

CALVIN'S THEOLOGICAL USE OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

by
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Measuring the Immeasurable

"Quam stultum sit eius immensitatem modo nostro velle metiri. How foolish is it to wish to measure God's immensity by our measure." So wrote Calvin in the Institutes, posing a rhetorical question which should answer itself.¹ Or so one would think, but it was not altogether so in the sixteenth century, and it is surely not so in the latter decades of the twentieth. Yet Calvin's thought was firmly based in a long tradition of catholic Christian reflection and theology. In recognizing the inability of unaided human capacity to reach to and understand God, Calvin followed Augustine, Nicholas of Cusa, and a host of other learned Christians in advocating a "learned ignorance."²

For Calvin this was not an obscurantist position, although for others it may be. Calvin had an extraordinarily high view of what humanity, whether Christian or not, could achieve in many fields within the bounds of this life by diligent inquiry and the use of reason. Of the arts and sciences he wrote, "If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God." For Calvin, the contributions made to human knowledge by jurists, philosophers (and scientists), rhetoricians, physicians, and mathematicians were immense; such achievements show man "to be a rational being, different from brute beasts, because he is endowed with understanding," and Calvin held that "in the arrangement of this life no man is without the light of reason."⁴

And yet, valuable as all this is "in the arrangement of this life," these approaches can offer as a knowledge of God no more than "a slight taste of his divinity." Although philosophers and poets may sense the existence of the divine, when it comes to a full awareness of God and of his fatherly favor to us, Calvin wrote, in a particularly beautiful passage, that even the greatest geniuses are "like a traveler passing through a field at night who in a momentary lightning flash sees far and wide, but the sight vanishes so swiftly that he is plunged again into the darkness of the night before he can take even a step--let alone be directed on his way by its help."⁵

And for all of us, whatever may be our natural gifts, our sins form a cloud of unknowing that shuts us off from any reliable, self-generated vision of God, so that in the realm of "the pure knowledge of God, the nature of true righteousness and the mystery of the Heavenly Kingdom," we cannot understand rightly apart from the gracious and providential self-disclosure of God. Calvin regarded the alternative position--that we may be able

solely by our own reason or study or intuition to understand God--as a massive violation both of reason and of revelation, because surely we should not expect to measure God's immeasurableness by any little measure of our own. He could thus declare that "it is not without reason that the judgments of God are called an unfathomable abyss."

Qualis sit Deus?

If the little measurements attainable through our purely human perception are entirely inadequate for measuring the incomensurability of God, how then are we mortal and limited creatures to know God? In the Institutes, Calvin suggested that the first issue is to phrase the question rightly. If we ask quid sit Deus, what is God, the form of the question will invite idle speculations, for we cannot know God in himself. It is more to the point to begin by asking qualis sit Deus. In effect, the change of the first word in the question opens the way to Calvin's principal and overriding concern: what God is like to us.⁸

Several chapters later, the Institutes reiterates the same crucial point, that God "is shown to us not as he is in himself, but as he is toward us--nobis describitur non quis sit apud se, sed qualis erga nos."⁹ Moving forward once again, we find the same issue dealt with in the third book: "In understanding faith it is not merely a question of knowing that God exists, but also--and this especially--of knowing what is his will toward us. For it is not so much our concern to know who he is in himself [quis in se sit], as what he wills to be toward us [qualis esse nobis velit]."¹⁰

Calvin's answer to the qualis esse nobis velit question, as Ford Lewis Battles summarized it, is that "patiently God, through our history, accommodates his ways of revelation to our condition. Thus, par excellence, the Word made flesh and the written word from which he speaks is God accommodating himself to us."¹¹ Here we can recognize the basic principles of Christian epistemology which Calvin adduced from the Scriptures and from the great theological tradition of reflection on the Scriptures. Those basic assumptions include at least the following: What we most need to know about God can come only from God, and it does come through God's self-disclosure in the incarnate Word and the written Word; such self-disclosure is not total (many aspects of God we do not and cannot and need not understand); furthermore, that self-disclosure is typically couched in terms accommodated to the limits of human capacity; the human need for God's accommodation of himself in order for us to understand him and his will for us is not directed only to the mentalités of primitive people, but "experience shows, [it] to be no less necessary to us than to the ancient fathers."¹² These are the assumptions underlying the "principle of accommodation" which Calvin found in the Scriptures and in the Fathers of the Church and which became central to his understanding of how God's reality and purpose for

us are conveyed to us in revelation. For Calvin, "the principle of accommodation always intervenes" in revelation between the divine revealer and the believer, as Dowey put it, or in Battles' words, "in all his ways with man, God is accommodating his infinity to our small measure," or as William J. Bouwsma writes in his recently published book on Calvin, the reformer emphasized that Scripture was "everywhere accommodated by God's decorum to human understanding."¹³

In the Word made flesh we find the principal and central, although not the only, accommodation by God to our human condition. As the Institutes expressed it with precision and eloquence, "the Father, himself infinite, becomes finite in the Son, for he has accommodated himself to our little measure lest our minds be overwhelmed by the immensity of his glory."¹⁴ According to Calvin's Commentary on I John 1:22-23, exposure to the unaccommodated majesty of God would dazzle our eyes and blind us. That divine light was made accessible to us through Jesus Christ the Son, "who is called the image of the Father (Heb. 1:3) because he sets forth and exhibits to us all that is necessary to be known of the Father."¹⁵ In his Commentary on I Peter 1:20, Calvin used still different words to make the same point once again: "through Christ, God in a manner makes himself little [quodammodo parvum facit] in order to accommodate himself to our comprehension [ut se ad captum nostrum submittat]."¹⁶ Just as the person, life, and work of the incarnate Son provide the key to everything else in Christian faith and life, so the Word made flesh provides the key to the written Word. The incarnation was God's ultimate accommodation; as such it was historical and not figurative, although the Son himself often used figurative language in teaching about himself and about the Father.

Anthropopatheia

Our focus here is upon Calvin's interpretation of figurative language as used in Scripture and in interpreting Scripture. Without a recognition of the figurative, Calvin held, we cannot properly understand God's accommodation to our need through the written Word. In the Institutes, he made this point in reference to Isa. 65:2, where God is described as stretching out his arms to recall a rebellious people. That example of the anthropomorphic "arms" of God led Calvin to express an important critical principle: If anyone wishes "to apply all this [human arms, etc.] to God, disregarding the figure of speech, many superfluous contentions will arise." Ford Battles' English translation, "superfluous contentions," is typically careful and responsible, but I prefer something closer to the awkwardness of the letter of Calvin's Latin, which reads multae supervacuae contentiones, labeling as "supervacuous" those contentions that arise from not knowing how to deal with figurative language.¹⁷

I have referred to the outstretched arms of God as an anthropomorphism, because that is the familiar term used in our time, but Calvin chose instead to use the Greek word anthropopatheia, which is translated into English as anthropopathy. Calvin's choice of this word was probably due to the primary identification of "anthropomorphism" with the heretical sect of the Anthropomorphites, who in the fourth century disturbed the church in Syria and North Africa by insisting upon a grossly material view of God.¹⁸ Calvin described them as imagining "a corporeal God from the fact that Scripture often ascribes to him a mouth, ears, eyes, hands, and feet." For Calvin, "such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness."¹⁹

God often made such "descents" in the figurative language of Scripture, and Calvin referred to this kind of figure both as metaphor and anthropopathy, the latter forming a subset of metaphor. Calvin described as metaphorical God's promise in Exodus 6:6f. to redeem Israel "with an outstretched arm," whereas he described the same action in Isaiah 65:2 as anthropopathy, as we saw. Similarly, where Psalm 10:1 describes God "standing afar off," Calvin commented that this "is an improper sense, and by anthropopathy," with a marginal gloss in the French edition explaining anthropopathy as the attributing to God of "the passions, affections, and manners of men."²⁰ Where Genesis 6:6 reports that God repented that he had created man on the earth, Calvin treated this as anthropopathy: because "we cannot comprehend God as he is, it is necessary that, for our sake, he should, in a certain sense, transform himself," as Calvin said happened "in many passages of Scripture."²¹

Figures, Signs, and Reality

In such instances of anthropopathy, as with other forms of figurative language in the Scriptures, Calvin always found substantive references to God's truth. Although these tropes are not literally true, they are nonetheless essentially true. This conception (like many I treat in this paper) was not invented by Calvin, but can be traced back to the patristic centuries. The Byzantine theologian Maximus Confessor expressed the matter with aphoristic force when he wrote that "Scripture spoke in a way that was not literally accurate in order to enable its readers to grasp what transcended literal accuracy."²² So Calvin discussed the "image of God" with confidence that its lack of physical univocality did not impair its spiritual truth: "Were these figurative modes of expression which represent the Lord in a human manner [anthropopathos], in adaptation to our feeble capacity, so anxiously employed by Moses for a thing of naught? Were it not to give an exalted idea of the image of God impressed on man? . . . We hold that nothing can bear the image of God but spirit, since God is a spirit."²³ As with direct anthropopathic descriptions of God, so it was with indirect accounts.

Thus Calvin regarded Stephen's vision revealing "the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God" as utterly trustworthy, yet he wrote that "for mine own part, I think there was nothing changed in the nature of the heavens, . . . [and even if] we grant that there was some division or parting made in heaven, yet man's eye could not reach so far. . . . Whereupon it followeth that the miracle was not wrought in heaven, but in his eyes." Indeed, as Calvin carefully pointed out, "properly speaking, that is, scientifically, there is no place above the heavens," and "the whole text is a metaphor." Yet Stephen's vision was both miraculous and true, in that "the glory of God appeared not unto Stephen wholly as it was, but according to man's capacity."²⁴

So too with the vision that came to Isaiah in the year that King Uzziah died: "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple." The vision is not literally accurate, because God "never appeared as he is in himself but as he could be understood by human minds. . . . Therefore Isaiah was shown a form of a kind which enabled him with his own understanding to taste the inconceivable majesty of God," as Calvin put it. Although the vision was not a literally accurate picture of God as he is in himself, neither was it "a game with such meaningless shapes as men use when they distort God with their inventions." Since it was God's chosen way of directly addressing Isaiah and, Calvin concluded, "since the vision was in no way a false symbol of the presence of God, Isaiah is right in asserting that he saw God."²⁵ In a similar way Daniel 7:9 described the Ancient of Days with "garment white as snow and the hair of his head like the pure wool; his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire," on which Calvin commented with characteristically dry wit that "God in reality neither occupies any throne, nor is carried on wheels." He added that although "we ought not to imagine God in his essence to be like any appearance to his own prophets," nevertheless such appearances "afforded them a taste of his presence for the sure acknowledgment of his Deity; . . . they comprehended him as far as it was useful for them and they were able to bear it."²⁶

More than once he flatly declared that "scientifically speaking there is no place above the skies."²⁷ References to our Father in heaven, and to Christ on the right hand of the Father, are not in any sense astronomical reports, but "by asking us to raise our eyes to heaven, exalt the Deity of God above all his creatures," and "for this reason, it is well to raise our hands up while we pray."²⁸ In other words, Calvin charged Christians to follow the teachings of the Scriptures as authoritative in matters of faith and life, but not for guidance in such disciplines as astronomy. This is the essential, theological truth in all such biblical references. Similarly, where Ephesians 4:8-10 refers to Christ "ascended above all heavens," Calvin commented

wryly, "when we say that Christ is in heaven, we must not imagine that he is somewhere among the cosmic spheres, counting the stars!"²⁹ Again he wrote that "when God is said to be in heaven, it is not meant that he is inside it [again, note the wry humor]; we must remember the words 'heaven of heavens do not contain him.' This expression sets God apart from all creatures, and warns us that no mean and earthly thoughts about him should enter our minds, because he is higher than the whole world."³⁰

In such interpretations, Calvin was in effect doing three things. Above all, he was striving to make clear the saving meaning of the Word of God, but he was also removing occasions for idolatry among the gullible, and he was clearing away stumbling blocks for the more sophisticated. His Geneva Catechism of 1541/45 declared that "there is no need for the reality to agree at all points with the symbol, if only it suit sufficiently for the purpose of symbolizing."³¹ That is an utterly basic principle: for Calvin, the sign is valid because of the authority of God's providential use of the Scriptures for our instruction, regardless of whether the sign is literally accurate or literally inaccurate.³²

Metaphors

Most of the examples cited thus far are metaphors, although they may³³ also fit under some closely related term such as anthropopathy.

Whether as a general or as a more specific term, metaphor meant a carrying over or a carrying beyond, and referred to the transference of a particular word from its obvious or "proper" use to a new sense, which is taken as analogous to it. For example, Calvin cited "scales of justice" as a metaphor for the legal weighing of opposing sides in a law case in order to reach an equitable judgment: this is a "carrying over" or "carrying beyond" the obvious or dictionary reference of scales, because judges do not use physical scales, but it is analogous and appropriate because judges do weigh evidence.³⁴

In my observation at least, metaphors are cited more frequently than any other rhetorical term in Calvin's writings, and it would be well to consider at more length how he treated this form. He commented on Jesus' saying "You are the salt of the earth" by observing that "our Lord skillfully pursues his metaphor" through to the conclusion that spoiled salt is good for nothing, "and communicates barrenness even to dunghills."³⁵ On a more pleasant topic, Calvin taught that the twenty-third Psalm was unified about "the metaphor of the shepherd," which is carefully developed throughout, and he added that in the Bible God "often assumes the title and role of shepherd," as that metaphor was converted into a standard appellation for God.³⁶ On the washing of the disciples' feet at the Last Supper, along with the

assurance that only the feet needed to be washed, he held that "the term feet . . . is metaphorically applied to all the passions and cares by which we are brought into contact with the world," and which need to be cleansed "daily," but not by anything so complete as repeated baptism.³⁷ As for the descriptions of hell as punishment by fire, sulphur, brimstone, and worms that turn not, he advised against being preoccupied with "subtle discourses" and "idle speculation with which silly people weary themselves for nothing," and interpreted the entire picture as metaphorical. But this is certainly not to say that Calvin regarded flaming fire and brimstone as what some of our contemporaries (even theological contemporaries) would naively call a "mere metaphor," meaning thereby that it either means nothing or almost nothing. For Calvin it meant the ultimate horror of separation from God; "which we can neither imagine nor express properly [properly meaning in its own terms] with our words."³⁸

Especially interesting is Calvin's metaphorical interpretation of a Pauline passage used by Roman Catholic exegetes to provide a firm biblical foundation for the existence of purgatory. In I Corinthians 3:12-15, Paul referred to the fire that will reveal "what sort of work each one has done," adding that "if any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire." Here, Calvin said, his adversaries "claim to have an invincible phalanx. . . . What fire, they ask, can this be but that of purgatory by which the filth of sins is cleansed away that we may enter into the Kingdom of God as pure men?" Calvin argued in reply that Paul was not speaking of a literal purging fire, but that he

used a metaphor when he called the doctrines devised by men's own brains "wood, hay, and stubble." As "hay, wood, and stubble" are set on fire, they are suddenly consumed. Thus the inventions of men, not grounded in the Word of the Lord, cannot bear testing by the Holy Spirit, but immediately fall and perish. . . . [Yet the foolish people themselves may be] "saved, but as through fire." [I Cor. 3:15] That is, not that their ignorance and delusion are acceptable to the Lord, but because they are cleansed from these by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, anyone who fouls the golden purity of God's Word with this filth of purgatory must undergo the loss of his work.³⁹

It was a skillfully managed point, showing that his opponents' claim of Pauline authority for purgatory was not an "invincible phalanx" as they claimed, but was instead the kind of combustible shoddy work that Paul prophesied God's fire would indeed destroy. Calvin's refutation was made possible by his firm grasp of metaphorical operations and meanings: there would indeed be a cleansing fire, but it would be the Holy Spirit's rejection of man-made doctrines such as purgatory.

Calvin's rebuttal of the purgatorial interpretation of those four verses in I Corinthians was rhetorically sophisticated, even if it may have impressed his adversaries as somewhat contrived, but it stopped well short of turning the metaphor into an allegory. Calvin knew the difference as well as anyone, and he observed it carefully. Of King Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 4, he wrote that this whole passage is "metaphorical--nay, properly speaking, it is an allegory, since an allegory is only a continued metaphor. If Daniel had only represented the king under the figure of a tree, it would have been a metaphor; but when he continues his own train of thought in a continuous tenor, his discourse becomes allegorical."⁴⁰ Calvin was quite ready to interpret allegory in its own terms, as he did here in Daniel. Joseph Haroutunian properly noted that "when Calvin protested against allegorizing, he was protesting not against finding a spiritual meaning in a passage, but against finding one that was not there."⁴¹ The problem, as Calvin put it, was that such allegorizers "threw the sacred word of God around as though it were a tennis ball. . . . Now anybody could do anything, and many did, there was no madness so absurd or so great that it could not be practised in the name of some allegory."⁴² In another context he wrote that "people praise the Word of God rightly as our very light, but still, our own darkness obscures the Word of God to such an extent that we think we are only hearing allegories,"⁴³ an error Calvin sought to avoid, usually with success. "Nothing," he said, "can be better than a sober treatment of Scripture. We ought never to fetch from a distance subtle explanations, for the true sense will, as I have previously expressed it, flow naturally from a passage when it is weighed with maturer deliberation."⁴⁴

Signs and Symbols in the Sacraments

As forced allegorizing could confuse and subvert the plain meaning of a text, so too could an inappropriate literalism, and Calvin rejected both such allegorizing and such literalizing. We have seen such rejection operating at many points in Calvin's biblical theology, but it occurs with greatest intensity in his interpretation of the Lord's Supper. Of the New Testament references to the sacrament, he declared that "it cannot be doubted that the language of Christ is metaphorical."⁴⁵ As Calvin saw it, a literal reading of "this is my body" and "this is my blood" was not only a major blunder in exegesis⁴⁶ but opened the way for the gravest abuses, including idolatry.

Otto Weber's German edition of the Institutes supplied one of the crucial paragraphs on the Lord's Supper with the title, "The impossibility of a purely literal interpretation," and the title was appropriately maintained by Battles. In that paragraph, Calvin had likened some of his opponents who advocated transubstantiation or consubstantiation to those ancient Anthropomorphites who "forbid even the slightest deviation from the

letter. . . . Once this principle is accepted," Calvin warned, "a boundless barbarism will overwhelm the whole light of faith. For what monstrous absurdities will these fanatical men not draw from Scripture if they be allowed to raise in objection every tittle to establish what they please."⁴⁷

Transubstantial and consubstantial doctrines of the real presence could not be dismissed by charging that they were based on "tittles," and in implying that they were Calvin was indulging, as he too often did, in the flamboyant exaggeration that tarnished theological and all other forms of controversy during the Renaissance and Reformation eras. Unfortunately, debate over the Lord's Supper--instituted as a sacrament of unity in the faith--has too often tended to divide the church into hostile camps. In the heat of partisan contentions, it is sometimes easy to lose sight of the central issues and even the principal positions, but our focus here is upon Calvin's use of the figurative principles, not upon the larger sacramental debate, and not upon the fullness of Calvin's sacramental theology. Suffice it to recall that Calvin held a remarkably high view of the sacrament, that he wrote of it repeatedly and extensively, with clarity, eloquence, and at times even mystical fervor. Firmly rejecting any purely memorial view, he affirmed "a true participation in Christ himself."⁴⁸

His conception of that true participation was worked out through the relationship between signs and symbols, on the one hand, and the realities to which they referred and which they communicated, on the other. Calvin was deeply convinced that "Christ is the only food for our soul,"⁴⁹ and he was equally convinced that the bread must be seen as bread and the wine as wine. As he wrote in his 1540 Treatise on the Lord's Supper, "the whole representation which our Lord wished to give in condescension to our infirmity is lost unless the true bread remain." Whereas the Romanists held to a transubstantiation of the elements, and the Lutherans posited a consubstantiation of the same elements, Calvin focused upon the meaning and operation of the words of the institution:

For the meaning of the words which our Lord requires us to use is as if it were said: Just as man is sustained and maintained so far as the body is concerned by eating bread, so my flesh is the spiritual nourishment by which souls are vivified.⁵⁰

By the accommodation here, we are taught that from

the physical things set forth in the Sacrament we are led by a sort of analogy to spiritual things. . . . When we see wine set forth as a symbol of blood, we must reflect on the benefits which wine imparts to the body, and so realize that the same are spiritually imparted to us by

Christ's blood. These benefits are to nourish, refresh, strengthen, and gladden.⁵¹

Between ourselves and the benefits conferred through the eucharistic elements, Calvin held that we can interpose two faults of our own making: first, we can give too little honor to the signs, by separating them "from their mysteries to which they are so to speak attached," and second we can extol the signs immoderately and thereby obscure the mysteries themselves.⁵² As Calvin put it elsewhere, "the human mind is unable to refrain from enclosing the power of God in signs, or substituting signs in the place of God."⁵³ What Calvin sought to expound was a sacramental theology by which "we distinguish as we ought between the signs and the things signified, yet we do not disjoin the reality from the signs."⁵⁴ In this way, he maintained, we are given "no fallacious figure" but a sure pledge by which "the substance and reality are conjoined; in other words, that our souls are fed with the flesh and blood of Christ."⁵⁵

This insistence that the sign is not the thing for which it stands, but that nonetheless the sign is conjoined with the thing signified, so characteristic of Calvin's theology, was disturbing to some of his readers. Of these Joachim Westphal of Hamburg was especially troubled and in turn became extremely troublesome during the 1550s. It was the Lutheran Westphal and his supporters whom Calvin described as forbidding even the slightest deviation from the literalistic sense of "this is my body."⁵⁶ The Romanist position was, of course, at least equally committed to a literal application of "this is my body." In replying to Calvin, both Romanists and Westphal's Lutherans charged him and his colleagues with being "tropists," due to their interpretive emphasis upon tropes or figurative language.⁵⁷

Aware of objections to the importance of figurative language in his interpretation, Calvin replied in the Institutes that "I indeed admit that the breaking of the bread is a symbol; it is not the thing itself. But, having admitted this, we shall nonetheless duly infer that, by the showing of the symbol the thing itself is also shown."⁵⁸ Giving another and equally forceful expression to the same conception, Calvin wrote that "Christ does not say to the bread that it shall become his body, but he commands his disciples to eat and promises them participation in his body and blood."⁵⁹ Calvin knew that his opponents were alarmed lest "the reality is replaced by the figure" in the Reformed conception, and in his irenic Best Method of Obtaining Concord of 1561 he attempted to show that "the reality is not excluded by the figure, only a difference is denoted between the sign and the thing signified, and this is not incompatible with their union." For Calvin, the "differences denoted" were not important for pedantic reasons, but "lest anyone should suppose that the bread is called 'the body of Christ' as absolutely [ita simpliciter] as Christ himself is called 'the Son of God.'"⁶⁰

Metonymy in the Sacraments

Calvin never minimized the figurative element of his interpretation, convinced as he was that the great mysteries of Scripture could not be understood apart from its frequent recourse to symbols, signs, and appropriate kinds of figurative communication, tropes which had been providentially employed by God in accommodating his nature and will to human understanding. In particular, Calvin observed of biblical sacraments that "Scripture assigns [them] a peculiar mode of expression," and that this figure "is not put forward as⁶¹ an empty phantom but taken grammatically to denote a metonymy." Indeed, he said, we assume "that whenever the sacraments are treated, it is usual to transfer⁶² the name of the thing signified by metonymy to the sign."

Now it must be admitted that "metonymy," once a term familiar to every student who had passed beyond grammar school, is not part of today's lingua franca, so that it may be helpful to give a contemporary example of how it works. Let us suppose that you or I were to put in a telephone call to the White House, and that the switchboard operator there answered by saying, "This is the White House." We would not for a moment assume that the phone itself was being answered by the house itself, but we would automatically decode the message into its intended sense, and we would probably do so without being conscious that the meaning had been communicated through an ancient and widely used figure of speech.

This particular figure, metonymy, was borrowed by modern languages from the Latin metonymia, which transliterated the Greek original, and means "a figure of speech which consists in substituting for the name of a thing the name of an attribute of it or of something closely related."⁶³ Calvin observed that metonymy was "used in Scripture when mysteries are under discussion" which can be understood only if we "take them as spoken with meanings transferred" according to God's promise.⁶⁴ In such metonymies, as Calvin pointed out, the two terms used (the sign and the thing signified) "have a certain common ground with one another," and "from the physical things set forth in the sacraments we are led by a sort of analogy to spiritual things," because such analogies are "excellently adapted to express those [spiritual] things when they are communicated to us."⁶⁵ In order for a metonymy to apply, there must be an association or relation between the symbol and the thing symbolized, but it cannot operate sacramentally unless God chooses the association and undergirds it with his promise to us.

We find the figure used in this way in the Old Testament sacraments. The rainbow, for example, was given to Noah as a sign that God would not again destroy the earth with a flood. Here Calvin observed that the rainbow, "which is but a reflection

of the sun's rays upon the clouds opposite," could not of itself forestall floods, but that nonetheless God gave it to Noah as a seal of his promise, and that to Noah and his descendants it operated as a covenant of promise. In effect, then, the rainbow signified what it was not and indicated God's willingness to guarantee what the rainbow itself did not. Similar expressions of Old Testament sacraments through metonymies, as cited in the Institutes, are "circumcision is a covenant" (Gen. 17:13), "the lamb is the Passover" (Ex. 12:11), the appearance of God to Moses in the burning bush (Ex. 3:2), and references to the Ark of the Covenant as God or God's face (Ps. 84:8; 42:3).⁶⁶

Turning to the New Testament, Calvin took the descent of the Holy Spirit in the appearance of a dove at Jesus' baptism to be a metonymy "by which the sign is put for the thing signified, the name of a spiritual object being applied to the visible sign."⁶⁷ And in another instance, "the rock from which water flowed in the desert" for the Israelites, as we read in Ex. 17:6, is metonymously identified by Paul with Christ.⁶⁸ In each of these cases, the changing of one name for another is a new relationship providentially established by God between a physical and visible sign, and a spiritual and heavenly "thing symbolized." In every instance, the name of the spiritual reality is transferred to the visible sign. And so it was, Calvin held, with the Christian sacraments. Baptism concerns the remission of sins,⁶⁹ but the water in and by itself as H₂O could not wash away sins. The Lord's Supper is the communion of the body and blood of Christ, but the physical elements of bread and water do not literally become that literal body and blood.

To summarize, Calvin's view was that we participate in the Supper neither as a mere memorial of the original supper in the upper room, nor after the conception of transubstantiation that asserts a miraculous transformation of the wine and bread before us into the very body and blood of Christ, now sacrificed anew upon the altar. On the contrary, Calvin said the Christian's participation in the Supper is "not that we offer or immolate, but that we take and eat that which has been offered and immolated"⁷⁰ by the unique historical sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Thus, we partake of the risen and ascended Christ in heaven, because "it is not necessary for the essence of the flesh to descend from heaven in order that we be fed upon it," but "we are joined to Christ only if our minds rise above the world. Accordingly the bond of our union with Christ is faith, which raises us upwards and casts its anchor in heaven, so that, instead of subjecting Christ to the fictions of our reason, we seek him above in his glory."⁷¹ Calvin argued that "we cannot be blamed for seeking Jesus Christ on high," and he cited as evidence "the preamble which had at all times" been used in the celebration of this sacrament--"Sursum corda. Raise your hearts on high."⁷²

Calvin persistently assumed and asserted the importance of figurative communication--tropes, symbols, and signs--through which we can find God accommodating his truth to our understanding, both in the sacraments and in the Scriptures. Replying directly to Roman and Protestant critics of his sacramental doctrine, Calvin related Scriptures and sacraments in this way: "For while nothing is more absurd to extol the sacraments above the Word, whose appendages and seals they are, they will find nothing applicable to the Word that we do not also give to the sacraments." That is a striking statement, and whatever else it means, it fully applies to Calvin's interpretation of figurative language both in the proclamation of the Scriptures and in the administration of the sacraments. Both were, Calvin believed, given by "God as the only author of our salvation . . . to be means and instruments of his secret grace, adapted to our weakness."⁷⁴

Synecdoche and the Law

As metonymy operated in the institution of Holy Communion, and metaphor or anthropopathy in the descriptions of God, so Calvin identified a distinctive figure operating in the Ten Commandments, in this case synecdoche. Calvin briefly defined it in this way: "by synecdoche the whole is sometimes taken for a part, sometimes a part for the whole," and he commented that this "figure is constantly occurring in Scripture."⁷⁵ A brief example may be found in the Lord's Prayer in the petition, "Give us this day our daily bread," where Calvin interpreted the prayer for bread as meaning all bodily food, and implying in "a still more extensive meaning . . . all that is necessary for the present life."⁷⁶

He found many examples of synecdoche in the Bible, but he appears to have found its most extensive and structural use in the Decalogue. Here Calvin pointed out "such manifest synecdoches" that "the commandments and prohibitions always contain more than is expressed in words," and a sober interpretation of the law therefore will necessarily "go beyond the words." He then evoked what he called the "commonplace" principle that "when a good thing is commanded, the evil thing that conflicts with it is forbidden . . . [and] that the opposite duties are enjoined when evil things are forbidden," thus expanding the implications of both positive and negative commandments.⁷⁷ By such applications of synecdoche, he was able to expound through the Decalogue all duties concerning the expression of our worship of God and our love for our human brothers and sisters.

Let us take Calvin's explanation of the Sixth Commandment as an example of how he would, as he put it, "go beyond the words" by applying the principle of synecdoche, with the part signifying the whole. Under the straightforward prohibition of murder, we are also forbidden anger (which Calvin acknowledged as

one of his own besetting sins), and hatred, and doing another person any manner of harm, whether physical or mental. Again, on the principle that when an evil is prohibited, the opposite good is enjoined, Calvin taught that this commandment required us to seek the good of our neighbors, to protect their lives and well-being in every way, and to hold them sacred because in them as in ourselves there is the image of God. So interpreted, "thou shalt not kill" is extended to mean the exclusion of all forms of ill will and violence and the encouragement of all forms of social peace.⁷⁸

In this method of approaching the Decalogue, Calvin claimed no originality, identifying it as "commonplace." Whatever may be said about it in other ways, this method had the great and obvious advantage of being an effective teaching device, in that it allowed the interpreter to use what the Hebrews called the ten words as a brief epitome through which to draw together a broad range of moral duties and principles either contained or implied in those first seventeen verses of Exodus 20. It thus provided a functional synthesis for all, or virtually all, moral obligations found in the Scriptures.

One further comment needs to be made at this point. Most of this paper has been focused upon Calvin's interpretive use of three major tropes: metaphor (including anthropopathy), and metonymy, and synecdoche. Limiting attention to a few figures has enabled us to explore these at some length, but even so I must say that a good deal has had to be omitted: I wish I could have said more about each of the figures chosen; and other figures, perhaps a dozen more, could not be mentioned at all. In a sense, this paper is itself a kind of synecdoche, because the part has been taken for the whole, but the part chosen is representative. By carefully considering a few key figures, I hope it has been possible to show the method, value, and significance of Calvin's figurative analysis in general. This having been said, we now need to proceed to some observations about the integration of the figurative into Calvin's larger hermeneutics.

"To Prepare for Reading the Divine Word"

When Calvin began his work in Geneva, he was given the title "Professor of Sacred Letters." No title could have been more appropriate, for as he said in every edition of the Institutes from 1539 to 1559, his purpose was "to prepare students of theology for the reading of the Divine Word."⁷⁹ To that end, his knowledge of rhetoric was of great value. As he wrote in his commentary on I Cor. 1:17, rhetorical skills "contain sound learning and depend on principles of truth . . . useful and suitable for the general affairs of human society." He was not interested in what he called "assumed rhetorical ornaments," but only in what was, as he put it, "intrinsic" to the Scriptures.⁸⁰ Here he followed Quintilian's basic distinction between tropes

used to⁸¹ "help out our meaning" and those used "to adorn our style." As a perceptive literary critic, Calvin could and did appreciate beauty of style, but his principal concern as a biblical scholar was necessarily for "figures of thought" that convey meaning.

It was therefore necessary, Calvin declared, "to know how Holy Scripture uses words; . . . we cannot at all understand the doctrine of God if we do not know the procedure it employs and its style and language."⁸² The laity were not exempt from needing such understanding, but for theologians to lack it was at once disabling to them and dangerous to others. We have already seen several instances of Calvin's correcting biblical interpreters and theologians who ignored (or were ignorant of) figurative language. What he had written on this subject as a young man of twenty-five remained his conviction to the end, that "we must send those back to their rudiments who have not yet learned" how to interpret the figurative.⁸³

Calvin's underlying skepticism, on which this paper opened, led him to judge that we cannot know God as he is in himself or in his own terms, and that our humanly self-generated words and conceptions are inadequate vehicles for expressing God. The only reliable knowledge we can have of God is that which he himself discloses to us, decisively, in the incarnate Word and through the written Word without which we cannot know the incarnate Word. This divine self-disclosure in Scripture is accommodated both to our limited capacity and our unlimited need, often through expressing figuratively "spiritual things too high for human sense by corporeal and visible symbols."⁸⁴ Always the divine Logos is present in any authentic disclosure of God, mediating between eius immensitatem, God's immensity, and our small measure, modo nostro, to recall my opening quotation from the Institutes,⁸⁵ Without divine mediation, we can have no sure understanding or experience of God.

In the written Word, that mediation often operates through figurative language. The biblical teachings about God are admittedly fraught with the particularities of Hebrew and early Christian experience--sometimes called "the scandal of particularity"--but they are not to be dispensed with as merely provincial and parochial. According to Calvin, the biblical expressions for God

do not bind him to one place or people. Rather, they are put forward merely for this purpose: to keep the thoughts of the pious upon that God who by his covenant that he has made with Israel has so represented himself that it is in no wise lawful to turn aside from such a pattern.⁸⁶

In summary, I suggest that we can best describe Calvin's biblical hermeneutics as vertebrate, in the sense of being at the same time tough and flexible. He protected the Scriptures from a

paralytic literalism by his emphasis upon divine accommodation to human capacity, and he protected them from idolatrous dilutions and intrusions by his insistence upon their unique authority and integrity. Throughout, Calvin's purpose in applying learning to Scripture was to allow the true sense to "flow naturally from a passage." In the service of that larger purpose, a knowledge of figures and tropes was invaluable, and without such a knowledge, as he observed, "many supervacuous contentions will arise," as indeed they have⁸ arisen, in his age, in every age, and not least in our own age.

Notes

¹Inst. IV.17.10, using Ford Lewis Battles' translation, in Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955). Library of Christian Classics, vols. XX and XXI. The Latin is from Calvini Opera Selecta, ed. Peter Barth and Wilhelm Niesel (Munich: Kaiser, 1928-36), vol. V, p. 351 lines 28f. Unless otherwise noted, my references are to one or both of these texts.

²Inst. III.21.2. Warnings against fruitless curiosity also came from classical authors; see Cicero, De Finibus 5.18.49, in H. Rackham, ed., Loeb Classical Library, London, 1914, p. 451.

³Inst. II.2.15.

⁴Inst. II.2.12, 13, and 17, and for his basic distinction between the understanding of earthly and of heavenly things, see especially par. 13.

⁵Inst. II.2.18.

⁶Inst. II.12.1 and II.2.13.

⁷Commentary on Gen. 9:25, trans. Joseph Haroutunian, Calvin: Commentaries (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), p. 275, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. XXIII.

⁸Inst. I.2.2. Quirinus Breen observes that both the quid and qualis questions were very carefully examined by the scholastics, whereas Calvin dismissed the first as toying with frigidis speculationibus: "John Calvin and the Rhetorical Tradition," Church History 26 (1957): 10-11.

⁹Inst. I.10.2.

¹⁰Inst. III.2.6.

¹¹Battles, "God was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," Interpretation 31 (1977): 34; a section on "The Incarnation

as Accommodation" begins on p. 34; the patristic background for accommodation is summarized, pp. 22-26; the background on classical rhetoric is mentioned, pp. 21-22, and Battles provides a fuller rhetorical treatment in his edition of Calvin's Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia (Leiden: E. J. Brill for Renaissance Society of America, 1969), 72-84.

¹²The quotation is from Calvin's Last Admonition to Joachim Westphal, 1557, in Tracts and Treatises, trans. Henry Beveridge, with historical notes and introduction by Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 2:428.

¹³See Edward A. Dowey, Jr., The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952); Ford Lewis Battles, "God was Accommodating Himself to our Capacity," 29; and William J. Bouwsma, John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 124.

¹⁴Inst. II.6.4, where Calvin also cites the influence of Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses 4.2.2.

¹⁵Calvin Translation Society, Calvin's Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), Commentary on the Catholic Epistles, pp. 196-197. This series will hereafter be cited as CTS, followed by subject of commentary, chapter, and verse.

¹⁶The quoted sentence goes on to add "and it is Christ alone who can make consciences at peace that they may dare to come in confidence to God," thereby integrally linking the cognitive and the moral dimensions of redemption. See CTS, Comm. I Peter 1:20, p. 250.

¹⁷Inst. III.24.17, where the general subject under discussion is God's justice. Calvin's phrase in the original Latin text is "figuram negligere."

¹⁸For a brief contemporary characterization of the sect, see Jerome, "Letter to Pammachius against John of Jerusalem," paragraph 11, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series, 6:430, along with the entries in The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, 1907, and in The Catholic Encyclopedia, 1907. A similar sect arose in northern Italy in the eleventh century.

¹⁹Inst. I.13.1, p. 121.

²⁰CTS, Comm. on Ps. 10:1, p. 134 n 4.

²¹CTS, Comm. on Matt. 23:37, p. 109.

²²Jaroslav Pelikan, The Christian Tradition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) 2:14, citing PG 90:621, 812.

²³Psychopannychia, 1534/42, Tracts and Treatises, 3:424.

²⁴CTS, Comm. on Acts 7:56, pp. 314, 316, and 315, in the order quoted, with the word "scientifically" substituted for "philosophically" to represent more precisely Calvin's sixteenth-century intent.

²⁵Comm. on Isa. 6:1-5, in Calvin: Commentaries, trans. Haroutunian, 120-121.

²⁶CTS, Comm. on Dan. 7:9.

²⁷The Mutual Consent of the Churches of Zurich and Geneva in Tracts and Treatises, 2:220, stating his views in words almost identical with those on the same subject earlier quoted from his Comm. on Acts 7:56, cited in n 24.

²⁸Comm. on John 17:1, slightly amended from Calvin: Commentaries, trans. Haroutunian, 287.

²⁹Ibid., 174.

³⁰Ibid., 286, Comm. on Matt. 6:9f., with internal quotation of 2 Chron. 2:6.

³¹Calvin: Theological Treatises, ed. and trans. J. K. L. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), The Library of Christian Classics, 22:112, and the congruent Latin source in Opera Selecta, 2:103, about the significance of the sabbath rest.

³²This understanding is implicit also in many of Calvin's teachings on the elements of the Lord's Supper, which will be treated below.

³³Note that the writing of the Decalogue on the two stone tablets "by the finger of God" was called a metaphor in the Commentary on Exodus, although similar descriptions were called anthropopathies, as with the Psalmist's expression about God "standing afar off." See Comm. on Exod. 31:18 (see also 8:19, and Luke 11:20) and Comm. on Ps. 10:1.

³⁴Calvin's Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia 25:3 calls scales metaphorica locutio, but also calls fitting or appropriate metaphors honestae translationes [36.8] and uses translatite [15:28] to mean metaphorically. This synonymy of metaphora and translatio was often used elsewhere by Calvin and others in the patristic and Reformation periods.

³⁵CTS, Comm. on Matt. 5:13 and Luke 14:34f., pp. 270-271. Of "salted with salt" in Mark 9:49, Calvin wrote that "to give the name of salt to what is salted is a rather harsh metaphor, but it creates no doubt as to the meaning" (p. 273).

³⁶Comm. on Ps. 23, in Calvin: Commentaries, trans. Haroutunian, 260-261.

³⁷CTS, Comm. on John 13:10.

³⁸Comm. on Matt. 3:12, with references to Isa. 30:33, in Calvin: Commentaries, trans. Haroutunian, 402.

³⁹Inst. III.5.9. See also Calvin's reply to the 1542 manifesto of the Faculty of Sacred Theology at Paris, Articles . . . with the Antidote, Article XVII, Tracts and Treatises, 1:100.

⁴⁰CTS, Comm. on Dan., 1:257.

⁴¹Haroutunian, Introduction to Calvin: Commentaries, 28.

⁴²Ibid., 108.

⁴³Ibid., 405, Comm. on John 16:25. I must say that Calvin's treatment of the burning bush, in his Comm. on Acts 7:30, does step over the bounds between metaphor and allegory, although this is a rare instance of his doing so.

⁴⁴CTS, Comm. on Dan., 2:242.

⁴⁵Last Admonition to Joachim Westphal, in Tracts and Treatises, 3:426.

⁴⁶As for the doctrine of transubstantiation itself, Calvin called it "an invention forged by the devil, to corrupt the truth of the Supper" (Treatise on the Lord's Supper, in Calvin: Theological Treatises, trans. Reid, 158).

⁴⁷Inst. IV.17.23.

⁴⁸Inst. IV.17.11.

⁴⁹Inst. IV.17.1.

⁵⁰Treatise on the Lord's Supper, in Calvin: Theological Treatises, trans. Reid, 158.

⁵¹Inst. IV.17.3.

⁵²Inst. IV.17.5.

⁵³Mutual Consent of the Churches of Zurich and Geneva as to the Sacraments: Exposition of the Heads of Agreement, in Tracts and Treatises, 2:229.

⁵⁴Ibid., 215.

⁵⁵Ibid., 238. In The French Confession, 1562, par. 31, we read: "In saying that the Supper is a sign, we mean not that it is a simple figure or remembrance, but confess that the thing signified by it is verily accomplished in us in fact. For seeing that God is infallible truth, it is certain that he means not to amuse us with some vain appearance, but that the substance of what the sacraments signify is conjoined with them" (Tracts and Treatises, 2:157).

⁵⁶See quotation from Inst. IV.17.23, cited in n 47.

⁵⁷"Tropistas vocando," Inst. IV.17.21, Calvini Opera Selecta, 5:371, line 18 and note 1 for references to the use of the allegation by Westphal and the Magdeburg ministers on the Lutheran side to which I add the famous Roman Catholic exegete Cornelius a Lapide [Lapidus] in whose commentary on I Corinthians (The Great Commentary, trans. W. F. Cobb [London: John Hodges, 1895], 278), we find the question, "If Christ ask the Calvinist, 'Why didst thou wrest my words from their proper meaning into a figure of speech,' what answer will he make?"

⁵⁸Inst. IV.17.10. I am perplexed by the fact that even so keen a student of Calvin as Paul T. Fuhrmann could say that "as a rule, he [Calvin] does not use like moderns the term 'symbol'" and even that the word is "not used by Calvin with reference to the sacraments," whereas the Latin texts of Opera Selecta show that it was repeatedly, almost insistently, used. See Fuhrmann's edition, Calvin, Instruction in Faith (1537) (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), 93 n. 223.

⁵⁹Inst. IV.17.39.

⁶⁰Best Method of Obtaining Concord, trans. Reid, Calvin: Theological Treatises, 327.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Mutual Consent of the Churches, in Tracts and Treatises, 2:243. For those who might prefer to call the figure a synecdoche, Calvin refused to quarrel over which technical term should be used, and proposed that the choice be left to grammarians. Calvin had a principle of "not quarreling over the word," but where necessary "over the thing itself," if it were important (Inst. IV.19.2).

⁶³Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "metonymy."

⁶⁴Inst. IV.17.21. For other examples of Calvin's treatment of metonymies, see his Last Admonition to Joachim Westphal, 1557, Tracts and Treatises, 2:372, 420, 478, and 484.

⁶⁵Inst. IV.17.21 and IV.17.3.

⁶⁶Inst. IV.17.21.

⁶⁷CTS, Comm. on Matt. 3:15-16, with footnote quoting the French version, p. 205 n 2.

⁶⁸Inst. IV.17.21, also citing I Cor. 10:4.

⁶⁹Last Admonition to Joachim Westphal, 478.

⁷⁰Treatise on the Lord's Supper, in Calvin: Theological Treatises, trans. Reid, 156.

⁷¹Best Method of Obtaining Concord, in Calvin: Theological Treatises, trans. Reid, 328 and 330.

⁷²Confession of Faith in the Name of the Reformed Churches of France, 1562, in Tracts and Treatises, 2:160, par. 37.

⁷³Calvin's sacramental doctrine "became known as Virtualism . . . [because] the faithful receive the power (*virtus*) of the Body and Blood of Christ"; see Geddes MacGregor, Corpus Christi: The Nature of the Church According to the Reformed Tradition [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958], 178ff.

⁷⁴Mutual Consent of the Churches, in Tracts and Treatises, 2:227, and Opera Selecta, 2:273.

⁷⁵Psychopannychia, 1534/42, in Tracts and Treatises, 3:458.

⁷⁶CTS, Comm. on Matt. 6:11, pp. 322-323, where Calvin criticized Erasmus for mistranslating this petition by calling it in Latin "our supersubstantial bread," because Erasmus did not think it likely that Christ would teach us to come into the presence of the Almighty and mention food. Calvin dismissed that argument as "exceedingly absurd," and affirmed that Christ did indeed speak here of bodily food, while also implying broader needs of this life.

⁷⁷Inst. II.8.8-9.

⁷⁸Inst. II.8.39-40.

⁷⁹John T. McNeill, The History and Character of Calvinism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 136 and 127-128.

⁸⁰CTS, Comm. on I Cor. 1:17, pp. 33 and 35.

⁸¹Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria, 8.6.2, and also 9.1.16-18, pp. 301 and 351 in Loeb Classical Library, ed. H. E. Butler.

⁸²Sermon on John 1:1-5, 465, as translated by William Bouwsma, John Calvin, 118-119.

⁸³Psychopannychia, 1534/42, Tracts and Treatises, 3:458, here referring particularly to a misinterpretation of synecdoche.

⁸⁴Psychopannychia in Tracts and Treatises, 3:453.

⁸⁵See above, n 1. For Calvin's conception of the Logos as "the only door whereby we enter into salvation," see, e.g., Inst. II.6.1 and 2.

⁸⁶Inst. II.8.15.

⁸⁷See above, n 44 and n 17.