

Calvin and the Patterns of Identity in Reformed Theology

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The following material is divided into two major parts. The “Presentation” was delivered orally at the Colloquium while the “Foundations” was distributed as a written handout.

Presentation

My connection with the conference theme begins with Calvin’s insistence that we do all things according to the Scriptures. Indeed, the very word “reformed” comes from the insistence of Calvin and others at the time, that we reform all of life according to the Scriptures. The Anabaptists said, “what is not permitted is forbidden,” and the Lutherans (and Anglicans) said, “what is not forbidden is permitted.” But Calvin insisted—with others who came to be called “Reformed”—that we walk with God in every moment and aspect of our lives. The Word of God—for Calvin both Jesus Christ the Word made flesh and the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments—is to be a lamp to our feet every step of the way and a light to the whole length of our pathway (Psalm 119:105). We will not use the Bible, then, as a mere code of laws to be followed slavishly, looking for the loopholes. Nor will we find ways to mark off some limited space for religion, which leaves major portions of human life untouched. No, in the *providence of God*, that is, in the *changing* times and situations of life we will look to the Scriptures to point us to *God*, *God’s* presence, *God’s* purposes, *God’s* activities, *God’s* mercy and justice, and where we fit into such things. And *God* will be the light of our lives in the present moment.

This remarkable approach to Scripture is no formality for Calvin or his Reformed colleagues. It worked itself out at the center of the Church’s life, her worship. In Calvin’s words: “Wherever . . . the Word of God [is] purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists” (4.1.9. Cf. Gallican and

Augsburg Confes). There, according to God's promise the Holy Spirit makes the Word and Sacraments effective, and *God* governs the lives of Christian people individually and collectively. Thus we see worship, the powerful exercise of the Scriptures, church government, and the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life combined. These connections were reaffirmed as recently as the Barmen Declaration of 1934. Whatever Calvin said—in letters, commentaries, treatises, sermons, catechisms, and theological texts (the *Institutes*)—his speech would be in the service of that worship center. Whatever we go on to say about the patterns of identity in Reformed theology, let the record show they concern the *life* of the Christian Church and the *lives* of Christian people. We are not dealing here with abstract or speculative ideas.

We could probably leave the question of identity right there, i.e., with the Church's worship center and the use of Scripture as the heart and center of what it means to be Reformed. Our forebears in the Reformed Tradition have been amazingly successful in carrying out the project of bringing all of life under the Lordship of Christ, according to the Scriptures. (*Reformata et semper reformanda a scripturarum*). But the Reformed Tradition is also a confessional tradition, with a variety of theological statements to serve as guideposts in the on-going life of these churches. Sometimes these strands (including confessions) are hard to recognize. Sometimes they present themselves as mutually exclusive and raise competing claims as to what the Reformed Tradition is or is not. So, it seems useful to press further and ask whether there is a clear theological identity to the Reformed Tradition, one in which the parents can recognize their children and vice versa, including the stepchildren and orphans.

My thesis concerning Calvin is actually quite simple, that he presents us with a distinctive pattern of life and theology that repeats itself in very different settings of the Reformed Tradition. I face several immediate problems in this presentation.

- (1) The time is too short to develop the foundations properly. Some of these foundations I have gathered and given out as written handouts for you to digest more slowly. I will say more about them if time permits.
- (2) I know ahead of time that this approach will not be universally welcomed. Some will say that this is a misuse of historical sources.¹ Others will say that the Reformed Tradition has no real heart and center, only a number of people within the historical stream called "Reformed" who do theology in

¹So Richard Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). According to Muller any approach to or interpretation of Calvin outside his 16th Century conversation partners and context is "accommodated," or invalid. The historicist perspective doesn't leave much room for later or contemporary use of Calvin's theology.

a wide variety of ways.² Both of these objections effectively deny the value of seeking a theological identity for the Reformed Tradition. As a scholar I can see the point of these objections. As a Reformed churchman I cannot accept either the conclusions or the denials. I must press forward in spite of the objections. Significantly, we can see a small explosion of literature dealing with just such an identity.³

- (3) Yes, there are other ways to trace the identity of the Reformed Tradition. One is to use the *loci* method in the 21st Century the way Calvin used it in the 16th, the Westminster Confession in the 17th, or Heinrich Heppe in the 19th and Karl Barth in the 20th. The *loci* method, of course, is not uniquely Reformed, and the theological topics (*loci*) tend to change from one period to another. Closely related is the avenue of picking out certain doctrines as typically or irreducibly Reformed.⁴ Yet another way is to write a history of Reformed churches and let the variety of people, institutions, and events weave their way through history. I confess I'm looking for something more incisive than any of these, while not wanting to speculate or remove myself from the substance or contributions of other ways.
- (4) In setting forth this thesis I cannot avoid stepping into the mix of contemporary Calvin scholarship, specifically the search for the historical Calvin (recovering the man in his own time, without the overlay of his theological

²See George Stroup, *Reformed Reader: A Sourcebook in Christian Theology, Volume II: Contemporary Trajectories 1799- Present*, edited by George Stroup (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993). Stroup raises the question of identity in Reformed faith and theology explicitly on p. xxixf, especially in the light of the fragmentation and diversity of Reformed theology in the 19th and 20th centuries. "What is and is not Reformed," he says, "is extraordinarily difficult to determine. The concept has no self-evident boundaries" (xxx). The "debate [over identity-mj] raises the question of whether Reformed belief still has an identifiable theological common ground, or whether Reformed theology acquires its identity only from its polity and perhaps from a social and political perspective shared by some leaders of the various denominations" (xxix).

³See for example, *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, edited by Donald McKim (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); *Dictionary of the Presbyterian and Reformed Tradition in America*, edited by D.G. Hart (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1999); plus several books dealing with the subject of Reformed identity: *Reformed Theology in America: A History of its Modern Development*, edited by David F. Wells (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999); *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions*, edited by David Willis and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999); and John W. de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991).

⁴See, for example, characteristics and lists of Reformed theology in John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, Revised Edition (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), 96-112; or again in *Reformed Theology: A Sourcebook in Christian Theology, Volume I: Classical Beginnings, 1519-1799*, edited by William Stacy Johnson and John H. Leith (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), xx-xxv. See also the list of themes given in the *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 1983ff), G-2.0500; and, further, the exposition of TULIP in R.C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown: The Heart of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997).

system or modern concerns about his theology) and the quest for Calvin's central dogma (or the key to the theological structure of the *Institutes*). Similar questions may apply to other theological figures (e.g., Schleiermacher), but they are less demanding.

Let me now state my thesis, which is three-fold. First, Calvin's theology follows a distinctive dialectic of God and humanity. He refers to it at the beginning of the *Institutes* in familiar words: "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves" (1.1.1).⁵ For every major point of theology he includes both ends of the dialectic. Following the proper order of teaching, he typically begins with God and then "descending into ourselves" (an oft-repeated phrase) he covers the part concerning humanity. Calvin's dialectic of God and humanity contrasts most clearly with Luther's (and the Lutheran) dialectic of sin and grace, i.e., the human condition under the law (sin) and the human condition under the gospel (grace). *Both patterns* derive from a consideration of law and gospel. The difference between the two is Calvin's treatment of the third use of the law, as we shall see.

To say Calvin's theology is dialectical will not surprise you. From a variety of angles Calvin scholarship has been coming to this insight for some time.

- Hermann Bauke pointed to the persistent dialectic of opposites in Calvin's thought as early as 1922, notably between the knowledge of God and ourselves.⁶
- Edward Dowey establishes for Calvin a clear dialectic of a *from which* and a *which*, worked out substantively in terms of the two-fold knowledge of God as Creator and as Redeemer, with soteriology at the center.⁷
- Ford Lewis Battles worked out a whole *calculus fidei* of the *Institutes* to emphasize the antithetical structure of Calvin's thought. He was constantly looking for "a *via media*," says Battles, "between the Scylla of aberrant Romanism and Charybdis of the radical tendencies of his time."⁸
- Brian Armstrong highlights a tension in Calvin between the Renaissance and the Reformation and a corresponding dialectic between the real and the ideal. Calvin's overarching concern, he says, was not formal theology but piety or worship.⁹

⁵Citations to Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* come from the edition of John T. McNeill, 2 volumes, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

⁶*Die Probleme der theologie Calvins* (Leipzig, 1922).

⁷*The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, Expanded Edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994, original in 1952), 247. The final chapter, 243-260, an essay from 1982 in which Dowey revisits his earlier thesis, is particularly noteworthy.

⁸*Interpreting John Calvin*, edited by Robert Benedetto (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 140.

- Borrowing from William Bouwsma, Heiko Oberman points out the dialectic of labyrinth and abyss as an explanation for Calvin's early development. One pole is Calvin's escape from the confusing labyrinth of Medieval scholasticism, the other is the terrifying abyss of persecution and exile while standing before the majesty and judgment of God. Oberman mentions but does not elaborate a third, more positive image, theater.¹⁰
- Several other authors have studied Calvin's use of language, notably his rhetoric, and found repeated antithetical forms.¹¹

Second, Calvin's dialectic of God and humanity does not come out of thin air. It takes off from a particular point of departure, something which is distinct from either pole. I have called it at times an interface because it runs along the line where God and humanity meet (always a wavy line, because the interface is never smooth, but between God and humanity there are no empty spaces, either!). From this interface it is possible, even necessary, to reflect upon both God and humanity at the same time. The interface is not "a point of contact" in the sense that Emil Brunner sought a few decades ago. The interface cannot be reduced to nature, what is natural, or the law of nature.¹² Law for Calvin has no other foundation than God, whether the will or the act of God. The interface is established by God alone, by revelation alone. We do not have any "natural" access to it, except as God gives it to us, i.e., by Word and Spirit. And then, taking off from the interface, we are led to reflect upon God on the one hand (2.8.2. See also 2.8.6-8) and, "descending into ourselves," humanity on the other hand (2.8.3).

Law stands out as the interface for Calvin, derived from his particular appropriation of law and gospel from Luther (see Foundations below). Calvin's third use of the law establishes the dialectic of God and humanity, and law gives the poles of the dialectic their particular nuances. God is above all One who acts,

¹⁰"*Duplex cognitio Dei, Or?* The Problem and Relation of Structure, Form, and Purpose in Calvin's Theology," in *Probing the Reformed Tradition*, edited by Elsie Anne McKee and Brian Armstrong (Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 135-153.

¹¹*Initia Calvinii: The Matrix of Calvin's Reformation* (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie Van Wetenschappen, 1991). See especially 25-28.

¹²See Francis Higman, *The Style of John Calvin in His French Polemical Treatises*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); Alexandre Ganoczy, *Ecclesia Ministrans* (Wiesbaden, 1968); Benoît Girardin, *Rhétorique et Théologique. Le Commentaire de l'Épître aux Romains* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1979); and Gilbert Vincent, *Exigence Éthique et Interprétation dans l'œuvre de Calvin* (Geneve: Labor et Fides, 1984).

¹³In his superb essay on natural law in Calvin, William Klempa shows how fluid this concept is for Calvin: it includes but cannot be reduced to morality, nature, conscience, reason, and equity. See "John Calvin on Natural Law," in *Calvin Studies IV*, edited by John H. Leith and W. Stacy Johnson (Davidson, 1988), 1-24. The same fluidity is evident in Locke's understanding of natural law. See Merwyn S. Johnson, *Locke On Freedom* (Austin, 1977), 23-52. See also I. John Hesselink, *Calvin's Concept of the Law*, (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1992).

and the acts of God manifest from Scripture are creating, redeeming, and glorifying. While these three activities of God cover the whole scope of history as beginning, middle, and end, they are never merely historicized: all three activities are at work all the time, at the same time. In Trinitarian terms: “to the Father is attributed the beginning of activity, and the fountain and wellspring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and the ordered disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity” (1.13.18).

The counterpart to the acts of God—set up by the law—are the acts of human obedience. The whole economy of Biblical religion for Calvin is wrapped up in established the rightful obedience of humans (by God’s right of creation, 1.3-5, 2.8.2), restoring it (by God’s redeeming grace in Christ), and bringing it to completion (by God’s move to glorify in the end). The law, then, marks off the place where God’s activity and human activity meet, overlap, and commune with each other. The law, accordingly becomes the jumping-off point for reflecting on what God does, what humans do, and how the interaction between them plays out. But the interface is also binding. Clearly there is no action of the human, sinful or redeemed, that does not act toward God. And there is no action of God that does not affect humanity (and human activity) directly. United with Christ, our greatest joy is to commune with God in the overlap of our activity with God’s (read: “glorify God and enjoy him forever,” *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, q. 1).

Notice that the interface is not a resolution to the dialectic of God and humanity, a third point of logic in some Hegelian sense or an occasion to pursue a “middle way” between extremes (*contra* Battles). From the interface comes a consideration of the two poles, of God and humanity, as in the expression “rightly dividing the word of truth” (see Calvin’s commentary on II Timothy 2:15, Torrance edition, 313f).

Third, the pattern that begins with Calvin tends to manifest itself in other times and places over the last 500 years. The dialectic of God and humanity stays the same, but the interface changes from time to time, theologian-to-theologian, etc. Where the interface is

- law for Calvin in the 16th Century, it becomes
- predestination/election/the decree of God for the Synod of Dorts (1619) and the Westminster Confession (1647). A person who zeroes in on Protestant Scholasticism could easily get the idea that the sovereignty of God (keying on predestination) is the central dogma of the Reformed Tradition (as A. Schweizer did in the 19th Century. Cf. also the PCUSA Book of Order).

A parallel interface during the same time is doubtless

- the covenant, which has strong affinities with law (cf. the development of the covenant of works and the covenant of grace as traced by R.T. Kendall. Cf. also J. Coccejus, *Summa doctrinae de foedere et testamento Dei*, 1648).

With the rise of Pietism during the 18th and 19th centuries, the condition of the believer takes center stage, and

- the Christian faith itself becomes the take-off point, as in *The Religious Affections* of Jonathan Edwards, 1746, and *The Christian Faith* of Friedrich Schleiermacher, 1821-1830).

For Charles Hodge and the Princeton School of the 19th Century (beginning already with the *Helvetic Concensus Formula*, 1675), the take-off point becomes

- the Bible: inspired verbally by the Spirit of God, the Book conveys the authoritative revelation of God in very human lives and words, which leads to a reflection upon God on the one hand and humanity on the other. In the 20th Century
- Jesus Christ is the take-off point for Karl Barth (1920s),
- history for Reinhold Niebuhr (*The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 1939ff), and
- the faithfulness of God in history for Jürgen Moltmann (cf. his accent on “the Trinitarian history of God,” post-World War II).

The challenge is most serious with Friedrich Schleiermacher, whom—time permitting—I propose to make a brief test case.

At the end of this presentation, my question to my audience is whether the patterns of theology outlined here—first in Calvin, then in Schleiermacher—makes sense to you and whether it is promising for further study, i.e., fleshed out in a book-length study.

Foundations

I

John Calvin spent the better part of his life turning away from a labyrinth (of scholastic theology and the sacramental system of the Medieval Church), through an abyss (of a refugee persecuted, fleeing for his life, making his way in a foreign country, exiled from his family and homeland—so Bouwsma, Oberman), to a theater (of God’s awesome majesty, mercy, grace, and glory—so Schreiner). A lawyer educated in civil not canon law, Calvin lived in a time of widespread public unrest and press for reform in both Church and State. With the impetus of Renaissance humanism Calvin and many others went back to the sources (*ad fontes*), the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, to recover the Word of God for his time. But he preferred the tools of rhetoric more than formal logic to express himself. His accent on addressing piecemeal the primary topics of theology (the method of *loci communes* embodied in the *Institutes*) reflects a similar concern for faithfulness to the Biblical text instead of system building. Recent studies of his language increasingly recognize an experience-rich dialectical habit of speech, which certainly adds to the dynamic quality of his writings (Higman, Millet, Gilbert, Battles, Armstrong, Ganoczy, Bauke). Not to be forgotten here: Calvin’s entire program of life, ministry, and theology came along in the train of the Lutheran Reformation (*sola scriptura*,

sola gratia, sola fidei, sola christi). His reliance upon Luther is clearly documented (Oberman, Van 't Spijker, Muller), as are his interactions with Melanchthon and the later Lutherans.

My starting point with Calvin is the issue of law and gospel (cf. Van 't Spijker, Battles, Girardin, Muller). Law and gospel are the key building blocks for Luther's theology of the cross (cf. Heidelberg Disputation) and the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone. Law—quickly developed in terms of law and gospel—is the starting point of Calvin's 1536 edition of the *Institutes*. While the material of this chapter found a different placement in later editions of the *Institutes*,¹³ the impact of it remains at the core of everything he said.¹⁴ For some time I have asserted that Calvin picked up and carried out an option in Luther's understanding of law and gospel which Luther and the Lutherans (including Melanchthon) did not see.¹⁵ All the Protestant Reformers rejected the antinomian solution of dispensing with the law altogether. They also rejected the Papal solution of binding the gospel with the law ("faith working with love"; the modern equivalent: "faith without works is dead"). Luther and the Lutherans said that we have to start with the law (to identify and manifest human sin: cf. I Cor. 15:56), in order to get to the gospel (to establish in the cross of Jesus Christ God's forgiveness of sin and justification of the sinner). Even when Melanchthon (*Loci communes*, 1535) and the Lutheran *Formula of Concord* (1577) speak of the third use of the law, they mean a repetitious use of preaching the law in order to establish the need and benefits of the gospel.

When Calvin speaks of the third use of the law, however, he pushes the issue of law and gospel to another level. Christ not only fulfills the law. He lived, taught, died to the curse of, and was raised in fulfillment of the law. "Christ is the end of the law," says Calvin following Paul (Romans 10:4. See 1.6.2, 2.6.4, 2.7.2, 2.10.4, and 3.2.6). Henceforth, "God is comprehended in Christ alone" (2.6.4). By fulfilling the law in every respect, Christ also transforms it. After Christ the law no longer retains its demand requirement, telling humans what

¹³The uses of the law moved to Book II, Chapt 7, along with the treatment of the Ten Commandments: the related block covers chapters 6-11 in the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*. The treatment of justification moved to Book III, Chapter 11: the related block covers chapters 11-18. The title to Book II, added in 1559, shows the underlying, continuous significance of the issue of law and gospel: "The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, First Disclosed to the Fathers Under the Law, and Then to Us in the Gospel.")

¹⁴Muller does a good job of tracking the core concept of law and gospel from the 1539 edition of the *Institutes*, governed by Calvin's *Commentary on Romans* (published 1540) through successive editions to 1559. See Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 118-139.

¹⁵See Merwyn S. Johnson, "Calvin's Handling of the Third Use of the Law and Its Problems," in *Calviniana: Ideas and Influence of John Calvin*, edited by Robert V. Schnucker (Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1988), 33-50.

we have to do or else.¹⁶ After Christ the law is important for telling us about the Lawgiver: who God is, what God is like (what kind of God wants us to do these things? what is God's intent?), what God is doing, what God's purposes are, etc. As good servants who love their master (2.7.12), we are to *use* the law and its various formulations to discern God's intent, to interpret where God may be active at the moment, and to engage ourselves in what God is doing. Doing the will of God and communing with God in the process is, simply put, the challenge and the joy of our salvation! The law—after Christ—points us to *the place where that happens*.

Calvin says plainly that the third use of the law is the primary one (2.7.12): in Christ the law is restored to its original, proper, and subordinate place of showing us the nature of God's will and activity (2.8.6-8). In its first two uses the law shows us the depth of our sin and restrains us from sinful excesses. How serious is the matter of showing and restraining our sin? Paul says plainly, "The sting of sin is death, and the power of the sin is the law" (1 Cor. 15:56). Paul is speaking of *God's law* here, and the whole economy of salvation and life with God ride on it. The deep problem of the law for Paul (and Luther/Calvin/the Protestant Reformers) is not legalism. The problem is idolatry. Having violated the law (once is all it takes!), humans fixate upon keeping the law and put it in the place of the Lawgiver (so Calvin's treatment of the innate sense of divinity, religion, and the wisdom of God in creation, *Institutes* 1.3-5, following Romans 1:18-25). For Paul the law becomes a cipher for human self-righteousness and the goodness we can attain on our own. If we can keep the law on our own and attain our own righteousness, then we don't need God. Although promulgated in the imperative sense (commandments, statutes, ordinances), the law concerning humanity is mainly *descriptive in its thrust*: it describes the kind of humanity God wanted us to be from the beginning, and in our misuse of it (keeping the law to make ourselves like God) it describes the sinful humanity we have become. Calvin's first or theological use of the law has this double aspect to it. Like a mirror (2.7.7)

The first and third uses of the law also mirror each other. Both describe the place where the interaction between God and humanity plays out, like the rules of a game.¹⁷ Having violated the rules, we get hung up on playing the game for

¹⁶"For the law is not now acting toward us as a rigorous enforcement officer who is not satisfied unless the requirements are met" (2.7.13). "Not that the law no longer enjoins believers to do what is right, but only that it is not for them what it formerly was: it may no longer condemn and destroy their consciences by frightening and confounding them" (2.7.14). "[Paul] teaches that we must be released from the bonds of the law, unless we wish to perish miserably under them. But from what bonds? The bonds of harsh and dangerous requirements, which remit nothing of the extreme penalty of the law, and suffer no transgression to go unpunished." (2.7.15)

¹⁷The game is obviously a modern venue. Calvin's venues are typically father/family, king/government, teacher/students, lord/army, and judge/courtroom, each of which has its own set of rules to regulate the interaction among the parties involved. See Heiko Oberman, *Initia Calvini: The Matrix of Calvin's Reformation* (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie Van Wetenschappen, 1991), 18.

the sake of keeping the rules. We miss the point of the game, which is to play the game for the love of the game, in fellowship with other players (including God) who are also playing the game. To reestablish the integrity of the game, God comes among us as a player and replaces the rules of the game with the person of Jesus Christ. In this role Jesus Christ is more than just another means of salvation replacing the old one (the law). Jesus Christ is God with us. Christ refocuses the law upon the Lawgiver and the play of the game. Before Christ the promises of the law all point forward to God's fulfillment of those promises in Christ (2.6ff.). After Christ, on the basis of his fulfilling the promises of the law, the law points once again to the Lawgiver from whom it came (2.7-11, esp. 8).

In ways that were never the case for Luther and the Lutherans (the law is too closely connected with sin) or for the Romanists (with deep roots in natural law), the law for Calvin has a strong, positive sense. For the Lutherans in particular the first two uses of the law refer to the human condition under sin: the law (e.g., the Ten Commandments) brings out our sin for all the world to see (Romans 7!) and restrains it. For them the third use is just an extension of the first two uses. The Gospel (the righteousness of God on the cross!) is God's answer to the law wrapped up in the power of sin. It refers to the human condition under grace. For the Lutherans Christ (the Gospel) truly releases us from the law and our sinful bondage to it. Calvin follows Luther to this extent, but presses on.

For Calvin Christ transforms the law itself, restoring it to its original, primary purpose, which is to establish humanity as God intended us to be (in God's image) and to manifest the real character of the Lawgiver at the juncture of their interaction. And this is the program Calvin carries out in his theology (and sermons, commentaries, writings, ministry, etc.). In place of the horizontal dialectic of Luther and the Lutherans—law and gospel, sin and grace, the human condition under sin and the human condition in salvation—Calvin puts the vertical dialectic of God and humanity, the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves (so *Institutes* Book I, Chapters 1-2 and *passim*). The law of God (not the law of nature as such)¹⁸ becomes thus for Calvin a take-off point/interface statement to reflect upon both God and humanity at the same time, one always in the light of the other. For the knowledge of God in creation (*Institutes*, Book 1), redemption (*Institutes*, Book 2), and glorification (*Institutes*, Book 3), Calvin always has a corresponding knowledge of humanity ("descending into ourselves," he says often) as creature yet idolater, as sinful yet redeemed, and as children of God adopted by our union with Christ.

¹⁸See William Klempa, "John Calvin on Natural Law," in *Calvin Studies IV*, edited by John H. Leith and W. Stacy Johnson (Davidson, 1988), 1-24.

II

Turning now to Schleiermacher, the key comes in the opening sections of *The Christian Faith* where he speaks of the religious self-consciousness as the seat of religion for human beings. At its fullest development that religious self-consciousness is the same as the Christian faith, a consciousness of God centered in Jesus Christ. Christ is both the ideal and the touchstone of God-consciousness: his faith engenders faith on our part and draws us into the fellowship of such faith, which resides in the Christian community.¹⁹ Notice that, as an ideal, Jesus Christ is far more than an example for us to copy or strive after: the aim of Christian proclamation is to bring us to a participation in the ideal of God-consciousness. Christ *is* the ideal in which we participate (§ 14, 68ff). Regardless of what is said about his views of the atonement, Schleiermacher always maintained a high view of Jesus Christ on the one hand and the Christian Church on the other (§ 11, 52ff).

The Christian faith itself Schleiermacher describes as “the feeling of absolute dependence” (§ 4, 14-18). As a feeling Christian faith is less of an emotion than an orientation of the whole self. He distinguishes between thinking, doing, and feeling (§ 3, especially 7-12). Feeling, he says, is more foundational than either thinking (doctrine) or doing (ethics) because feeling gives to the other two their orientation to God—a connection they do not have in and of themselves. The same is the case with the natural feelings (§ 5, 18ff) that arise in the course of our day-to-day lives. Coupled with the feeling of absolute dependence such feelings become the religious affections which signal our concrete experiences with God.²⁰ Schleiermacher develops a spectrum of the world religions based on the degree of God-consciousness they attain (31ff).

A closer look at the feeling of absolute dependence is quite interesting. Such a feeling cannot generate itself: if it could, the feeling would be relative (12-16), not absolute. Similarly, the feeling of absolute dependence cannot be reduced to a dependence upon nature or the world as a totality, for then, too, it would be a feeling of relative dependence (15f). The feeling of absolute dependence thus comes as a gift from the absolute upon which it depends utterly—God (16-18). Schleiermacher had no truck with Pelagian or cooperative views of free will (98f). But because the absolute dependence is obviously a human orientation, it has to take into account its location, namely, within the religious self-consciousness.

¹⁹See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, edited by H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 5ff. Schleiermacher actually begins his whole dogmatic treatise considering the *Church*. See also § 6, 26ff. All further citations to *The Christian Faith* will be to this edition.

²⁰See Van A. Harvey, “A Word in Defense of Schleiermacher’s Theological Method,” *The Journal of Religion*, vol. XLII, Number 3 (July 1962), 151-170.

From there, in the body of his theology, Schleiermacher goes on to elaborate the religious self-consciousness through its *vital relations*: with the world, with God, and with the relationship between God and the world. He reviews these relations three times: at one point under the condition of sin (294-354), at another point under the condition of grace (by far the longest, 355-737), and then at the point of the relations between God and the world presupposed by the human consciousness of both sin and grace (142-256). He draws specific guidance from the Scriptures and the confessions of the Church (including notably those of the Reformed Tradition. See § 27, 112-118). These writings represent to him the normative distillation of revelation and Christian insight as they are embodied in the religious self-consciousness of the Church over time. Accordingly such documents are to be taken seriously.

Gone for Schleiermacher is an elaborate doctrine of God. He reduces the attributes to a hand full, and he debunks the Trinity in fourteen pages at the end of his 751 page book (in English translation) along with the two-natures doctrine of Christ—both of which come from the distant era of Neo-Platonic philosophy. Like Calvin, Schleiermacher says we humans do not know God as God is in Godself. We know God only as God is related to us and reveals that relationship to us in our consciousness of God. We know God, says Schleiermacher, only in God's relations—to the World and to the religious self-consciousness. We know ourselves as Christians only within the same framework of relations. All which confirms the thesis, that for Schleiermacher the feeling of absolute dependence (or God-consciousness, the religious self-consciousness, or Christian faith—they are all the same thing) is his take-off point, the interface between God and humanity. And from this take-off point he moves back and forth between the poles of God and humanity, just like Calvin.

Remarkably, Schleiermacher's take-off point is dramatically different from Calvin's accent on the law. The idiom of Calvin's theology is ACT, of which *law* is the mode and *doing* is the accent. For Schleiermacher and most of Pietism with him, the idiom of theology is RELATION, of which *personal relationship* or experience (read: "religious affections") is the mode and *feeling* the accent. The differences are dramatic, to the point where some people don't consider Schleiermacher can possibly be a part of the Reformed Tradition.²¹ Yet if

²¹In the first edition of his book, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), John Leith did not list Schleiermacher as a Reformed theologian. Cf. the Revised Edition (1981, p. 139). Following the Neo-Orthodox onslaught on Schleiermacher in the first half of the 20th Century, Leith questions openly whether Schleiermacher belongs in a list of "representative Reformed theologians." Brian Gerrish, on the other hand, argues strongly for Schleiermacher's inclusion in *Tradition and the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 13-48. In his treatment of Calvin, Gerrish tries to read him through the eyes of Schleiermacher. See, for example "Schleiermacher, Hodge and the Theological Legacy of John Calvin," in *The Legacy of John Calvin*, edited by David Foxgrover (Grand Rapids: CRC Product Services, 2000), 158-175; and the monograph *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1993).

Schleiermacher had not transposed the idiom of Reformation theology into the idiom of Pietism, the Reformed Tradition could not have entered the era of modernity. And here we are again, at the end of one era and the beginning of another, trying to figure out again what continues, what stays behind, and what the points of identity are from one era to the next.

III

At the end of this presentation, my question to my audience is whether the patterns of theology outlined here—first in Calvin, then in Schleiermacher—make sense to you and whether it is promising for further study, i.e., fleshed out in a book-length study.