

## The Centrality of Christ

### Introduction

God's decree of history, including the decree of predestination and the power to carry it out, are important in Calvin's theology as the secret principle of God's government of his creation. To deny God's decree is to take away his glory. But God's decrees, in which we rest as believers, are not the central focus of Calvin's theology. Neither is this knowledge unique to Calvin. This knowledge of the Scripture doctrine of predestination is shared by Luther, Thomas Aquinas and some other Scholastic theologians, all the way back to the Church Father Augustine in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

Reformed theology always has a high view of the manifold uses of the law, including its instruction for living well. Calvin agrees heartily with this emphasis – which also is not unique to Reformed theology. But, the important teaching on Law is not the thing most central to Calvin's doctrine.

For Calvin, God's covenant is single – but complex – containing within it the two historical administrations of the Old and the New Covenants of Scripture. This single covenant – spanning both testaments – manifests within itself, under all its administrations, the supreme tension between God's Holy Law and God's Holy Gospel, and the total resolution of that tension in Christ. This complex structure of a single covenant is, in my opinion, a more characteristic feature of Calvin's doctrine. But, Calvin's theology is not looked upon by the scholars as a developed form of the Covenant Theology. This development is seen later in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with the doctrines of the separate covenants of Works (or Creation) and Grace, as illustrated for instance in the Westminster Confession (WCF 7:2-3).<sup>1</sup>

### The True Center

Searching in the doctrines of “Calvinism” for what is particular to Calvin (or his theological heirs) will miss what is central to Calvin.

**What is central to Calvin, and to all the Protestant Reformers, is the person and work of Christ The Savior in all his offices.**

The medieval church looked upon Christ as Judge. There was fear of God, though this was not always a godly fear. You needed the intercession of saints, who might be more sympathetic to your case than Christ, who was probably angry with you. You needed good works (or money) in order to merit (or buy) His favor. The central thing that made the Reformation what it was is the recovery of the knowledge of Christ The Savior. Even justification by faith alone, the single

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<sup>1</sup> It is my observation that knowledge of the details of the subsequently developed “covenant theology” might confuse a student of Calvin's theology, because he is always inadvertently reading things into Calvin's teaching that probably developed later. It seems to me that taking Calvin's teaching in a very simple and straightforward manner is the best way to understand him.

central doctrine at the hinge of it,<sup>2</sup> fits this paradigm: To let a single particle of our justification be a product of our own merit is to chisel away for ourselves some glory from Christ The Savior.

In his Institutes, Calvin breaks the knowledge of God into two parts – the knowledge of God as Creator, and the knowledge of God as Redeemer. In all of his Institutes, but especially in Book I, Calvin emphasizes the knowledge of God the Creator, even the goodness of God displayed for all to see before the need for redemption came about due to Adam’s fall. Beginning at Book II, Chapter VI, Calvin’s focus shifts to the knowledge of God the Redeemer, as manifested in the Mediator between God and Man, the Incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. This focus is retained throughout the remainder of the Institutes.

### Chapter Titles

In previous chapters, Calvin has discussed the Creation and Fall of man, our depravity, and our loss of freedom to will the moral good. Now Calvin takes up the remedy for this disaster. The chapter titles beginning at this point in the Institutes are revealing, especially the titles for Chapters VI, VII and IX:<sup>3</sup>

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|---------------------|---|--|
| Book II, Chapter VI | - | Fallen Man Ought to Seek Redemption in Christ  |
| “ Chapter VII       | - | The Law Was Given, Not to Restrain the Folk of the Old Covenant Under Itself, but to Foster Hope of Salvation in Christ Until His Coming |
| “ Chapter VIII      | - | Explanation of the Moral Law (the Ten Commandments) <sup>4</sup>   |
| “ Chapter IX        | - | Christ, Although He Was Known to the Jews Under the Law, Was at Length Clearly Revealed Only in the Gospel                               |

It is clear from the chapter titles that the focus is entirely on Christ as the way of redemption. In fact, one might say from inspecting the titles, especially the title of Chapter IX, that Calvin’s theology, if expressed in terms of the historical covenants of Scripture, is New Covenant oriented. All the other historic preparations from the beginning of creation, through the time of the Law, are structured to bring history to its climax in Christ.

The editors of the McNeill edition comment in II.VI.1 footnote 1:

... It is of decisive importance that soteriology [the doctrine of salvation] is introduced, not by law, but by this radical *in Christo* [Latin for “in Christ”] passage, which brings the law within the context of the promise of the gospel. ...

<sup>2</sup> ... this is the main hinge on which religion turns, ... (Calvin, Institutes, III.XI.1)

<sup>3</sup> You have to learn your Roman numerals to find your way around the Institutes ☺

<sup>4</sup> From what I understand at the present time, I can’t say that Calvin sees the Ten Commandments as “the law of the Covenant of Works,” as the Confession has it. (WCF 19:2) Here, we just have to take Calvin simply. The Law is a given within the (single) covenant of God. But, Calvin always confesses the tension between the Law and the Gospel.

Let us now begin the exposition of Calvin's teaching in these chapters.

Book II, Chapter VI – Fallen Man Ought to Seek Redemption in Christ

It is clear that one of the main objects of this chapter is to conclusively state that Christ clothed in the Gospel is the sole Redeemer in all aeons of history. The title of the chapter is carefully constructed. Just as fallen man has the duty to see God's handiwork in all creation and in His providence, so fallen man has the duty to seek redemption in Christ alone. Seeking redemption any other way is not only fruitless, but constitutes rebellion.

Calvin:<sup>5</sup>

*1. Only the Mediator helps fallen man*

"The whole human race perished in the person of Adam. Consequently that original excellence and nobility which we have recounted would be of no profit to us but would rather redound to our greater shame, until God, who does not recognize as his handiwork men defiled and corrupted by sin, appeared as Redeemer in the person of his only-begotten Son. Therefore, since we have fallen from life into death, the whole knowledge of God the Creator that we have discussed would be useless unless faith also followed, setting forth for us God our Father in Christ.

"We must, for this reason, come to Paul's statement: "Since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of preaching to save those who believe."<sup>6</sup> ...

"Therefore, although the preaching of the cross does not agree with our human inclination, if we desire to return to God our Author and Maker, from whom we have been estranged, in order that he may again begin to be our Father, we ought nevertheless to embrace it humbly. Surely, after the fall of the first man no knowledge of God apart from the Mediator has had power unto salvation.<sup>7</sup> For Christ not only speaks of his own age, but comprehends all ages when he says: "This is eternal life, to know the Father to be the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent."<sup>8</sup> Thus, all the more vile is the stupidity<sup>9</sup> of those persons who open heaven to all the im-

<sup>5</sup> I have put Calvin's quotes or implicit Scripture references into the footnotes. When he quotes, sometimes it is the Vulgate, and sometimes it is no known translation. Sometimes it is only the sense of the passage that is presented as a quote. This is in harmony with the custom of the time. But, for modern accuracy, I've given the KJV.

<sup>6</sup> <sup>KJV</sup> **1 Corinthians 1:21** For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

<sup>7</sup> <sup>KJV</sup> **Romans 1:16** For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. <sup>KJV</sup> **1 Corinthians 1:24** But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

<sup>8</sup> <sup>KJV</sup> **John 17:3** <sup>3</sup> And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.

<sup>9</sup> The language of the day could be harsh. Also, it is possible that what is translated "stupid" into our English does not always have the same flavor as the Latin. The Latin tends to mean what the English used to mean – struck senseless; or, dull, heavy, or slow. In other words, in this context, it could mean grave spiritual insensitivity.

pious and unbelieving without the grace of him whom Scripture commonly teaches to be the only door whereby we enter into salvation.<sup>10</sup> ...

“Besides this, Christ answered the Samaritan woman: “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know; for salvation is from the Jews.”<sup>11</sup> In these words he both condemns all pagan religions as false and gives the reason that under the law the Redeemer was promised to the chosen people alone. From this it follows that no worship has ever pleased God except that which looked to Christ. On this basis, also, Paul declares that all heathen were “without God and bereft of hope of life.”<sup>12</sup> Now since John teaches that life was in Christ from the beginning,<sup>13</sup> and all the world fell away from it,<sup>14</sup> it is necessary to return to that source. So also, Christ, inasmuch as he is the propitiator, declares himself to be “life.”<sup>15</sup> To be sure, the inheritance of heaven belongs only to the children of God.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it is quite unfitting that those not engrafted into the body of the only-begotten Son are considered to have the place and rank of children. And John clearly declares: “Those who believe in his name become children of God.”<sup>17</sup>

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Erasmus, the great humanist and restorer of the Greek New Testament, who was also a big “make no waves” advocate of church reform within Romanism, is one example of the error Calvin is complaining about. As our editors to the McNeill edition point out, Erasmus’ *Colloquies*, “*Convivium religiosum*,” contains the phrase, “Holy Socrates, pray for us.” And the early Protestant reformer Zwingli, to give another example, put these “virtuous” pagans as inhabitants of heaven: Theseus, Socrates, Aristides, Antigonus, Numa, Camillus, the Catos, and the Scipios. You can look these pagan names up to find out more about them. Calvin is obviously very adverse to this. As Calvin says, the whole tenor of the Scripture is that Christ must be known in order to receive his saving benefits.

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<sup>10</sup> KJV **John 10:9** I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.

<sup>11</sup> KJV **John 4:22** Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews.

<sup>12</sup> KJV **Ephesians 2:12** That at that time ye [Gentiles] were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world:

<sup>13</sup> KJV **John 1:4** In him [the Word, at the beginning of creation] was life; and the life was the light of men.

<sup>14</sup> KJV **John 1:10** He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not.

<sup>15</sup> KJV **John 11:25** Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: **John 14:6** <sup>6</sup> Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

<sup>16</sup> KJV **Matthew 5:9-10** Blessed *are* the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. <sup>10</sup> Blessed *are* they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>17</sup> KJV **John 1:12** But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, *even* to them that believe on his name:

Calvin continues:

2. *Even the Old Covenant declared that there is no faith in the gracious God apart from the Mediator*

“Accordingly, apart from the Mediator, God never showed favor toward the ancient people, nor ever gave hope of grace to them. I pass over the sacrifices of the law, which plainly and openly taught believers to seek salvation nowhere else than in the atonement that Christ alone carries out. I am only saying that the blessed and happy state of the church<sup>18</sup> always had its foundation in the person of Christ.

Calvin has pointed out that the Law obviously prefigures Christ. He now argues from the promise God made to Abraham in Gen. 17:4, 400 years before the law was given:

<sup>KJV</sup> **Genesis 17:7** And I [God] will establish my covenant between me and thee [Abraham] and thy seed [singular] after thee in their [plural] generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed [singular] after thee. <sup>8</sup> And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed [singular] after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their [plural] God.

and compares this with what Paul says in Gal. 3:16:

<sup>KJV</sup> **Galatians 3:16** Now to Abraham and his seed [singular] were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds [plural], as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed [singular], which is Christ.

The Hebrew text uses the singular word “seed” to refer to a body of descendants from Abraham. This is clear from the plural word forms used in within the text of the verse in Genesis. However, Paul uses the fact that the Hebrew word is a singular to argue that the original covenantal promise God made to Abraham included the promise of an individual Head of this corporate body. There is a corporate seed, and there is a singular Seed, who is the Head of all the corporate seed. The great Seed, Christ, who is Israel in Person, incorporates within himself all the other promised seed who are the spiritual offspring of Abraham.

Calvin will argue that this insight of Paul is not new with him, but is exactly the insight that spiritual Hebrews would draw from the original promise as given in the Hebrew language to Abraham. We will discuss Calvin’s argument that Paul’s argument was always known to the spiritual Hebrews in a moment, but first we need to clear away a problem with our Bibles.

Many modern translations, including the New King James Version and others, render the Hebrew word for “seed,” which is in the singular, with the English word “descendants,” which is in the plural. So, the translation becomes:

“And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you ... .”

The singular nuance present in the original Hebrew word is now lost in this translation. It is apparently true that many modern translators of the Hebrew text thought that Abraham, or the Hebrews, would never think that the singular Hebrew word for “seed” could refer to the individual

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<sup>18</sup> By “church” Calvin includes the Israelite church, and all those believers in the Promise before Abraham.

person of the Messiah, else, the translators would never have mistranslated the Hebrew word as “descendants.” The translators were operating with the mistaken presupposition that Paul the apostle’s understanding of “seed,” in the singular, as a reference to the Messiah, is a concept he somehow deduced in his own day and which he read back into the original text. This error in translation is an example of theological bias, inadvertent or otherwise.

But now, Calvin explains this, as we continue in section 2 of this chapter:

“For even if God included all of Abraham’s offspring in his covenant [which he did not], Paul nevertheless wisely reasons that Christ was properly that seed in whom all the nations were to be blessed, since we know that not all who sprang from Abraham according to the flesh were reckoned among his offspring. For, to say nothing of Ishmael and others, how did it come about that of the two sons of Isaac, the twin brothers Esau and Jacob, while they were yet in their mother’s womb, one was chosen, the other rejected? Indeed, how did it happen that the firstborn was set aside while the younger alone kept his status? How, also, did it come about that the majority was disinherited? It is therefore clear that Abraham’s seed is to be accounted chiefly in one Head, and that the promised salvation was not realized until Christ appeared, whose task is to gather up what has been scattered. So, then, the original adoption of the chosen people depended upon the Mediator’s grace. Even if in Moses’ writings [in Genesis] this was not yet expressed in clear words, still it sufficiently appears that it was commonly known to all the godly. For before a king had been established over the people, Hannah, the mother of Samuel, describing the happiness of the godly, already says in her song: “God will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his Messiah.”<sup>19</sup> ...

So, the gist of Calvin’s argument seems to be this: The original proclamation of the covenant to Abraham implicitly included the concept of a head of the body of offspring. (Only modern, democratic folk would ever think otherwise.) The historical elimination of offspring from the spiritual inheritance (which had already begun with Ishmael) implies that the elect is a special group. The process of historical elimination, including the great apostasy at the time of Christ, must produce the recognition that only Christ was left to be the Seed of Abraham through whom the promise could be fulfilled. And, so this was always God’s intention from the beginning, and always part of the promise with which he informed mankind. So, Christ [Messiah] was always the object of faith, however dark and obscure the details of this promise were.

Calvin carries on his argument about the early knowledge of the Messianic King by connecting this promise with the Davidic Kingship.

And there is no doubt that our Heavenly Father willed that we perceive in David and his descendants the living image of Christ. Accordingly David, wishing to urge the pious to fear God, commands them to “kiss the Son.”<sup>20</sup> To this corresponds the saying of the Gospel: “He who does not

<sup>19</sup> <sup>KJV</sup> **1 Samuel 2:10** The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; out of heaven shall he thunder upon them: the LORD shall judge the ends of the earth; and he shall give strength unto his king, and exalt the horn of his anointed.

<sup>20</sup> <sup>KJV</sup> **Psalms 2:12** Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish *from* the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed *are* all they that put their trust in him.

honor the Son does not honor the Father.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, although the Kingdom collapsed because of the revolt of the ten tribes, yet the covenant that God made with David and his successors had to stand, just as he spoke through the prophets: “I will not tear away all the Kingdom ... for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem which I have chosen ... but to your son one tribe will remain.”<sup>22</sup> This same promise is repeated a second and a third time. ... Then, although affairs verged on ruin, it was again said: “The Lord was unwilling to destroy Judah, for the sake of David his servant, since he promised to give a lamp to him and to his sons forever.”<sup>23</sup>

“To sum up: while all others were passed over, David alone was chosen, as he in whom God’s good pleasure should rest, ...

After giving many more Scripture indications that the hope of the godly lay in the protection of the Messianic King, who, in many contexts, appears to be divine, but who also is the Son of David (or even called David), Calvin concludes:

“From this it is now clear enough that, since God cannot without the Mediator be propitious toward the human race, under the law Christ [Messiah] was always set before the holy fathers as the end to which they should direct their faith.

I am not now giving the total picture that Calvin draws in making his case that Christ, through the Davidic Kingship, is promised and portrayed to the believers ever since the promise to Abraham, and throughout the time of the law. To do real justice to this could take several class sessions. I point those who are interested in the total picture of the argument to pay close attention to Book II, Chapter VI, sections 2 and 3, where many more Scripture references are given than I have quoted here.

In conclusion, Calvin says this:

“God willed that the Jews should be so instructed by these prophecies that they might turn their eyes directly to Christ [Messiah] in order to seek deliverance. Even though they had shamefully degenerated, they still could not efface the memory of that general principle: that, as had been promised to David, God would be through the hand of Christ [Messiah] the deliverer of the church; and that his freely given covenant, whereby God had adopted his elect, would stand fast. From this it came about that when Christ entered Jerusalem a little before his death this song was on the children’s lips: “Hosanna to the son of David” [Matt 21:9]. ... For this reason Christ himself bade his disciples believe in him, that they might clearly and perfectly believe in God: “You believe in God; believe also in me” [John 14:1]. ...

<sup>21</sup> <sup>KJV</sup> **John 5:23** That all *men* should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him.

<sup>22</sup> <sup>KJV</sup> **1 Kings 11:13** Howbeit I will not rend away all the kingdom; *but* will give one tribe to thy son for David my servant's sake, and for Jerusalem's sake which I have chosen. **1 Kings 11:32** ( But he shall have one tribe for my servant David's sake, and for Jerusalem's sake, the city which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel: )

<sup>23</sup> <sup>KJV</sup> **2 Kings 8:19** Yet the LORD would not destroy Judah for David his servant's sake, as he promised him to give him alway a light, *and* to his children.

“ ... unless God confronts us in Christ, we cannot come to know that we are saved. ... Hence, what we have recently said becomes clear, that apart from Christ the saving knowledge of God does not stand. From the beginning of the world he had consequently been set before all the elect that they should look unto him and put their trust in him.

“ ... John’s saying has always been true: “He that does not have the Son does not have the Father” [I John 2:23 alt.]. For even if many men once boasted that they worshiped the Supreme Majesty, the Maker of heaven and earth, yet because they had no Mediator it was not possible for them truly to taste God’s mercy, and thus be persuaded that he was their Father. Accordingly, because they did not hold Christ as their Head, they possessed only a fleeting knowledge of God. From this it also came about that they at last lapsed into crass and foul superstitions and betrayed their own ignorance. So today the Turks [Islamics], although they proclaim at the top of their lungs that the Creator of heaven and earth is God, still, while repudiating Christ, substitute an idol in place of the true God.

### Conclusion

A final quote from our chapter of Calvin:

God is comprehended in Christ alone.