

ACTS OF GOD AND THE MEDIATION OF GRACE ACCORDING TO CALVIN

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I begin with two forewords.

The first foreword is to honor the memory of John Leith. John was a reliable combatant for things of ultimate worth, a patient bearer of illness, a stubborn student of texts, and an advocate for keeping together the pastoral and teaching offices.¹ That tradition is kept alive by those who have troubled to convoke this meeting and whom we thank.

The second foreword is to express my pleasure to find myself in this sodality of old and new friends who are devoted to mining and refining the rich legacy of a reformer who chose not to have a movement named after him but did.

INTRODUCTION

The title of my remarks is a compound one: “Acts of God and the Mediation of Grace According to Calvin.” Like most compound titles, the paper is really about the “and.” We will examine the conjunction between events attributed to God and the social consequences

¹ One of the most helpful of John Leith’s insights is the attention he paid to “ethos” in understanding the Reformed heritage, for which see “The Ethos of the Reformed Tradition,” in Donald M. McKim, ed., *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992) 5-17.

of those events.² In doing so, my interest is as much systematic as historical. By “systematic” here I mean the critically thought-through interconnections among the Church’s faith claims for the sake of the proclamation of the gospel. To do this systematic task, however, we shall attend to a representative text in its historical context and ask whether what Calvin says there sheds light on a problem of special urgency to congregations we belong to and minister to today.

THE REPRESENTATIVE TEXT

The representative text is a familiar one. Its importance lies not with its novelty but with its freshness when re-read in subsequent contexts and with the light it sheds on other currents in Calvin’s theology. The passage strikes me as especially relevant whenever there is a tendency (as I perceive there to be today) towards an epistemological docetism. By that term I mean a diminution of the worldly media through which God elects and covenants to be made known.

I refer to the rich passage that appeared first in the 1539 edition, kept thenceforth in the subsequent editions, and finally numbered *Institutes* 1.5.9. Here I use McNeill 61-62; Benoit 1:77-78; and OSC 3:53.³ Calvin’s argument in chapters 1-4 is that God’s glory and wisdom so brilliantly shine forth in creation that everyone, learned or untutored, see them to be the works of God. Calvin extends that argument in chapter five. Speaking of evidences in creation “that serve to illuminate and affirm the divine majesty,” Calvin says:

“...Whithersoever you turn, it is clear that they [“evidences, (*testimonia*) that serve to illuminate and affirm the divine majesty”] can easily be observed with

² In this instance, I primarily mean by “social consequences” the vocation and shaping of the community of believers in Christ and their worldly engagement after the manner of W. Kolffhaus, *Christusgemeinschaft bei Johannes Calvin* (Neukirchen: Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1939); Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); Andre Bieler, *The Social Humanism of Calvin* (Richmond: John Knox, 1964); W. Fred Graham, *The Constructive Revolutionary: John Calvin and His Socio-economic Impact* (Richmond: Knox, 1971); William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 189-229; and Heiko A. Oberman Heiko A. Oberman, *Initia Calvini: The Matrix of Calvin’s Reformation* (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, 1991); David Willis, “The Social Context of the 1536 Edition of Calvin’s *Institutes*,” *Papers from the International Calvin Symposium*, ed. E.J. Furcha (Montreal: McGill University, 1986), 133-153; David Willis, “Calvin’s Prophetic Reinterpretation of Kingship,” *Probing the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Elsie McKee and Brian Armstrong (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 116-134. Alexander J. McKelway, *The Freedom of God and Human Liberation* (London: SCM Press, 1990)

³ John Calvin, *Johannis Calvini Opera Selecta*, 5 vols., ed. P. Barth and W. Niesel (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1926-36 (henceforth designated “OS”)) John Calvin, *Institution de la Religion Chrestienne*, J.-D. Benoit, ed. 5 vols. (Paris: J. Vrin., 1957-) (henceforth designated “CIB”) John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., J. T. McNeill, ed., F. L. Battles, trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) (henceforth designated “CIM”).

the eyes and pointed out with the finger. And here again we ought to observe that we are called [*invitari*] to a knowledge of God: not that knowledge which content with empty speculation, merely flits in the brain, but that which will be sound and fruitful if we duly [*rite*] perceive it, and if it takes root in the heart. For the Lord manifests himself by his powers [*virtutibus*], the force [*vim*] of which we feel within ourselves and the benefits of which we enjoy. We must therefore be much more profoundly affected by this knowledge than if we were to imagine a God of whom no perception came through to us [*nullus ad nos sensus pervenerit*]. Consequently, we know the most perfect way of seeking God, and the most suitable order, is not for us to attempt with bold curiosity to penetrate to the investigation of his essence, which we ought more to adore than meticulously to seek out, but for us to contemplate him in his works whereby he renders himself near and familiar to us, and in some manner communicates himself [*in suis operibus contemplerur quibus se propinquum nobis familiaremque reddit, ac quodammodo communicat*].”

Calvin goes on to cite Paul in Acts 17:27, Psalms 145:5-6, and, in 1543, Augustine, whose brief dictum well summarizes Calvin’s own main point: “...overwhelmed by God’s magnitude we cannot grasp him, we ought to gaze on his works so that we may be remade by his goodness [in Psalm. 145].” (*Institutes* 1,5,9)⁴

TWO THINGS THE TEXT DOES NOT SAY

From this passage — *Institutes* 1,5,9 — there are two conclusions not to be drawn. I use a sort of hermeneutical *via negativa* to get at the positive doctrine otherwise misunderstood.

⁴ “...Il appert de quelque coste qu’on se tourne qu’ils viennent promptement au devant, et nous rencontrent en sorte que nous les marquer de vue et monstrent au doigt. Derechef nous avons ici a noter que nous conviez a une cognoissance de Dieu, non pas telle que plusieurs imaginent, assavoir qui voltige seulement au cerveau en speculant, mais laquelle ait une droit fermete et produises son fruit, voire quand elle est deument comprinse de nous et enracinee au coeur. Car Dieu nous est manifeste par ses vertus, desquelles quand sentons la force et vigueur en nous et iouysson des biens qui en proviennent, c’est bien raison que nous soyons touches beaucoup plus d’une telle apprehension qu’en imaginant un Dieu eslongne de nous, et lequel ne se fist point sentir par effect. Dont aussi nous avons a recueillir que la doite voye de chercher Dieu et le meilleur ordre que nous puissions tenir est, non pas de nous fourrer avec une curiosite trop hardie a esplucher sa maieste, laquelle nous devons plustost adorer que sonder trop curieusement, mais de le contempler en ses oeuvres par lesquelles il se rend prochain et familier a nous, et par maniere de dire se communiqué. A quoy sanict, Paul a regarde en disant qu’il n’est ia mestier de le chercher loing, veu que par sa vertu toute notoire il habite en chacun de nous (Act. 17, 27). Parquoy David, ayant confesse que la grandeur de Dieu ne se peut raconter, estant venu a en parler dit qu’il la racontera (Psal. 145). ... Et comme S. Augustin advertist quelque part: ’Pource que ne le pouvons comprendre, defaillans sous sa grandeur, nous avons a regarder a ses oeuvres pur ester recreez de sa bonte’” (Benoit *Inst.* 1, pp. 77-78).

First, this passage does not mean that Calvin is only interested in the acts of God but he is not interested in the being of God — as he, Calvin, is so often misinterpreted to be saying.⁵

It was a late medieval — actually it is much older and is to be found in abundance in the theologians of the third and fourth centuries — commonplace that God's being or essence is not known by us.⁶ Only the energies, or outward actions of God, are knowable, even in the affective way Calvin is speaking of, i.e., that which takes root in the heart. The being of God is a matter for adoration not speculation, that adoration which constitutes a major component of *pietas*. By speculation is meant — in a polemical context - the fantasizing of the brain supposedly encouraged by the so-called “Sorbonnists” and “theologasters.”⁷ Calvin goes so far as to say more than just that God makes the effects of his works to be sensed: Calvin says that God *quodammodum se nobis communicare*, “in a kind of way communicates himself to us.”

A second conclusion that cannot be drawn from Institutes 1,5,9 is that what counts as a sure source of our knowledge of God is the testimony of a warmed heart. We might paraphrase this error. It considers a largely emotional experience to be a sufficient foundation for true piety.⁸

⁵ David Willis, “Calvin's Use of Substantia,” in *Calvinus Ecclesiae Genevensis Custos*, ed. W. Neuser, Frankfurt-a.-M., Lang, 1984, pp. 289-301. For Calvin's interpretations of Paul, see A. Ganoczy, “Calvin als paulinischer Theologe,” in *Calvinus Theologus*, ed. w. H. Neuser (Neukirchen: Neukirchen Verlag, 1976) 39-69.

⁶ E.R. Hardy, ed., *Christology of the Later Fathers*. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954).

⁷ It is hard to match any one of the teachers at the Sorbonne with people supposedly advocating frigid cerebral activity as the real thing. Rather we are dealing here with those opposed by people who were members of groups like the circle of Meaux headed by Bishop Briconnet or those schooled in those institutions run by the Brethren of the Common Life. The Christian humanists, like Bude, who opposed the so-called Sorbonnists, were certainly learned groups, so long as piety is understood to be a feature of such learning. Their learning was characterized by personal spontaneity, by depth of repentance, by joy in forgiveness, by growth in communal discipline — in short, by the practice of *pietas*. For the diverse influences on Calvin's brand of Christian humanism and late Medieval piety see w.m. Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, op.cit.; Heiko A. Oberman, op.cit.; Francois Wendel, *Calvin et l'Humanism* (Paris: Presse Universitaire, 1976; Francois Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development...*, op.cit, especially pp. 15-107; Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988).

⁸ This issue is a perennial one for those who strive to maintain a balance between piety and learning, as witness the forms in which this struggle took shape in the debates Jonathan Edwards carried on, for which see: George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) especially 201-290; Michael Bush, *Jesus Christ in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 2003; Louis Mitchell, *Jonathan Edwards on the Experience of Beauty* (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2003); Sang Hung Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), and Anri Morimoto, *Jonathan Edwards and the Catholic Vision of Salvation* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

Calvin's heart-rooted knowledge is not a one-sided emphasis on *fides qua* at the expense of *fides quae*. Sensing God's works holds together faith as an act of believing and faith as the content of what is believed. What takes root in the heart is the knowledge of God which results from our senses being quickened at God's works. More than observation of his works is needed to make a heart-rooted knowledge of God, namely the inner work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit takes the outer acts of God and uses them for our internal transformation. It is through his works — first outer, then inner — that God makes his love and care to be sensed by us. The way to our heart is through the senses, not around them - or by minimizing them in a so-called spiritualizing form of Christianity, ancient or modern.

HEART KNOWLEDGE AS RESTORED *SENSUS* OF RIGHT RELATION TO GOD: *CONSCIENTIA*

So much for two misinterpretations of *Institutes* 1,5,9. They are that heart knowledge has nothing to do with the being of God and that a warmed heart is what counts not the content of the faith.

Now to a preliminary positive identification of the heart-rooted knowledge of God.⁹

I want to suggest four things: (a) that this heart-rooted knowledge is concisely but accurately defined as a form of the conscience freed and healed by the gospel; (b) that the experience of a freed conscience (*suasio dulcitatii*) is as much an aesthetic reaction to God's acts as it is a forensic realization; (c) that this heart-rooted delight is the same thing as that proper knowledge of self which Calvin, at the beginning of the *Institutes*, says is one of the two parts of which almost the whole of knowledge consists; and (d) that another word for this knowledge is simply faith defined as "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us founded on the truth of the freely given promise in Christ both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit." (*Institutes*. 3,2,7; McNeill p 551).

⁹ Given the prominence Calvin gives to the knowledge of God and of self, the size of the literature on the subject is not surprising. I mention here only some of the studies which have particularly engaged my attention in rethinking this part of Calvin's teaching. They are: Brian G. Armstrong, "Duplex cognitio Dei, Or The Problem and Relation of Structure, Form, and Purpose in Calvin's Theology," in *Probing the Reformed Tradition*, ed. by E. McKee and B. Armstrong (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989) pp. 135-153; Charles Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977) pp. 29-41; Charles Partee, "Calvin and Experience," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 26,2 (May, 1973) pp. 169-181; T. H.L. Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959); (especially on the Barth-Brunner debate) E.A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, 2nd Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965) and Brian A. Gerrish, "The Mirror of God's Goodness: A Key Metaphor in Calvin's View of Man," Donald K. McKim, ed., *Readings in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 107-122; Donald K. McKim, "Calvin's View of Scripture," Donald K. McKim, ed., *Readings in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 43-68.

In each of these cases and in the four of them taken together, the issue is how we can know God with saving and bold certainty: how do we know that we know — how do we know that what we take for a knowledge of God is not a terribly attractive illusion, a product of our wishful thinking?

For Calvin, the answer is clear, though his answer may strike some as naive tautology and may strike others as one of the great strengths of his doctrine to equip forgiven sinners with bold ethics in a complex world. God's acts distinguish him from the false gods who stick to themselves and do not act in the world to hear and do saving action on behalf of those who belong to him (a point comprehensively argued, for example, in Biblical studies by G. Earnest Wright).¹⁰ This, the true and living God, is the one whose action outward is the presupposition of creation as well as redemption. The certainty of faith rests on the nature of God as the only deed-doer who is utterly reliable as witnessed to by the Word conjoined to the Holy Spirit. That is, (a) the certainty of the Word is assured — the Word is reliably heard- only when the letter is confirmed, made alive, by the testimony of the Holy Spirit; and (b) faith is the God-given trust in the promise that the Word and Spirit are united in eternity and in timely action toward creation, including the means of grace. This is classically put when Calvin interprets 2 Corinthians 3:8 and Phil. 2: 16 to mean that,

“The letter...is dead and the law of the Lord slays its readers where it is both cut off from Christ's grace and, leaving the heart untouched, sounds in the ears alone. But if through the Spirit it is really branded upon hearts, if it shows forth Christ, it is the Word of life....The Word itself is not quite certain for us unless it be confirmed by the testimony of the Spirit...For by a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God's face, shines; and that we in turn may embrace the Spirit with no fear of being deceived when we recognize him in his own image, namely in the Word. So indeed it is. God did not bring forth his Word among men for the sake of a momentary display, intending at the coming of the Spirit to abolish it. Rather, he sent down the same Spirit by whose power he had dispensed the Word, to complete his work by the efficacious confirmation of the Word.” (*Institutes*. 1,9,3; McNeill.95)

¹⁰ Cf. G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (Naperville: Alec Allenson, 1952), recognizes that the acts of God in history are not directly accessible and that they comes to us, are mediated, through the various forms in which their recital engage us. I prefer to call these media of historical confession *doxological memory*, which includes the diverse *Gattungen* by which the people who confess their identity as God's people move that tradition to be increasingly prophetically inclusive. Cf. also Martin Noth, “The ‘Representation’ of the Old Testament in Proclamation,” in Claus Westermann and James Luther Mays, eds., *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1963) pp. 76-88.

This heart-rooted knowledge is the result of the interaction of two sets of inseparable factors — affective change in the knowing person and the acts of God.¹¹ As Calvin again puts it *Institutes* 3,2,36,

“It now remains to pour into the heart itself what the mind has absorbed. For the Word of God is not received by faith if it flits about in the top of the brain, but when it takes root in the depth of the heart, that it may be an invincible defense to withstand and drive off all the stratagems of temptation. But if it is true that the mind’s real understanding is illumination by the Spirit of God, then in such confirmation of the heart his power is much more clearly manifested, to the extent that the heart’s distrust is greater than the mind’s blindness. It is harder for the heart to be furnished with the assurance than for the mind to be endowed with thought. The Spirit accordingly serves as a seal, to seal up in our hearts those very promises the certainty of which it has previously impressed upon our minds; and takes the place of a guarantee to confirm and establish them.” (McNeill, 583-584)

This heart kind of knowing goes deeper than the mind alone or the body alone. The *sensus* which the divine majesty effects through creation is an inner and outer experience. It is an affection of the body and of the mind. The outer act impinges on the corporeal faculty but is not restricted to it, just as the inner perception is tied to the mental faculty but not

¹¹¹ This event of grace, this sheer gift, can be put formally (if a bit clumsily). Heart-rooted knowledge of God is

the knowing person’s

mind and

heart affected by

(a) God’s acts toward us as

(1) accommodation of the Word of God to be the enfleshed Mediator

(i) witnessed to by Scripture and the ordinary means of grace of the believing community and

(ii) the work of the Eternal Word through creation as read with the spectacles of Scripture,¹¹ and

(2) accommodation of the *Holy Spirit*,

(i) not only in redemption as the bond of the mystical union of Christ and his body

(ii) but also in creation and historical events as interpreted by the mediating community. .

restricted to it.¹² It is not the case that one aspect is what we today might call “objective” and the other what we might call “subjective.” Both inner and outer are (if we choose to use the terms objective and subjective) “objective” in the sense that they are not just a matter of our perspectives. What we might be tempted to call the subjective side is the inner dictates of the conscience that, according to Calvin, itself is an expression of the natural law that belongs to the structure of creation.¹³ The truth of the gospel confronts the sinner, confrontation that moves us to repentance. The twofold experience (*duplex experientia*)¹⁴ is a mediated knowing in two ways. First, it is mediated because it occurs through the senses. To put it more accurately, this twofold experience is a *sensus* of one’s location in relation to the rest of

¹² The terms “inner” and “outer” can be as confusing as their synonyms and as the explanations intended to clarify. “Inner” was and is usually used to mean the same as “heart” and “soul” — but these last terms often mean the whole person. “Mind” also has an “inner” connotation: “mind” was and is usually used to mean the same as the faculty (another tricky term) of cognition, thought, reason, cerebral activity having most to do with identifying, clarifying and drawing conclusions about comparative ideas. “Outer” usually was and is used, almost tautologically, as that which extends beyond — lies behind — is what is perceived as the “out there” reference of what is inwardly experienced. Bishop Berkeley’s formulations are very much with us in modern guise when we raise again and again the question whether or not there is anything beyond, more than, a person’s perception of his or her perception or his or her perception *ad infinitum*. My computer is loaded with metaphysical presuppositions, as, for example, when it regularly tells me, when I wish to save a document, “The suchandsuch.doc already exists. Do you want to replace it with the existing file?” Much of the confusion — and much of the pragmatic ability to communicate even with slippery terms — comes from the ancient and present habit of speech whereby “body”, “soul”, and “mind” are of overlapping referents, both inner and outer. In this paper, I am intending to show that thinkers like Calvin saw the connection between the inner and outer without coalescing them. That is, there is a somatic dimension to cognition, there is a psychic dimension to the body, and so on. Heart knowledge occurs when one knows with all these triadically overlapping and mutually reinforcing dimensions.

¹³ The summary is given in *Institutes*. 1,5,13 (“b”): “It is therefore in vain that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author. Although they bathe us wholly in their radiance, yet they can of themselves in no way lead us into the right path. Surely they strike some sparks, but before their fuller light shines forth these are smothered. For this reason, the apostle, in that very passage where he calls the worlds the images of things invisible [*dit que le monde est comme une effigie ou spectacle des chose invisible*], adds that through faith we understand that they have been fashioned by God’s word [*c’est par foy qu’on cognoist qu’il a este aussie bien compasse et approprié par la parole de Dieu* [Heb. 11:3].[[FN: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old received divine approval. By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear.” RSV]] He means by this that the invisible divinity is made manifest in such spectacles, but that we have not the eyes to see this unless they be illumined by the inner revelation of God through faith.” [*combien la maieste invisible de Dieu soit manifestee par tel miroirs, que nous n’avons pas les yeux pour la contempler iusques a ce qu’ils soyent illuminez ar la revelation secrete qui nous est donne d’enhaut.* (*Institutes*. 1,5,14; McNeill, p. 68 — “b”); Benoit 1: 83-84)

¹⁴ I am not sure Calvin himself uses this term. I use it to underline the act that in his thought, the experience is two forms of the same reality.

creation and, ultimately, one's relation to the creator. Second, this experience is mediated because it is a manifestation of God's presence through the same Word who became incarnate. This is the very same Word by whom all things were made and whose vestiges, including the conscience, are evident in the wisdom and majesty of creation. Many people today consider the conscience a purely subjective or culturally utterly variable matter - if indeed conscience is even considered a matter for serious anthropology. But for Calvin, the conscience is an objective witness to the justice and beauty of creation. As one form of the law, conscience functions to move people to repentance and guide them in righteous, joyful living.¹⁵ Even a bad conscience is a kind of good news. A troubled conscience is better than an almost extinct conscience. I say an "almost extinct conscience" because time and again an almost extinct conscience is like ashes or sparks that the Spirit blows on to make a dormant fire flare up again. That is what a reawakening is all about. Repentance is an effect of the gospel: to move us from a sense of being rejected by God to that sense of God's favor in Christ which is the same as the knowledge of God's benevolence that takes root in the heart. That is why Calvin puts it in terms of descending into oneself.

We must therefore admit in God's individual works — but especially in them as a whole — that God's powers are actually represented as in a painting. Thereby the whole of mankind is invited and attracted to recognition of him, and from this to true and compete happiness. Now those powers appear most clearly in his works. Yet we comprehend their chief purpose, their value, and the reason why we should ponder them, only when we descend into ourselves and contemplate by what means the Lord shows in us his life, wisdom and power; and exercises in our behalf his righteousness, goodness and mercy. (*Institutes*, 1,5,10, McNeil, 61 ("b"))¹⁶

For Calvin, there is a kind of parallel between: (a) on the one hand, the Word's external work of creation and the same Word's work of redemption; and, (b) on the other hand, our observation of God's external acts and of our conscience as the self's sense of its relation to God.

The knowledge of God by the Holy Spirit through creation and through Scripture means that we rightly see God's salvific purposes even behind providence.¹⁷ Indeed, we are

¹⁵ See Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956) 92-103; John Hesselink, "Christ, the Law, and the Christian," in Donald K. McKim, ed., *Readings in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House) 179-191

¹⁶ McNeill cross references *Institutes* 1,1,2 and 1,5,3 n.11. See the note on *se descendere* which McNeill interprets largely negatively — or at least as cause for repentance, whereas I think it can just as well refer to the microcosm which is treated as a parallel to the macrocosm, as part of the theater of God's glory. However, Calvin does, indeed, in the next section — 1,5,11 — go on to berate our stupidity (we become increasingly dull) and the ravings of the evil imaginings of our flesh — and refers to Plato as "the most religious of all and the most circumspect, [who] also vanishes in his round globe" (pp. 63-64).

¹⁷ Cf. Charles Partee, "Calvin on Universal and Particular Providence," in Donald McKim, ed., *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, op. cit., 69-88; Benjamin W. Farley, "The Providence of God in Reformed Perspective," in Donald K. McKim, ed., *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992) 87-93.

moved to trust that even the most unlikely developments are ultimately turned to God's sovereign ends.

That confession is as often as not — perhaps more often than not — made only in retrospection, if we are to take seriously the sweep recounted in Hebrews 12 and 13. Such benevolent purpose is not self-evident; faith is its discernment. The ultimacy of benevolence is seen above all in the assurance that the true meaning of being created in the image of God is known from its restoration. (*Institutes* 1,15,4) The Word by whom all creation is the same whose proclamation frees the sinner to know God to be the benevolently trustworthy one in whom alone is assurance of pardon. The restored conscience is the freed conscience — freed from works righteousness, freed to practice the law, freed to practice indifference to indifferent things (*Institutes* 3,19).

SOME CONTEMPORARY SYSTEMATIC IMPLICATIONS OF CALVIN'S DOCTRINE

I say "some" implications because different features will occur to other students of Calvin's work. I say some "implications" because they are logical concomitants of Calvin's understanding of the mediation of grace.

First, God's acts are accommodations to our condition through the senses.

The term "sense" may refer to "meaning" as when we say this or that does or does not "make sense." "Sense" may also refer to the five — some would say six — ways we as living organisms observe and relate to the external world. It is in this second sense that I have in mind when I say grace is mediated through the senses: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching. (For the moment I am taking intuition not to be another sense but the creative interaction of the five.) Something — say a cluster of grapes — being tasted entails both the thereness of the sugar content and the recipient taster. If we describe the taste, the words can be efficacious to make a listener's mouth water. When that happens, we have caused an image in another person's imagination that acts like an external stimulus to quicken the sense of taste. Whether the image be external or imagined, communication occurs though "sensible" awakening and directing.

I have just used a word — "sensible" — as the French do to refer to that which pertains to the senses, for which we do not have an equivalent in English. "Sensible" in English has the over tones of level-headed, "sensitive" has the overtone of sympathetic, and sensual — which comes closest - has been trivialized to have only the overtone of sexual — to the detriment of both sex and sense! Think of Proust's recognition of the close relation between smells and memory. When we read Proust, his words evoke in the reader the smell the author is describing, so in the reader a secondary taste event takes place. The communication of sensually observable events by means of words applies to the written no less than heard words — hence the close relation between acts of God and their recounting in verse and song and telling. Thus we say that such and such an image, or sign, or word, or symbol (or tune that we say is stuck in our mind all day) "moves us."

That is what we mean when we speak of the efficacy of the Word to create this or that movement of the heart and mind. Scriptures themselves and proclamation out of the Scriptures are "sensible" means of grace. God accommodates to our condition by making

himself to be mediated through our senses. The same applies to the prophetic exhortation “Hear the Word of the Lord” and the dictum that “Proclamation of the Word is a Word of the Lord.” By God’s fresh choice, by his free and utterly reliable action, by his renewed promises — his *pactum* — the Lord conveys his favor and strengthens us in trusting that accommodation

Second, the mediation of grace is after the manner of the Incarnation.

Mediation is defined by the Mediator. This does not mean that the forms of mediation are extensions of the Incarnation; but it does mean that they, the means of grace, are congruent analogs to the singular person who is the eternal Word enfleshed. In fact, they are ways that singular act is efficacious among us, instruments by which he continues his presence and activity, media by which he keeps his promise to be with his followers unto the end of the age.

When we speak of the acts of God we are referring not to one of a series all of equal reality and import. The Mediator is the defining act of God in the light of which the others are rightly taken to heart — are heartfeltdly known. An analogy says what things are alike — but also how they differ. The Incarnation is unique. The elements — say of bread and wine - are and remain creatures to which the hypostatic union does not apply. That was part of Calvin’s objection to transubstantiation, namely that it threatened the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper because it — the doctrine of transubstantiation — undercut the reality of the bread and wine through which Christ, true to his promises, is present by the work of the Holy Spirit.

That is one of the things that is important about the specificity of saying the man Jesus is Mediator. It does not mean that Christ’s humanity is not united to his divinity. But it does mean that the humanity is physical, material, like us in all respects save sin. The eternal Word takes up — assumes — the whole of our human condition so that the whole of the human condition may be restored and reset in the right growth in wholeness. The flesh is the reality through which this particular God — forget the other gods — has chosen and continues to choose to be benevolent towards all creation. The humanity of God leads to the confession of the identity of the God who encounters us and joins us to himself by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit moves us along through the humanity to the divinity. The election of God to dwell among us full of grace and truth is the ground and presupposition of the many means of grace. Moving us to trust that reality, moving us to take this fundamental fact to heart, is the chief work of the Spirit in the matter of our salvation.¹⁸ That is the signet act of the Holy Spirit — to unite us to Christ and to each other into his body, a unity transcending every humanly inspired barrier.¹⁹

¹⁸ Cf. Werner Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin*. (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957); Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983); Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994)

¹⁹ The specificity of this central act of mediating grace is what — at least in the West — the *filioque* is all about: that just as the Word and Spirit are eternally united, so the acts of God — including say the written and preached Word- are trusted to be historical manifestations of the grace of the benevolent God we know in Christ to be at work in countless ways also beyond the Church.

Third, it is through the ordinary means, the sensible media, of grace exchanged among members of the body of Christ that these promises are conveyed so their truth becomes revealed to the mind and sealed on the heart.

Faith comes from hearing — apprehension by all the senses - the good news passed on by those who welcome one another as Christ has welcomed them, i.e. those whom the bond of the Holy Spirit has united to Christ and to each other. The dynamics of this union is the subject of the largest of the four books of the Institutes entitled “The External Means [*moyens exterieurs*] or Aids by Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein [*nous convier a Iesus son Fils, et nous retenir en lui*].”

That means that ecclesiology is far more central to the assurance of faith than we of Protestant conviction tend to acknowledge. The radical fact is that believers belong to and are part of the whole Christ. We cannot even begin accurately to conceive of Christ — he is not accurately conceivable — apart from those whom he chose and chooses to unite to himself by the power of the Word and Spirit. Our heart-rooted knowledge of God’s benevolence includes the knowledge that we are members of the body of Christ, that we are part of the *totus Christus*. We need reinforcing in the knowledge that we belong to that society of repenting sinners whom Christ covers with the garment of his — his — righteousness. Christology includes ecclesiology and shapes it. Our assurance of faith is our conviction — mortification and vivification — that we are co-members of the body of Christ, co-members of the bride awaiting the bridegroom, persons gifted by the Spirit to exercise Christ’s own ministry in Christ’s own world.

The Mediator is also the Mediated One. Calvin’s stance within a tradition of mysticism had been long neglected or recognized but minimized. However, it is clearly there. Remember, for example, *Institutes* 3,2,24 where Calvin speaks of our union with Christ and our daily growing more and more one with him. Calvin inherited the distinction I have just used, that between the whole Christ (*totus Christus*) and the entirety of Christ. The former is Christ together with the members of his body, i.e., those whom the Holy spirit has bound to Christ and moved to faith. The image of a body of members joined to its head is, obviously, analogical language — and therefore (not despite) more true than a literal proposition. The reality warps the fabric of language. Heart-rooted knowledge is deeper than literal expression. Christ is present - indeed, united — to us by his perpetual choice, by his sustained election to deliver himself over to his members. Jesus Christ the Mediator submits himself to be delivered, the Mediator mediated. The media of that self-delivery are the ordinary, and extraordinary means of grace.²⁰ Now and in the life to come believers’ lives are hid in Christ- hid, yes, but in Christ, most assuredly. The analogy of the vine and the branches is also about the life of believers in Christ. Where the service of the Word takes place — for example through proclamation and the sacraments and prayer (which Westminster a century after Calvin also calls the ordinary means of grace), Christ is delivered to make his presence a part of our experience by the power of the Holy Spirit.

²⁰ Ronald S. Wallace, “The Preached Word as the Word of God,” in Donald K. McKim, ed. *Readings...op.cit.*, 231-243; Wilhelm Niesel, “The Sacraments,” in Donald K. Kim, ed. *Readings... op.cit.*, 244-259; Dawn DeVries, “The Incarnation and the Sacramental Word,” in D. Willis and M. Welker, eds., *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) pp. 386-405

Fourth, the Holy Spirit is at work both in the external evidences of God's presence and activity and in the internal transforming recognition that makes a neutral human — or lukewarm religious person — into a devout believer.

The Holy Spirit is *Creator Spiritus et Redemptor Spiritus*. Calvin speaks of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit which confirms that Scripture's author is God: as a seal, the internal testimony of the Spirit validates God as its source — like the seal of a signet ring on the wax of an official document (or a notary's embossing on an official paper today). The internal, hidden action is by the same Spirit who is at work outwardly, patently in the rest of creation. In referring to Hebrews 11:3, Calvin (in *Institutes* 1,5,14) says that "He means by this that the invisible divinity is made manifest in such spectacles, but that we have not the eyes to see this unless they be illumined by the inner revelation of God through faith."²¹

For Calvin, things are because God chooses them to become. That can be put another way: in bringing into existence what was not, God discloses himself to be the one God who elects to be joyously known, trusted, obeyed, and delighted in. The acts of God are ways God's covenanting purposes are made known, sustained, and directed. The whole rests on the sovereign benevolence of God who sets set in motion the ripples of divine favor, grace whose benefits we enjoy by faith. The term "mean of grace" is misleading only if by "grace" is meant some infused substance. The term "means of grace" is entirely in order if what is meant by "grace" is God's favor on which the whole economy of salvation — indeed eventually creation — depends. The media by which we know in a saving way are the means of grace and faith includes trusting those means, trusting God who promises to mediate his presence through those chosen means. They are to be trusted as instruments of the Spirit. They are such to faith in the sense that what the believer puts his or her trust in shapes the choice of which things are worth remembering and celebrating.

What are called acts of God, say in Psalm 145, are seen as such by the community of faith. In its liturgy, holy days of remembrance, Sabbath rest, body language, psalmody - all that constitutes pure worship - the community proclaims that it is its covenanting God who is this or that praiseworthy event. Faith functions in a highly selective manner when it makes such claims. The claims are selected and shaped by their doxological intent. It is through these proclaimed events that God principally chooses to be known. That includes their function to provide the perspectives through which God's self-disclosure in creation is rightly interpreted. Faith is historically transmitted and culturally conditioned if it is to be knowledge of the Holy One of Israel and the Church.

CONCLUSION

It is a matter of existential urgency to ask the question, How do God's acts then and there, pointed to in the scriptures, become experienced by us here and now: what do we mean by acts of God and how do they become true for us? Calvin offers us some helpful guides to answering these questions also in today's terms. I have been less interested in putting a label to Calvin's epistemology than in pointing to some features of how it functions in the life of believers. There were tendencies in Calvin's time as there are in our

²¹ ...combien la maieste invisible de Dieu soit manifestee par tel miroirs, que nous n'avons pas les yeux pour la contempler iusques a ce qu'ils soyent illuminez par la revelation secrete qui nous est donne d'enhaut. (*Inst.* 1,5,14; *McN.* P. 68 —"b"; *Benoit* 1: 83-84)

times to spiritualize the church and even to eschew the term "means of grace." These spiritualizing tendencies were and are reinforced: by misunderstanding what is meant by the invisible Church; and by suspecting that the physical elements easily come to be considered as more than instruments, thus blurring the radical distinction between Creator and creature. *Institutes* 1,5,9 is a representative text that will do much to dispel these errors.

While these dangers are real, Calvin and the Genevan wing of the Reformed tradition did not let those negative fears obscure the dynamic physicality of the acts through which God's makes himself to be heart-rootedly known by the work of the Holy Spirit. The acts of God are the material that the Holy Sprit uses to quicken, affect, stimulate our external and internal sensing the truth of God's benevolence to the whole creation in general and believers in particular. That dynamic knowledge of God is the result and manifestation of God's free accommodation to the human condition, physical as well as spiritual and intellectual condition, sinful as well as finite condition. Faith that is heart-rooted knowledge is mediated knowledge: we rightly call the means of grace the ways Christ "not only draws near to us but in a fashion communicates himself to us." The means of grace are the media through which God's conveys his presence and activity to bring us into God's own creative and redemptive activity in his world. They are the route by which the initiating acts of God become efficacious to make believers out of people.

Totus Christus is Mediator of grace, so that trusting the freely given promises in Christ entails trusting the gifts though which faith is awakened and strengthened. A workable assurance of faith comes from knowing — mind and heart — that the efficacy of God's works continue as he shows his ultimate benevolence to all. Rather than be suspicious of the physical media by which faith is quickened and guided, believers are those who trust that God will continue to meet them and transform them through the instruments of his favor.

Oh taste and see — for that matter, hear and touch and smell —how good the Lord is!