin did not produce a "theological system" in the strictest meaning of system, nonetheless he was a "systematic theologian" in the sense that he devoted sustained reflection to theological topics. However, the "architectonic" which Calvin employed for this reflection, while crucial for interpretation, is not specified in any evident way, and several have been suggested.

The four books of the final edition of the Institutes are often divided along the lines of the Apostles' Creed into the doctrines of God the Father (Book I), God the Son (Book II), God the Holy Spirit (Book III), and the Church (Book IV). The major objection to this division is that Calvin did not use the term "Holy Spirit" in his title for Book III, nor are all the topics treated therein directly related to the Holy Spirit as would seem necessary if Calvin were using a Trinitarian outline. Another way of organizing the Institutes is to take as programmatic Calvin's statement, "Nearly all the wisdom we possess . . . consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."⁸ However, since Calvin does not deal with the "knowledge of ourselves" in a separate section apart from the "knowledge of God" in 1559, it is unlikely that this distinction is to be regarded as the basic division of the final edition of the Institutes. Still another approach is from the twofold knowledge of God as Creator (Book I) and as Redeemer (Books II-IV). This division serves very well for expounding the knowledge of God but is imprecise in dealing with the knowledge of ourselves which is intimately connected to but not entirely subsumed under the knowledge of God. That is to say, while Calvin's theology is certainly "theocentric," there are "anthropocentric moments" when the knowledge of God as Creator and Redeemer forms only the background of the discussion rather than its focus. Moreover, while Calvin is obviously concerned about "knowing," he is not unconcerned about "being."

Doubtless Calvin's purpose in writing the Institutes was, as he declares, to instruct candidates in sacred theology,⁹ and his desire to be faithful to the range and depth of the subject. There is no evidence that Calvin thought the search for a central dogma or common theme or organizing principle was an essential feature of that task. Calvin did not find a key and build a house to fit it. Calvin did not set out to expound theology from the point of view of any one doctrine. Nevertheless, the exposition of his theology finds the presence of the union with Christ in so many places and in such a significant way that that "union with Christ" may be usefully taken as the central affirmation.

Of course, the union with Christ is plainly taught in Scripture. Karl Barth even claims Colossians 3:3 as the center of the gospel.¹⁰ Thus most, if not all, theologians have dealt with this doctrine in some fashion. The "essential elements" of Christian theology are "God," "Man," "God and Man in Jesus Christ," and the relationship of mankind to God in Jesus Christ.¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, for example, divides the Summa Theologica into God's movement toward mankind (ST.I) and the movement of mankind toward God (ST.Ia. IIae).¹² These two movements are not entirely discrete, and both Thomas and Calvin insist that the initiative is with God, but Thomas treats them more sequentially than Calvin. Moreover Calvin, of course, does not sharply divide God from Jesus Christ nor man from Jesus Christ. Thus the focus is not on entirely separate entities but on relationships.

At the beginning of Book III, Calvin indicates that Books I and II dealt in some sense objectively with the knowledge of God the Creator and Redeemer, while the work of God the Father revealed in Jesus Christ the Son, subjectively considered, is the domain of the Holy Spirit. Thus he writes:

. . . 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. For this reason, he is called "our Head" [Eph. 4:15] and "the first-born among many brethren" [Rom. 8:29]. We also, in turn, are said to be "engrafted into him" [Rom. 11:17], and to "put on Christ" [Gal. 3:27]; for as I have said, all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him.¹³

Using this statement as a pivot, the Institutes can be divided into two roughly equal parts:

- A. God for us
 - I. As Creator (Book I)
 - a. His creation
 - b. His providence
 - II. As Redeemer (Book II)
 - a. The revelation
 - b. The natures and person
 - c. The offices

- B. God in us
 - I. As Individuals (Book III)
 - a. Faith
 - 1. Regeneration
 - 2. Justification
 - b. Election
 - II. As a Community (Book IV)
 - a. The ministry
 - b. The sacraments
 - c. The state

It cannot be demonstrated, and should not be asserted, that Calvin consciously organized the four books in an objective (God for us) / subjective (God in us) fashion. In fact, the growth of the Institutes from 1536 to 1559 more than likely precludes a sharply defined over-arching or underlying structure in Calvin's own mind. When Calvin recast his material in 1559 he did not pour it into a precast mold. The present claim is only that this division "fits" Calvin's discussion in a more comprehensive way than other suggestions, and if it fits well enough, then it will commend itself as attractive without argumentation but only illustration.

In Book I Calvin deals with God the Creator and therefore God's creation of and providence for all things, but especially of and for human beings. Calvin is quite eloquent and even passionate in describing the Creator's care for his creature. In Book II, after discussing the creature's sin (chapters 1-5), Calvin expounds the objective knowledge of God the Redeemer, affirming the central mystery of the incarnation in Chalcedonian terms and avoiding Eutychianism more clearly than Nestorianism.¹⁴ Having, then, explicated theology proper in Book I and Christology in Book II, he turns not to anthropology but to soteriology,¹⁵ that is, to the explication of the redeemed sinner in terms of faith,¹⁶ regeneration, and justification, and concludes with eternal election.¹⁶ Following the exposition of the redeemed sinner in Book III, Calvin treats the redeemed community in Book IV: its ministry, its sacraments, and its relation to the civil government.

Such an overview suggests and probably requires a viewing point--if not exactly on the part of the writer, at least by the reader. That is to say, it is not unimportant to estimate where Calvin is standing when he looks to what God has done for us and in us. The answer seems adumbrated in the union of God and man in Jesus Christ which is extended to those who are joined to Christ.¹⁷ Thus the doctrine of union with Christ seems adequate to serve as a basis for surveying the Institutes from a central perspective. Having created all mankind (Book I), God becomes a man, Jesus Christ, for the salvation of mankind (Book II). In Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God enters the lives of individuals (Book III) and of a community (Book IV).

Since it is not the intent of this essay to analyze the doctrine of union with Christ or to expound it in detail within the outline of the Institutes, but only to suggest its central location, the following remarks must suffice.¹⁸ Calvin insists that God became a man in Jesus

Christ--the "objective moment" or the central affirmation about God--and that in Jesus Christ humankind is united to God--the "subjective moment" or the central affirmation about humankind. Calvin believes that "since God is incomprehensible, faith can never reach to Him, unless it has immediate regard to Christ. . . . Hence all thinking about God outside Christ is a vast abyss which immediately swallows up all our thoughts."¹⁹ "[Christ] is the beginning, the middle, and the end."²⁰ Thus "we see that our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ [Acts 4:12]. We should therefore take care not to derive the least portion of it from anywhere else."²¹ As God is known in Christ, so is man. We are not to consider God or ourselves apart from Christ. "Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts--in short, that mystical union--are accorded by us the highest degree of importance. 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."²² Again "if we desire anything more than to be reckoned among God's sons and heirs, we have to rise above Christ. If this is our ultimate goal, how insane are we to seek outside him what we have already obtained in him and can find in him alone."²³ Moreover, "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 . . . contemplate our own election."²⁴ Further, in his commentary on I Corinthians Calvin writes, "I declare that it is only after we possess Christ himself that we share in the benefits of Christ. And I further maintain that he is possessed not only when we believe that he was sacrificed for us, but when he dwells in us, when he is one with us, when we are members of his flesh, in short, when we become united in one life and substance, in a manner of speaking, with him."²⁵

Citations like these indicate the far-reaching importance of "union with Christ" for Calvin's theological understanding. This understanding is everywhere present, but it is not exhaustively defined. That is to say, Calvin's explication in Book III makes it clear that we receive the benefits of Christ on something more than a fiducial basis. Moreover, Calvin²⁶ is not satisfied with an understanding of union limited to imitation. "Our Ingrafting signified not only our conformity to the example of the cross but also the secret union by which we grow together with Him, in such a way, that He revives us by His spirit, and transfers His power to us."²⁷ Further, "we should note that the spiritual union which we have with Christ is not a matter of the soul alone, but of the body also, so that we are flesh of his flesh, etc. (Eph. 5:30). The hope of the resurrection would be faint, if our union with him were not complete and total like that."²⁸ Moreover, while Calvin is willing on occasion to use the term "substance" in a positive sense,²⁹ his rejection of Osiander's view precludes a simple ontological identification between the believer and the redeemer. Calvin clarifies his position by insisting that the union with Christ is effected not by the inflowing of substance but by the grace and power of the Spirit.³⁰ Thus perhaps one could say in summary fashion that the union with Christ for Calvin is not mystical (in the sense of imitation) nor substantial (in an ontological sense) but real (in a genuine but unspecified and unspecifiable sense).

Without denying or minimizing the importance and excellence of various other ways of approaching Calvin's thought, this essay has attempted to suggest the breadth and depth of doctrine of "union with Christ" as the central mystery of Calvin's theology, which means that this viewing point is present in Calvin's thinking about every other doctrine and with the expectation that it is a useful and comprehensive way of introducing and suggesting a theological rather than a philosophical basis for the description of Calvin's thought. To the extent that this claim is considered, the expositor will be forced to deal more with Calvin's faith than his logic. The union with Christ is vigorously asserted by Calvin, but it is not completely explained; perhaps it cannot be completely explained because for him it is not only a central but an ultimate mystery located at the foundation of his understanding and exposition of the Christian faith. If, and to the extent that, this is true, the explanation of Calvin's theology would do well to focus on this doctrine and some such sketch as that proffered here may be beneficial both for the initial and the final understanding of Calvin's theology.

Notes

¹T. F. Torrance, Calvin's Doctrine of Man (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949).

²T. H. L. Parker, Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959) and Edward A. Dowey, Jr., The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology (2nd ed.; New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).

³Werner Krusche, Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957).

⁴E. David Willis, Calvin's Catholic Christology (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966).

⁵Richard Stauffer, Dieu, la création et la Providence dans la prédication de Calvin (Bern: Peter Lang, 1978).

⁶Edward A. Dowey, Jr., "The Structure of Calvin's Thought as Influenced by the Twofold Knowledge of God" in Calvinus Ecclesiae Genevensis Custos, ed. by Wilhelm H. Neuser (Bern: Peter Lang, 1984); reflects the willingness to identify a central doctrine writing, "We do not mean here to introduce a central dogma or systematic premise, but to describe the strongest element in a field of force" (n. 8, p. 137). Dowey does not explain how "the strongest element in a field of force" differs from a "central dogma." Moreover, statements like "Knowledge, thus, is the [not "a"] fundamental and central category of Calvin's theological thought" (p. 138), "It is this duplex cognito Domini . . . that lies at the root of the dialectical structure of Calvin's thought" (p. 142), "[It] structures the basic dialectic of his thinking" (p. 146) certainly seem to be describing what is taken to be a "systematic premise."

⁷See Dowey's helpful reflections, *ibid.*, pp. 136-7.

⁸Inst. I. 1. 1. (OS III, 31, 6-9). The Institutes (Inst.) in the Library of Christian Classics edition, edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles is cited by book, chapter, and paragraph. The second part of the reference is to the volume, page, and lines of the Opera Selection (OS) edited by P. Barth and W. Niesel.

⁹Ibid., p. 4, "John Calvin to the Reader" (OS III, 6, 18-20).

¹⁰Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), II, 1, 149. See also IV, 3, 2, pp. 539ff. where Barth deals with the union with Christ. According to Barth, this doctrine "has a comprehensive and basic significance for Calvin. Indeed, we might almost call it his conception of the essence of Christianity" (p. 551). However, Barth, disagreeing with Niesel, sees in Book III only "occasional references to union with Christ but not the illuminating penetration we might have expected" (p. 553). Barth is certainly correct in holding that Calvin did not rewrite the Institutes in the light of this doctrine. The present claim is that the "comprehensive and basic significance" of the doctrine of union with Christ illumines the exposition of the Institutes in such an essential way that it may be considered a "central dogma."

¹¹Nature, independent of human nature, has not received the theological attention it deserves, especially in a century so vitally concerned and involved with the dimensions of space on the one hand and the resources of earth (including animals) on the other. But see George S. Hendry, The Theology of Nature (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980).

¹²Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, trans. by Dominican Fathers (Chicago: William Benton, 1952).

¹³Inst. III. 1. 1 (OS IV, 1, 10-19).

¹⁴Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, I, 2, 24, sees a certain line from Paul and John through Docetism through Alexandrian Christology through Eutychianism to Luther. He also sees a line from the Synoptics through Ebionism through Antiochean Christology through Nestorianism to Calvin. These two theses, Barth argues, are mutually related.

¹⁵Inst. III. 1. 1 (OS IV, 2, 4-6). Calvin's major point is that the Holy Spirit is the bond by which the Father and Son are united and the bond by which Christ unites us to himself.

¹⁶If the doctrine of union with Christ is central to Calvin's theology, then it is understandable that predestination, which presents one aspect of this basic doctrine so powerfully, could be seen by synecdoche as the central doctrine of Reformed Christianity.

¹⁷"We cannot know by idle speculation what is the sacred and mystic union between us and Him and again between Him and the Father, but . . . the only way to know it is when He pours His life into us by the secret efficacy of the Spirit" Com. Jn. 14:20 (CO 47, 331). Calvin returns to the importance of the unity between Father and Son and between Christ

and the believer in 17:21 (CO 47, 387). In 16:27 (CO 47, 371) Calvin says, "The only bond of our union with God is union with Christ." The latest available English translation of Calvin's commentaries are cited by book, chapter, and verse and include reference to the volume and page of the Calvini Opera (CO).

¹⁸In Com. I Cor. 1:9 (CO 49, 313) Calvin speaks of the assurance that can be derived from membership in the body of Christ.

¹⁹W. Kolfhaus, Christusgemeinschaft bei Johannes Calvin (Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins Neukirchen Kr. Moers, 1939) expounds Calvin's view of union with Christ at length but does not regard it as central (p. 12). Wilhelm Niesel, Reformed Symbolics, trans. by David Lewis (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1962), p. 181ff. suggests that it is. Neither scholar seeks to describe the possibility of its central location in the Institutes. See the brief interpretation in Charles Partee, Calvin and Classical Philosophy (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977), p. 87ff.

²⁰Com. I Pet. 1:20 (CO 55, 226).

²¹Com. Jn. 14:6 (CO 47, 324).

²²Inst. II. 16. 19 (OS III, 507:1,2-508:1).

²³Inst. III. 11. 10 (OS IV, 191, 27-34).

²⁴Inst. III. 24. 5 (OS IV, 416, 21-4).

²⁵Inst. III. 24. 5 (OS IV, 415:39-416.4); emphasis added.

²⁶Com. I Cor. 11:24 (CO 49, 487). Cf. Inst. IV. 17. 11 (OS V, 354, 22-25).

²⁷Cf. Com. Rom. 6:4-5 (CO 49, 106).

²⁸Com. Rom. 6:5 (CO 49, 106).

²⁹Com. I Cor. 6:15 (CO 49, 398).

³⁰See Helmut Gollwitzer, Coena Domini (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1937), p. 117ff. Also David Willis, "Calvin's Use of Substantia," in Calvinus Ecclesiae Genevensis Custos, pp. 289-301. Wilhelm Niesel, Calvin's Lehre vom Abendmahl (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1930), pp. 50-1 points out that Calvin in the "Second Defense Against Westphal" (CO 9, 70f), rejects and uses the concept of substance side by side. Calvin's Tracts, ed. and translated by Henry Beveridge II (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 277, commenting on Eph. 5:30 (CO 8, 382; 51, 768-70), Calvin insists that this sacred union (ceste union sacree) is a miracle of the Holy Spirit and is not merely "spiritual" but includes our being flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone. Doubtless this view helps to explain the importance which Calvin gives to the "local presence" or the risen and integral humanity of Christ.