

# *Theology Matters*

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**July 10, 2009 is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Calvin's birth. We have included articles on Calvin and the Reformers in this issue in celebration of Calvin's birth.**

## **The Reformers Teach Us About Thinking, Praying, Living**

**by Ann White**

The Reformation surged out of Wittenberg and Geneva proclaiming the Bible alone as faith's authority, setting aside the weight of church tradition that had crippled the Roman Catholic church. Not only Luther and Calvin but also ordinary sixteenth-century men and women proclaimed and debated, suffered criticism and sometimes harm, always with the Bible as the source of their convictions. These passionate defenders of the Protestant Reformation boldly claimed that the Bible illumines the whole of reality.

Following Luther and Calvin, Reformed Christians have held that the Bible is the chief authority in the church, and that preaching and teaching of the Scriptures forms the church's chief duty. Today, however, confidence in the Bible sputters. Can serious study of the way God cared for rebellious ancient Israelites possibly influence lives lived centuries later?

I write here of the first two sixteenth-century generations of Reformers, from Martin Luther's posting of his 95 Theses in 1517 to the death in 1564 of John Calvin, a second generation Reformer. These people had a depth of faith and biblical understanding from

which we can learn and on which we can profitably meditate.

And not just the leaders possessed this faith and understanding. One of Luther's opponents expressed his great astonishment at what lay people grasped after they had read Luther's translation of the New Testament. "Even shoemakers and women," he said, "ventured to dispute, not only with Catholic laymen but even with masters and doctors of theology, about faith and the Gospel."<sup>1</sup> That these sixteenth-century Reformers can be examples for us is well expressed in the judgment of Reformation historian Steven Ozment, who wrote that they were "the most theologically informed and curious generations in Western history, so that laity, whether literate or not, saw more clearly than ever before how seemingly abstract theological issues directly affected their lives."<sup>2</sup>

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## The Reformers Teach Us That the Bible Illumines All of Reality

Consider Argula von Grumbach, Bavarian wife and mother, contemporary of Luther, who took enormous risks because of her understanding of the biblical witness. She wrote to the authorities at the University of Ingolstadt, criticizing them for their imprisonment of a young professor who had been teaching the evangelical ideas of Luther. In her letter she asked, “Where do you read in the Bible that Christ, the apostles, and the prophets imprisoned, banished, burned or murdered anyone? I send you not a woman’s ranting, but the Word of God. I write as a member of the Church of Christ against which the gates of hell shall not prevail.”<sup>3</sup>

Argula von Grumbach lived 1500 years after Jesus. She had just as much reason to be skeptical of the Bible’s efficacy as we do. We must remember that everyone in the first two Reforming generations had no idea whether what we call “the Reformation” would succeed or fail. They got up each morning, just as we do, facing the hundreds of decisions that each day brings. They risked imprisonment, even death. A preacher at the University of Ingolstadt labeled Argula “an insolent daughter of Eve, a heretical bitch and confounded rogue.”<sup>4</sup> Years later, at age 70, she was briefly jailed for organizing heretical worship and teaching heretical doctrines. Yet she, like Luther and so many others, said that the biblical witness to a God who searched out and saved human beings persuaded them to obey him in their speaking and acting. God, they said, would produce the results.

We are not so convinced that biblical preaching and teaching can produce results, except maybe by “comforting” individuals. The rugged Reformation understanding of Scripture puts us to shame.

When Luther hid out in the Wartburg Castle so he would not be murdered as an outlaw and a heretic, his followers back in Wittenberg smashed statues in the churches and dragged Roman Catholic priests out by the hair, because they thought that “reform” demanded such radical measures. Luther, despite the risks to his own person, returned to Wittenberg when he learned of these outrages. He preached one sermon each day for eight days. The sermons ended the violence. Yet Luther did not harangue in these sermons, nor did he criticize from the pulpit the rabble-rousing leaders of the violence. He preached the application of *biblical* ideas. No one can be forced to believe the truth, he said. It is God’s work that brings faith to the heart. He told his hearers that Paul’s warning of becoming a clanging gong without love was a “terrible saying”<sup>5</sup> for them, because they had not shown the tiniest bit of love to their neighbors when they harassed their neighbors about religious practices.

Luther demonstrated that biblical ideas, preached persuasively, could completely change the temper of a town.

## The Reformers Show Us the Meaning of “To God Alone Belongs the Glory”

The sixteenth-century Reforming generations show us what confidence in biblical authority looks like in action. They also show us the deep meaning of “to God alone belongs *all* the glory.”

Yes, we give lip service to the doctrine of justification by faith alone: nothing we do gains our salvation; salvation is God’s gift. Yet the belief that God is completely in charge of history, that he has ordained everything that happens in time and space, throws us into a panic. We get nervous when it appears that God does not operate according to our ideas of what is decent and just. As one woman said in a church class that I taught, “I can’t believe in a god who would let so many people die in a tsunami.” The Lord showed his own sense of what is right through his dealings with Moses, David and Jeremiah, and by coming here to pit himself against evil as a vulnerable human being. But all of that is not enough for us. We want the high and holy God to conform to our ideas of right and wrong.

At the heart of the Reformers’ experience was their conviction that human beings can never fulfill God’s commands that are summarized in the first and second great commandments, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind; you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” We cannot do that! None of us can ever do that. There is not a moment of life in which we are not concerned with ourselves at least as much as with God and other people. That is sin: putting ourselves on a makeshift throne.

Knowing the pervasiveness of his sin drove the young Luther to despair. The same deep understanding of sin produced the sentence of confession in Thomas Cranmer’s sixteenth-century *Book of Common Prayer* that became so offensive to twentieth-century Episcopalians that they removed it: “There is no health in us.”<sup>6</sup>

That sentence no longer appears in the *Book of Common Prayer*, but it is not just Episcopalians who refuse to acknowledge the depth of sin revealed to us in the Bible, in all of history, and in our own lives every day. By refusing to acknowledge our sinfulness, we mock our claim to be Christian. Luther saw this clearly: “If we believe that Christ redeemed man by His blood, we are forced to confess that all of man was lost; otherwise, we make Christ either wholly superfluous, or else the

redeemer of the least valuable part of man only, which is blasphemy and sacrilege.”<sup>7</sup>

Luther, Calvin, all the members of the first Reforming generations were clear that the Bible testifies to a God who holds all things in his hands—the past, present, and future of the world. “If you don’t believe that God foreknows and wills all things,” asked Luther, “how can you believe, trust, and rely on his promises?”<sup>8</sup>

We bridle at the notion that anyone, including God, controls our destinies apart from our knowledge and understanding. But what the Reformers understood, and we do not understand, is that our bridling is itself evidence of sin. We want to be in charge, just as Adam and Eve could not bear to let God be in charge. They asserted their own power by doing exactly what God had told them not to do.

Modern Christians recoil at Calvin’s referring to human beings as worms, even though he is quoting Job when he uses the word. Calling us worms seems an insult to our dignity. But Calvin was not denying human dignity when he used this word; he was showing us our finite creatureliness before an infinite, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient God, just as the book of Job shows us when the Lord says to Job, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the world?” “Man,” says Calvin, “is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God’s majesty.”<sup>9</sup> To God alone belongs all the glory!

### **The Reformers Show Us How To Live One Day At a Time**

The Reformers struggled as we do to understand how to live creatively in the present without brooding over the past and without fretting about the future. They had no idea whether their religious convictions would prevail, or indeed whether they would escape personal harm.

And they had good reason to worry about what the future held. As a young woman, Argula von Grumbach was labeled a heretic for defending a Protestant professor. Rather than being sent to prison, she was consigned to the authority of her husband, who had the right to cut off one of her fingers as punishment. Luther’s friend and colleague, Philip Melancthon, attempting to fashion a compromise with Roman Catholics at a conference in the city of Augsburg, wrote Luther in despair. He wanted to hold fast to his evangelical principles, at the same time that he wanted to prevent a huge rift in Christendom. He told Luther he was sure he was failing in preventing the rift and of course we know that he did fail. Melancthon was making himself ill with anxiety.

Yet Argula did not stop speaking and writing her convictions, as her imprisonment decades later shows us. And Luther told Melancthon that if he knew the outcome of their cause he would have nothing to do with it. “If Moses had insisted on understanding how he was to escape from Pharaoh’s army, Israel might still be in Egypt today,” Luther wrote. “May God increase your faith and ours. If we have that, what can Satan and the whole world do to us?”<sup>10</sup>

We look back at John Calvin and think how stalwart he was, sticking to his convictions in Geneva all those years, building the church, and shaping a tradition. All of those things are true of Calvin. Yet for a time in Geneva he faced so much opposition that he did not know what would happen to his leadership from one day to the next. In 1555 he faced down a mob incited by political opponents who wanted to keep religious authority in the hands of the government, not the Consistory of pastors and elders led by Calvin. Calvin shouted to the marauders, “If you want blood, you can start with mine.”<sup>11</sup> When they wavered he began a speech and the mob dispersed. The next day Calvin said: “I despair of holding this church any longer.”<sup>12</sup>

The ground of the Reforming generations’ staggering faith was their conviction that God is in charge of history. Understanding that God—the God who tried over and over again to help the Israelites and who entered human history in a human body—really does foreknow and foreordain all things, means that you can trust him with your own brief and precious moment of history.

The Reformers’ moment of history involved outbreaks of plague, no modern medicine, poor water, children’s frequent deaths, and worries over money. They faced all of these obstacles while bringing about a stunning renewal of the Christian church in Europe. Luther said that he was the ace of trumps in a hand of cards that God was playing with the pope. Luther was not being egotistical. Quite the contrary. He was declaring his certainty that God was in charge of his reforming efforts.

### **The Reformers Teach Us That Faith Invites Conflict**

The Bible shows us, as it showed Luther and Calvin and Argula von Grumbach, that Christian witness does not bring peace. In fact, the conflict Jesus faced stands at the heart of the Scriptures. Jesus could have bypassed Calvary. Instead, he *chose* to engage with his enemies among the religious leaders and to move toward the awful violent conflict of Calvary. From the beginning, our faith has not been a faith of quiet peacefulness.

A sixteenth-century Strasbourg woman, Katherina Schutz, put herself in the line of fire when in 1523 she married one of the first Reforming ministers, Matthew Zell. Middle class and with a German education, Katherina read Luther and studied the Bible. She understood how the marriage of the clergy followed logically from the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. But to most of her contemporaries the idea of a married clergyman was strange. They were accustomed to priests taking concubines and fathering children outside of marriage. They believed that priests should not marry, as the church taught, and that only a slut would live with a priest—certainly not a well brought up young woman like Katherina Schutz.

Katherina Schutz Zell did not shrink from the opprobrium and the conflict that came with her marriage. She met it head on, writing a spirited and profoundly biblical defense of her husband and of their marriage. She lived in a swirl of conflict for the rest of her life.

It is good for us to meditate on the contrast between how deeply we want people to like us and Jesus utterly alone at Calvary, with no one offering a good opinion of him. To the people of the first Reforming generations, like Katherina Schutz Zell, the necessity and pain of the conflict revealed in the Bible—conflict that engulfed prophets, apostles, Jesus himself—was real: it illumined their own reality of ceaseless conflict. Calvin was hounded by political opponents. Argula von Grumbach was jailed at age 70 because she persisted in organizing evangelical worship and teaching the Bible. Thomas Cranmer, author of the *Book of Common Prayer*, was burned to death by English authorities under Roman Catholic Queen Mary.

At the beginning of his Reforming efforts, Luther was threatened with death. Until the end of his life, he was constantly criticized, both by Roman Catholics and by other reformers. He set down the situation plainly and biblically: “The Word of God comes to change and renew the world. This cannot happen without commotion and upheaval, and often without bloodshed.”<sup>13</sup>

### **The Reformers Teach Us That Faith Requires Intellectual Effort**

It is accurate to picture the sixteenth-century Reformers at worship, their faces expectantly uplifted as they listen to the preaching. But it is just as accurate to picture them *reading*.

We know that the invention of the printing press “helped the Reformation.” But do we think about what the printing press meant in the lives of individuals? It

meant that they read hungrily expecting that the Holy Spirit would illumine their situation through their arduous study.

Consider again Argula von Grumbach. She was a wife and mother living in a small town. Having been raised in the Bavarian court, where she worked as a lady-in-waiting, she had received an education that enabled her to read and write German, but she was not a scholar, not a professor. Yet she read everything she could lay her hands on about the faith. First and foremost was the Bible, newly available in Luther’s German translation. She read it as though her life depended on it. What did it say to her about her duties as a Christian? How could it help her understand the moment of history in which she lived?

She asked friends and relatives in larger cities to send her books and pamphlets not available in her town. She read everything that Luther wrote, and everything written by Luther’s friend and fellow Wittenberg University professor, Philip Melancthon. Argula von Grumbach was not untypical in her voracious reading.

As we have seen, Argula’s deep study and reflection led her to write a letter criticizing the action of a Roman Catholic university faculty. Following the same pattern of careful reading and study and then taking up a pen to write, a sixteenth-century French woman named Marie Dentiere wrote to defend the right of women to teach the Gospel. Marie’s “Epistle” to the sister of the Roman Catholic King of France also warns how the Roman Catholic hierarchy made up rules as if Christ had never come. Her writing is steeped in scriptural understanding and Reformation theology.

The Reformation stood for sophisticated intellectual endeavor: Bible study in home, church, and school; the writing and study of catechisms; extensive university training for those who would be ministers of the evangelical and Reformed churches. Neither Luther nor Calvin ever apologized for their extraordinarily deep learning or their academic degrees. On the contrary, they were proud of these achievements. To the end of his life, Luther cherished his doctorate. He was a university professor and curriculum reformer at the University of Wittenberg while also being a pastor, prolific writer, and leader of the Reformation.

Both Luther and Calvin insisted on the founding of public schools for all children—girls as well as boys—Luther in the German states and Calvin in Geneva. Both understood that Christians had to be educated so as to study the Bible and to witness persuasively in their societies. It is no accident that the first states to achieve universal literacy in the nineteenth century were states where the Reformation first took hold.

“Witnessing persuasively” means *speaking*. This is another important intellectual aspect of the Reformation. In early sixteenth-century Europe, most people could not read. Did that mean they were left out of Reformation activity? Absolutely not. The thousands of pamphlets that poured off printing presses contained pictures and cartoons. They contained sermons that people read aloud to others. Argula’s letter to the Ingolstadt faculty was printed in a pamphlet, no doubt read silently and aloud many times.

Luther said, “The ears alone are the organs of a Christian.”<sup>14</sup> From its beginning, our faith has been most surely transmitted by one person’s speaking to another. In the Reformation, laypeople understood this truth better than we do. They studied and labored to articulate the faith to others, discussing Christian theology at street fairs, in town markets, inns, mills, guilds, and civic debates.

The debate was an academic practice that wasn’t confined to the academy. Luther published his 95 Theses as statements for public debate. The Swiss cities held debates between Roman Catholic and Reformed theologians, after which the citizens voted on whether or not their city would accept the Reformation. The young Calvin stunned Roman Catholic debaters when he showed in debate that he knew more about the writings of early church fathers like Augustine than the Catholics knew. A sixteenth-century woodcut shows Argula von Grumbach holding her Bible while confronting a group of theologians in debate. Such a face-to-face debate never took place. Nonetheless, in the imaginations of those who had read or heard her letter through pamphlets, the debate should have taken place. It made no difference that ninety percent of the population could not read. They learned their Bible and their theology by listening.

### **The Reformers Teach Us That Christian Faith Requires Obedience**

Jesus is not only our Savior, he is also our Lord, our authority. “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you?” he said (Luke 6:46, NRSV). But we resist authority. We resist it because, like Adam and Eve, we want to do things our own way, to trust ourselves above all. Additionally, Americans are culturally conditioned to resist authority. Our forbears revolted against a legal authority. Later forbears lived on the frontier with no authority save that which they made for themselves. American Christians are quick to understand that law without Gospel breaks the spirit, but very slow to acknowledge that Gospel without law is sterile.

The Reformers taught the three uses of the law: 1) it preserves the order of creation; 2) it convinces persons of their need for grace; and 3) in response to grace, it provides a standard of obedience to God, a guide for daily living.

John Calvin urged the people of Geneva, in grateful response to God’s great mercy in Christ, to live amended lives obeying the law. Calvin never held political office in Geneva. He was always simply a Minister of Word and Sacrament, and the Consistory of ministers and lay elders that he led was *not* Geneva’s legislature. Calvin wanted religious influence to pervade Geneva’s life, and he accomplished this through preaching, teaching, and personal persuasion, all of which influenced the elected men who made Geneva’s laws.

For example, at Calvin’s prompting, Geneva’s larger legislative council swore “to live according to the Reformation, forget all hatreds, and cultivate concord.”<sup>16</sup> The smaller legislative council held regular meetings, pledged to secrecy, for self-correction. Another example flowed from Calvin’s perception that the Bible unequivocally teaches that women and men are equal in God’s eyes. At his urging, Geneva adopted laws forbidding prostitution and the abuse of women, and gave women the right to sue for divorce as well as to seek annulment of a marriage on the grounds of impotence. Calvin’s goal was always to bring about concrete practical obedience to God’s commands in the life of his society. His vision, grounded in Scripture, was of a citizenry with a sense of public responsibility. To that end he delivered a sermon every year just before the election of public officials.

For all the members of the first Reforming generations, salvation by God’s grace alone never negated God’s commands. Calvin said that all of the good works of personal, social, and political life—done in obedience to God’s commands—are signs of divine benevolence, proofs of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Later generations of Lutherans skewed Luther’s teachings to suggest that salvation by God’s grace alone was *everything*. This is a serious misunderstanding of the first Reformer. We quickly remember Luther’s vituperations against German peasants, but we do not remember that he wrote over 1000 letters to landowners urging better treatment of their peasants as part of their responsibility to follow God’s commands. In both his small and large catechisms Luther wrote about the Ten Commandments, noting in the Larger Catechism that the Ten Commandments are “the greatest treasure God has given us.”<sup>16</sup> We have already seen how forthrightly he preached to his Wittenberg congregation about their

disobedience to God's commands in their rioting against Roman Catholic practices.

Argula von Grumbach's understanding of God's Word compelled her to take action. Argula called the Gospel of Jesus Christ a "hammer," a tool that should remold all aspects of life: political, social, cultural, and personal.

And Luther spoke for all members of his and Calvin's generations of Reformers when he said: "For where works and love do not break forth, the faith is not right, the Gospel does not take hold, and Christ is not rightly known."<sup>17</sup>

### Conclusion

It is worth pausing to reflect on the lives of Luther and Arugula and Calvin and Marie Dentiere, especially when we pity ourselves, thinking it is hard to be Christian in our culture. Members of the Reforming generations had it harder. They struggled with intellectual doubt. Luther wondered about himself: Could a single monk in all of Christendom be right about the faith? They ruggedly handled conflict all the days of their lives—and in the case of Thomas Cranmer until his enemies put an end to his life. They studied relentlessly and strove to obey God's commands, even when obedience brought ridicule and fresh conflict. Their luminous faith can steady us, instruct us, guide us. We are the poorer if we leave their lives unexamined.

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3. Roland Bainton, *Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy*, Beacon Press, 1971, p. 105.
4. Bainton, p. 105.
5. *Readings in Luther for Laymen*, Ed. Charles S. Anderson, Augsburg Press, 1967, p. 64.
6. *Book of Common Prayer*, Church Pension Fund, 1945, p. 6.
7. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, Trans. J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston, Fleming H. Revell, 1957, p. 318.
8. *The Bondage of the Will*, pp. 83-84.
9. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book I, in *A Reformation Reader*, Ed. Denis R. Janz, Augsburg Fortress, 1999, p. 228.
10. Atkinson, p. 285.
11. John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 171.
12. McNeill, p. 171.
13. *The Bondage of the Will*, p. 91-92.
14. Ozment, p. 204.
15. McNeill, p. 187.
16. Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, Fortress Press, 1959, pp. 54-55.
17. *Readings in Luther for Laymen*, p. 197.

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# A Shattered Vase: The Tragedy of Sin in Calvin's Thought

by Michael Horton

The Enlightenment had high hopes for humanity. Emancipated from the church, tradition, and Scripture, the self-made individual aspired to attain intellectual or at least (after Kant) moral perfection. For this realization of the moral kingdom, Christ was not absolutely necessary. Not only is there no such thing as original sin in the Enlightenment perspective, but also the example or model of a life well-pleasing to God is

already innate in our minds. Therefore, we may advance simply on the basis of the moral law within.

However, Pelagianism—the religion of self-salvation—is the default setting of the fallen heart ever since the fall. We find it even in the nineteenth-century American evangelist Charles Finney, and it remains a potent theology in practice even in many places where it is

denied in theory. Accordingly, the emphasis falls on human activity and striving, self-improvement, and the moral transformation of society. In many ways, modernity represents a theological and spiritual movement: a Christian heresy that could arise only as the negation of the faith that offended its moral sensibilities.

Turning his back even on the supposed givens of nature, Friedrich Nietzsche insisted that truth is not discovered, but made—by us. Our lives do not have any purpose, given their accidental origin, but we can create a destiny for ourselves. Preserving the emphasis on blind willing, many of Nietzsche’s postmodern heirs have also deconstructed the sovereign self presupposed by their mentor. Michael Foucault realized that it was, to borrow a term from Nietzsche, “bad fiction.” In reality, the self is no more a fixed and stable entity than other notions, such as truth, being, God, or the world. We are not sovereign over our own lives, but are shaped by constantly changing power structures.<sup>1</sup> From the sovereign self, emancipated from all authorities, to the vanishing self, imprisoned in a network of power-relations, humanity is unsure of itself now more than ever.

For a variety of reasons, John Calvin’s treatment of humanity provokes a host of questions and answers that remind us how powerfully Scripture still speaks to our condition. Wherever the realism of the biblical account of the human condition is taken seriously, the gospel is seen more clearly and embraced more deeply. Calvin would likely agree with Foucault that there is no such thing as an autonomous self that first exists and then enters into power-relations (i.e., social structures). Rather, human beings are inherently covenantal. That is, they are always already participants in a web of relationships. First of all, they are “in Adam”—both sinners and sinned-against, caught up in the paradox of being image-bearers of God accountable to God for their obedience or transgression. No one is an island of pure subjectivity, alone determining what one is or will be. Rather, we are conditioned by our relatedness to each other as children of Adam. Second, as they are “in Christ,” the elect are not only accountable and therefore liable to condemnation, but are chosen, redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified. They belong to the covenant community, including its practices of baptism, catechesis, discipline, communion, and so forth. There is no abstract self hovering above these two networks of power-relations. One is either a covenant-keeper in Christ or a covenant-breaker in Adam. Like Jesus’ generation, which he compared to children who did not know either how to mourn or dance properly, we—even in the church—seem to regard the verdict of the law as too severe and the verdict of the gospel as too good to be true. Our age

does not seem to know either the grandeur of creation or the tragedy of the fall.

### **The Paradox in Calvin’s Anthropology**

Not only Calvin’s critics, but sometimes admirers, are surprised to discover in his writings such lavish descriptions of the majesty of creation in general and the dignity of human beings in particular. Absent from Calvin is the traditional Augustinian and medieval notion of a *donum superadditum*—a gift of grace added to nature in order to orient human beings toward God, righteousness, and life.<sup>2</sup> This view depended largely on a Platonic/Neoplatonic cosmology, with the intellect at the highest rung of the ladder, participating in divinity, and the body toward the lower rungs, with the soul ranged midway. Thus, with the superadded gift, Adam could either raise himself above the realm of the body and its passions, following the image of God imprinted on his mind, or allow his lower nature to drag him down.

In Calvin’s understanding, created nature was excellent simply by virtue of being generated by God’s unfailing word. “For not only did a lower appetite seduce him, but unspeakable impiety occupied the very citadel of his mind, and pride penetrated to the depths of his heart. Thus it is pointless and foolish to restrict the corruption that arises thence only to what are called the impulses of the senses; or to call it the ‘kindling wood’ that attracts, arouses, and drags into sin only that part which they term ‘sensuality.’”<sup>3</sup> Human fallenness cannot be attributed to any weakness in human nature as created, which would place blame ultimately at God’s feet. Rather, it was the inexplicable apostasy from true righteousness and holiness. Calvin put it this way:

Now away with those persons who dare write God’s name upon their faults, because we declare that men are vicious by nature! They perversely search out God’s handiwork in their own pollution, when they ought rather to have sought it in that unimpaired and uncorrupted nature of Adam. Our destruction, therefore, comes from the guilt of our flesh, not from God, inasmuch as we have perished solely because we have degenerated from our original condition.<sup>4</sup>

To God alone is attributed human dignity. The *imago dei* can be properly defined only in relation to its renewal in Christ by the Spirit (1.15.4). “In this integrity man by free will had the power, if he so willed, to attain eternal life. Here it would be out of place to raise the question of God’s secret predestination because our present subject is not what can happen or not, but what man’s nature was like. Therefore Adam could have stood if he wished, seeing that he fell solely by his own will.” His faculties

were rightly composed to obedience, until in destroying himself he corrupted his own blessings. Hence the great obscurity faced by the philosophers, for they were seeking in a ruin for a building, and in scattered fragments for a well-knit structure. They held this principle, that man would not be a rational animal unless he possessed free choice of good and evil; also it entered their minds that the distinction between virtues and vices would be obliterated if man did not order his life by his own planning. Well reasoned so far—if there had been no change in man. But since this was hidden from them, it is no wonder they mix up heaven and earth! <sup>5</sup>

Not abstract metaphysical speculation, but the concrete history of the covenant as interpreted by divine revelation, was Calvin's way of approaching the tragedy of human corruption. Not nature as fashioned by the hand of God, but the willful decision of the covenant partner to violate the commission entrusted to him, was the locus of misery in the world. Ranged, like Irenaeus, against the Gnostic identification of evil with the warp and woof of creation itself—a view that has returned with a vengeance among Nietzsche's heirs—Calvin emphasized the fall as the historical event of willful human transgression that spoiled a glorious theater.

This paradox of human dignity and human tragedy is apparent throughout Calvin's treatment of sin, and it is far from unique to the Geneva Reformer. Especially among the younger reformers such as Calvin, humanism had made a deep impression. Although differences are sometimes exaggerated, in material terms humanism exhibited greater interest in human dignity, and in terms of methods was more concerned with history and the interpretation of texts than with the more speculative approach characteristic of medieval scholasticism. When Calvin heaped scorn on the "school-men," he was simply echoing Erasmus, Lefèvre, Valla, and other humanists of his day. The Reformed scholasticism that followed in the wake of Bucer, Calvin, Vermigli, Musculus, and numerous other important figures, was imbued with this humanist spirit, however much it seems to have followed the more traditional method of scholastic systems. However, it is Scripture that shaped their anthropology, so that it could simultaneously affirm human nature as such and reckon with the gruesome reality of human misery.<sup>6</sup> Much like our own day, there were humanists such as Pico della Mirandola who exalted the divinity of the human soul, and those whom Calvin identified as new Epicureans, who could scarcely distinguish humans from brute animals.

Of course, this somewhat paradoxical anthropology of what we might call simultaneously dignified and deranged is not always apparent in the work of everyone who claims Calvin's legacy. Especially in

more popular renditions, the summary often begins with total depravity. This may be due in part to the famous acronym "TULIP," which is itself a shorthand summary of the Canons of the Synod of Dort (1618-19). However, it must be remembered that Dort was a response to the Five Points of the Remonstrants (Arminians) and as such never intended to offer a summary of Calvinism per se, but a defense of Reformed doctrines at stake in that controversy. Furthermore, even there, under the topic of human corruption, the canons begin, "Man was originally formed after the image of God. His understanding was adorned with a true and saving knowledge of his Creator, and of spiritual things; his heart and will were upright, all his affections pure, and the whole man was holy." Only after saying this did the divines assembled at Dort think it possible to add, "But, revolting from God by the instigation of the devil and by his own free will, [man] forfeited these excellent gifts; and in the place thereof became involved in blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity, and perverseness of judgment; became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections."<sup>7</sup>

The same dual emphasis is found in the Belgic Confession, where, after commenting on the *imago dei*, it is added, "But being in honor, he understood it not, neither knew his excellency, but willfully subjected himself to sin and consequently to death and the curse, giving ear to the words of the devil." Transgressing "the commandment of life," he "corrupted his whole nature" and "lost all his excellent gifts which he had received from God, and retained only small remains thereof, which, however, are sufficient to leave man without excuse."<sup>8</sup> The same affirmation of created dignity and total corruption appears in the Heidelberg Catechism (Q.6) as well as the Westminster Confession (4.2) and catechisms (Shorter, Q. 10, 15-19).

If we begin with total depravity rather than creation, the former can easily lose the tragic element; sin too easily then becomes confused with our humanity as such rather than with its corruption. This is the popular caricature of Calvin's critics, where human existence itself is a factor that must be endured with extreme reluctance and dissatisfaction, breeding an asceticism that makes its medieval versions seem appealing by comparison.

However, for Calvin and Reformed theology, it is not our humanity with its magnificent endowments, but the perversity of our willful suppression of the truth in unrighteousness, employing those gifts as weapons against a good Creator, that introduces the tragic element in nature and history. "This is the inherited corruption, which the church fathers termed 'original sin,' meaning by the word 'sin,' the depravation of a

nature previously good and pure.”<sup>9</sup> Calvin explicitly appeals to the double imputation in Romans 5—that is, the parallel between Adam and Christ. If human corruption is simply a matter of imitating Adam’s trespass, then salvation comes by imitating Christ’s good example.<sup>10</sup> Calvin refuses to become mired in the finer historical debates over the transmission of the soul from one generation to another, content to assert with Scripture that Adam stood as the covenantal representative for the human race.<sup>11</sup> Original sin includes both guilt and corruption.<sup>12</sup>

### **How *Total* is Total Depravity?**

Calvin and Reformed theology generally differed from Luther and Lutheranism on the question of the effect of the fall on the image of God. For the latter tradition, the fall so corrupted human nature that there is no vestige of the image of God; it has been entirely lost and can be restored only by redemption in Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup> Again Calvin’s concern to uphold the integrity of God’s creation is exhibited in his refusal to accept a total eradication of the divine image. In fact, particularly against the radical Anabaptists, Calvin offers a challenge that is worth quoting at length:

Whenever we come upon these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts. 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 by holding the gifts of the Spirit in such slight esteem, we condemn and reproach the Spirit himself. What then? Shall we deny that the truth shone upon the ancient jurists who established civic order and discipline with such great equity? Shall we say that the philosophers were blind in their fine observation and artful description of nature? Shall we say that those men were devoid of understanding who conceived the art of disputation and taught us to speak reasonably? Shall we say that they are insane who developed medicine, devoting their labor to our benefit? What shall we say of all the mathematical sciences? Shall we consider them the ravings of madmen? No, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without great admiration.... Those men whom Scripture calls “natural men” were, indeed, sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. Let us, accordingly, learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of its true good.<sup>14</sup>

The Spirit is at work savingly in the elect, but also in common grace toward the reprobate.<sup>15</sup>

Luther too, of course, spoke of the potential for unregenerate humanity in “things earthly,” but Calvin saw this as evidence not of the neutrality or indifference of earthly things in relation to God and his kingdom, but of the ineradicable and indelible imprint of God’s image. Indeed, it is this fact that humanity remains in some sense God’s image-bearer and covenant partner that motivates human beings in their sinfulness to idolatry and sophisticated schemes of religious distortion. Fallen human beings are not irreligious, but idolatrous. The image must be suppressed because it is still there. Like a mirror that reveals a reflection that we do not want to see, it must be distorted, covered over, smeared with mud. Because it reflects the God whose existence stands over against us in judgment, the image of God is no longer redolent of high office, but is a burden to be cast off. Precisely because it cannot be eradicated it is disfigured beyond recognition.

Again, this gives to Calvin’s doctrine of sin an irreducibly ethical determination. In the fall, humanity lost nothing of its created nature. There is no missing part, no weak faculty, that could account for disobedience.

Because of the bondage of sin by which the will is held bound, it cannot move toward good, much less apply itself thereto; for a movement of this sort is the beginning of conversion to God, which in Scripture is ascribed entirely to God’s grace.... Nonetheless the will remains, with the most eager inclination disposed and hastening to sin. For man, when he gave himself over to this necessity, was not deprived of will, but of soundness of will.... Therefore simply to will is of man; to will ill, of a corrupt nature; to will well, of grace.<sup>16</sup>

This requires a distinction between necessity and compulsion. Just as God’s immunity to sin derives from his own natural goodness rather than any external compulsion, so the reverse is true for sinners. Calvin appeals to Bernard’s argument that human beings are “oppressed by no other yoke than that of a kind of voluntary servitude.”

Surely my readers will recognize that I am bringing forth nothing new, for it is something that Augustine taught of old with the agreement of all the godly, and it was still retained almost a thousand years later in monastic cloisters. But Lombard, since he did not know how to distinguish necessity from compulsion, gave occasion for a pernicious error.<sup>17</sup>

Reformed scholastics would invoke the distinction between natural and moral ability, which makes the same point perhaps more precisely. Yet the two sets of terms are related: depravity is natural in the sense that it is universally inherited, not in the sense that it is inherent in human nature as created; human beings retain the natural ability to contemplate God in his works because the image of God has not been completely lost, yet the moral ability to render gratitude, true worship, and obedience to God is entirely surrendered to the bondage of sin. Everyone still retains a *sensus divinitatis*: “a sense of divinity which can never be effaced is engraved upon men’s minds.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, superstition and idolatry are evidence both of this general revelation and its distortion in the fallen heart.<sup>19</sup>

Some Calvinists may be embarrassed by Calvin’s repeated affirmations of the persistence of the divine image, particularly with the Reformer’s appeal to metaphors such as embers, lamps, and remnants. Indeed, total depravity is sometimes represented even by advocates as requiring something closer to the Lutheran view, with every vestige of original righteousness, holiness, and love extinguished in the unregenerate heart. However, Calvin is closer to Augustine in this respect. Although he does not attach himself (at least explicitly) to the theory of sin as mere privation of the good, he typically understands sin as parasitical. It cannot create, but can only undo; it cannot bring about its own state of affairs, but can only corrupt, distort, disfigure, and suppress an original state of affairs determined by God’s goodness. Ugliness is the marring of beauty; stupidity and foolishness are the derangement of an original intelligence and wisdom; injustice is, as its prefix suggests, the undoing of justice; error is the distortion of the truth. Sin and evil cannot create, but only destroy.

But not destroy *completely*. The rays of God’s glory in creation still manage to penetrate through the mud that human beings have smeared onto the mirror, and God’s gracious providence (what later Reformed theology would call common grace) enables humanity even in its perversity to arrive at some semblance of truth, goodness, and beauty in things earthly. For Calvin, then, depravity was total in its extensiveness, not in its intensiveness. In other words, there is no foothold of goodness anywhere in us—in our mind, will, emotions, or body—where we could rise up to God. Sin has corrupted the whole person, like a poison that works its way in greater or lesser intensity throughout the entire stream. Yet, despite ourselves, this does not eliminate the possibility of reflecting God’s glory. Humanity is therefore not as bad as it could possibly be, but as badly off as it could possibly be. There is no residue of obedient piety in us, but only a *sensus divinitatis* that we exploit for idolatry, self-justification, and

superstition. Thus the same remnants of original righteousness that allow even pagans to create a reasonably equitable civic order in things earthly provoke them in their corruption to false religion in things heavenly.

As Calvin sees things, medieval theology had compromised both the integrity of creation and the sovereignty of grace. With respect to the former, creation lacked genuine integrity apart from a superadded gift of grace that elevated nature beyond itself. Yet with respect to God’s tribunal, general revelation yielded some saving truth to which at least the relatively unfallen intellect could assent and, as the will cooperated with grace, conversion could ensue. Calvin took creation and the fall more seriously. He took issue with the popular notion that God simply holds out his hand in an offer of pardon to those who turn themselves toward him—and that this constitutes the grace of God in regeneration. “We admit that man’s condition while he still remained upright was such that he could incline to either side. But inasmuch as he has made clear by his example how miserable free will is unless God both wills and is able to work in us, what will happen to us if he imparts his grace to us in this small measure?”<sup>20</sup> Again, it is not that the will is rendered inactive by sin, but that it is bound by sin until grace restores it in a one-sided, unilateral, and unassisted divine act (2.3.14).

God’s revelation in creation renders us all inexcusable. “Yet let this difference be remembered,” Calvin adds, “that the manifestation of God, by which he makes his glory known in his creation, is, with regard to the light itself, sufficiently clear; but that on account of our blindness, it is not found to be sufficient.”<sup>21</sup> Only by the light of faith can we properly discern even the revelation of God in creation, Calvin argues, appealing to Hebrews 11:3.<sup>22</sup>

Calvin’s repeated images are vivid: the burning lamps shine, but we immediately leap to extinguish them; embers continue to smolder, but we smother them; wherever rays of God’s glory break through, we smear the mirror with our filth; the tree is chopped down before it can bear the fruit of true righteousness. “Their unrighteousness was this—they quickly choked by their own depravity the seed of right knowledge, before it grew up to ripeness.”<sup>23</sup> “As experience shows,” he says, “God has sown a seed of religion (*semen religionis*) in all men. But scarcely one man in a hundred is met with who fosters it, once received, in his heart, and none in whom it ripens—much less shows fruit in season.” Whether they explicitly deny God or embrace their own superstitions, “all degenerate from the true knowledge of him.”<sup>24</sup> Creation is “a glorious theater”; indeed, “wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the

universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of his glory,” especially in “this most vast and beautiful system of the universe in its wide expanse.”<sup>25</sup> Even the most uneducated person can recognize this, but how much more can those who daily engage in “astronomy, medicine, and all natural science,” not to mention “the liberal arts.”<sup>26</sup>

Another popular analogy is that of a labyrinth.<sup>27</sup> In the theater of this world, “so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author. Although they bathe us wholly in their radiance, yet they can of themselves in no way lead us into the right path. Surely they strike some sparks, but before their fuller light shines forth these are smothered.”<sup>28</sup>

In his Romans commentary, Calvin follows Paul’s logic closely: the consequence of human wickedness and suppression of the truth in unrighteousness is not atheism, but idolatry, speculation, and the measuring of God’s majesty according to human standards.<sup>29</sup> “[Paul] then intimates, that they, making a depraved choice, preferred their own vanities to the true God; and thus the error, by which they were deceived, was voluntary.”<sup>30</sup> Romans 1 targets the obvious vices of the Gentiles, but chapter 2 “is directed against hypocrites, who dazzle the eyes of men by displays of outward sanctity, and even think themselves to be accepted before God, as though they had given him full satisfaction. Hence Paul, after having stated the grosser vices, that he might prove that none are just before God, now attacks saintlings (*sanctulos*) of this kind, who could not have been included in the first catalogue.”<sup>31</sup> If “the Lord sings to the deaf as long as he does not touch inwardly their hearts,” it is only because of our own perversity.<sup>32</sup>

God continues to give general or common graces to the wicked. “For this reason, we are not afraid, in common parlance, to call this man wellborn, that one depraved in nature. Yet we do not hesitate to include both under the universal condition of human depravity.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, in the court of human justice and opinion, there is great diversity. Some people are more vicious, others more virtuous; some more intelligent, artful, just, and generous than others. Yet before God’s tribunal, all mouths are stopped.

Calvin’s distinctions between God’s general gifts in providence and God’s saving grace in the church, necessity and compulsion, nature-as-created and the corruption of nature, things heavenly and things earthly, a righteousness before God and a righteousness before humanity, allow him to continue to affirm the goodness of creation as such alongside the most unflinching appraisal of human wickedness. So although we are

swimming in revelation, our minds are drowning in self-imposed ignorance and vanity. Not until God speaks in the Scriptures is there a proper knowledge of God.<sup>34</sup> Only with the Scriptures as our spectacles are we able to recognize truly what before we had seen only confusedly and distortedly.<sup>35</sup> Now, we apprehend God’s works, “while these very works are appraised not by our depraved judgment but by the rule of eternal truth.” To be sure, even here we see through a glass darkly, but “it is better to limp along this path than to dash with all speed outside it.”<sup>36</sup> Human beings are the loftiest examples of divine wisdom,<sup>37</sup> which makes their willful ingratitude in turning away from God all the more culpable.<sup>38</sup>

### Is God the Author of Sin?

As the quote above from the Canons of Dort attests, Calvinism in its official expressions attributes original sin to the transgression of Adam, “by his own free will.” It is not God’s sovereignty that holds human freedom in bondage, but sin. Here too, confessional Reformed theology is obligated to hold together two apparently conflicting theses: God has decreed whatever comes to pass, yet this in no way infringes on creaturely freedom. It would be easier, of course, for finite intellects to resolve this dilemma in the direction of either human autonomy or fatalism, but the Bible does not allow these options.

Calvin’s theological heirs are therefore simply affirming with their mentor the futility of speculation, which can only lead finally to error and ultimately to idolatry. God is not the author of sin, since he does not directly cause or bring it about. (In his treatment in the *Institutes*, Calvin freely employs the Aristotelian categories of primary and secondary causality.) That is, God does not make, create, or coerce creatures toward evil. This conclusion, in fact, Calvin regards as blasphemy.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, the fall did not catch God by surprise. From all eternity, God had elected a people from the human race in Christ for eternal life. Supralapsarians and infralapsarians have both found statements in Calvin to support their positions (that God’s decree of election was made with regard to humanity either as created or as fallen, respectively). However, this is a later debate that can only be anachronistically inserted into Calvin’s thinking.

The important thing for Calvin is simply to affirm simultaneously that God is neither the author nor the passive victim of creaturely aggression. He cautions,

Let no one grumble here that God could have provided better for our salvation if he had forestalled Adam’s fall. Pious minds ought to loathe this objection, because it manifests inordinate

curiosity.... Let us accordingly remember to impute our ruin to depravity of nature, in order that we may not accuse God himself, the Author of nature.<sup>40</sup>

In fact, we call this corruption natural only “in order that no man may think that anyone obtains it through bad conduct, since it holds all men fast by hereditary right.” Thus, it is not nature itself but its corruption that is in view.<sup>41</sup>

## Sin and Grace

We have seen that for Calvin human dignity rather than depravity must be the starting point for anthropology. It should be added that his stark appraisal of sin was but a prelude to the gospel. Just as creation measured the tragedy of the fall, redemption in Christ measured the triumph of grace. Throughout Calvin’s discussion of the first chapters of Romans, it is repeatedly observed that the apostle’s grave commentary on human depravity is calculated to drive the sinner to God’s mercy in Christ. The purpose was not simply to expose human perversity, but “Paul’s object was to teach us where salvation is to be found,” namely, “in the grace of God alone”—in Christ rather than in us.<sup>42</sup>

The targets of Calvin’s polemics are “the Pelagians of our own age, that is, the Sophists of the Sorbonne.”<sup>43</sup> At the heart of this heresy, even in its more moderate forms, was the failure to distinguish the nature of humanity as originally created from the state of humanity after the fall. Before the fall, humanity was indeed oriented toward God and righteousness, capable of doing all that God had commanded. “Law” is humanity’s native tongue. After the fall, however, at least if there is to be any hope of rescue, another word must be announced. The gospel is not innate. It must be revealed from heaven as good news. “In this ruin of mankind no one now experiences God either as Father or as Author of salvation or favorable in any way, until Christ the Mediator comes forward to reconcile him to us.”<sup>44</sup>

The natural order was that the frame of the universe should be the school in which we were to learn piety, and from it pass over the eternal life and perfect felicity. But after man’s rebellion, our eyes—wherever they turn—encounter God’s curse.... For even if God wills to manifest his fatherly favor to us in many ways, yet we cannot by contemplating the universe infer that he is Father. Rather, conscience presses us within and shows in our sin just cause for his disowning us and not regarding or recognizing us as his sons. Dullness and ingratitude follow, for our minds, as they have been blinded, do not perceive what is true.... 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>45</sup>

It was this faith in Christ, directed by the shadows of the law and the prophetic promises, that kept a remnant in Israel looking toward the future in hope.<sup>46</sup> God can be considered the object of faith only with the qualification that “unless God confronts us in Christ, we cannot come to know that we are saved.” And “in this sense Irenaeus writes that the Father, himself infinite, become finite in the Son, for he has accommodated himself to our little measure lest our minds be overwhelmed by the immensity of his glory.... Actually, it means nothing else than that God is comprehended in Christ alone.”<sup>47</sup>

Apart from Christ, then there can be only a “fleeting knowledge of God” that quickly turns to the vinegar of idolatry and superstition, however much “they [Calvin refers to Moslems here] proclaim at the top of their lungs that the Creator of heaven and earth is God.”<sup>48</sup>

According to surveys, most professing evangelicals, along with the wider culture, deny original sin.<sup>49</sup> In his recent study, sociologist Christian Smith has characterized religion in America as “moralistic, therapeutic deism,” with no distinction between those who have been raised in evangelical churches and those reared in liberal, Unitarian, or unchurched backgrounds.<sup>50</sup> Having witnessed the baneful effects of Pelagianism on mainline Protestantism, the evangelical movement in North America seems increasingly to be reaping the whirlwind of the seeds sown by its revivalist legacy. Pragmatism, consumerism, self-help moralism, and narcissism are simply the symptoms of a disease that is, at its heart, theological: namely, the drift toward Pelagianism. Whatever the formal creed, and regardless of whether it appears in the form of a rigorous legalism or a sentimental antinomianism, a seriously deficient appraisal of sin surely lies at the heart of the church’s lack of confidence in the gospel to create and empower the church’s life, worship, and witness.

I leave it to the reader to evaluate this gloomy appraisal, which is increasingly observed with considerable alarm even by mainline theologians. If it is indeed accurate, or even partly accurate, then the condition of at least American Christianity may actually be worse than that of the medieval church. In any case, it is hoped that the richly biblical wisdom that Calvin offers—both in the speculations that he eschews and the frank if unpleasant exegesis that he so vividly expounds—will prove its worth again in our faith and practice today.

1. Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power" in *Was ist Aufklärung? (What is Enlightenment?)*, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books), 32-50; cf. Barry Cooper, *Michel Foucault: An Introduction to the Study of His Thought*, Studies in Religion and Society 2 (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1981).
2. John Calvin, *Institutes* 1.16.8, Calvin simply refuses to speculate about why Adam did not persevere in holiness. All references are from *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).
3. *Ibid.*, 2.1.9.
4. *Ibid.*, 2.1.10.
5. *Ibid.*, 1.15.8.
6. This characteristic emphasis of Reformed anthropology can be found among many of Calvin's students, as in J.I. Packer's *Christianity: The True Humanism* (Waco: Word, 1986).
7. The Canons of Dort, Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine, Art. 1, in the *Psalter Hymnal: Doctrinal Standards and Liturgy of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: Board of Publications for the Christian Reformed Church, 1976), 102. See also Michael S. Horton, "Post-Reformation Reformed Anthropology," in Richard Lints, Michael Horton, and Mark Talbot, eds. *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 45ff. I treat this historical development at greater length in *Lord and Servant* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2005), chs. 4 and 5.
8. The Belgic Confession, Art. 14, in the *Psalter Hymnal*, 75.
9. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.5.
10. *Ibid.*, 2.1.6.
11. *Ibid.*, 2.1.7.
12. *Ibid.*, 2.1.8.
13. See Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Paul F. Koehneke and Herbert J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), 47 and 59, with ample citations from the Book of Concord and Lutheran orthodoxy.
14. Calvin, *Institutes* 2.2.15.
15. *Ibid.*, 2.2.16.
16. *Ibid.*, 2.3.5.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, 1.3.3.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, 2.3.10.
21. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 71.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, 73.
24. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.4.1.
25. *Ibid.*, 1.5.1.
26. *Ibid.*, 1.5.2.
27. *Ibid.*, 1.5.12.
28. *Ibid.*, 1.6.14.
29. Calvin, *Romans*, 73-74.
30. *Ibid.*, 80.
31. *Ibid.*, 83-84.
32. *Ibid.*, 88.
33. Calvin, *Institutes* 2.3.4.
34. *Ibid.*, 1.6.1.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*, 1.6.3.
37. *Ibid.*, 1.5.3.
38. *Ibid.*, 1.5.4.
39. *Ibid.*, 3.23.4-5.
40. *Ibid.*, 2.2.11.

41. *Ibid.*
42. Calvin, *Romans*, 68.
43. Calvin, *Institutes* 2.3.13.
44. *Ibid.*, 1.2.1.
45. *Ibid.*, 2.6.1.
46. *Ibid.*, 2.6.2-3.
47. *Ibid.*, 2.6.4.
48. *Ibid.*
49. See the statistics offered in David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 299.
50. Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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#### **Quotes from John Calvin's *Institutes***

"Hence the Scriptures obtain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard." John Calvin, *Institutes* 1.7.1

"For even if it [Scripture] wins reverence for itself by its own majesty, it seriously affects us only when it is sealed upon our hearts through the Spirit. Therefore, illumined by his power, we believe neither by our own nor by anyone else's judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing on the majesty of God himself) that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men...we feel that the undoubted power of his divine majesty lives and breathes there. By this power we are drawn and inflamed, knowingly and willingly, to obey him, yet also more vitally and more effectively than by mere human willing or knowing!" John Calvin *Institutes* 1.8.5

# The Reformation of the Church: Electing Commissioners to General Assembly

by Gabrielle Avedian

*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the Church of God, which He obtained with His own blood. Acts 20:28 (ESV)*

*Christ is head of the Church, which is His body, He is the Cornerstone, and the Church is to exercise the authority of Christ with Christ as chief Cornerstone in all that she does. (Eph 1:22-23, 1 Cor 12, Rom 12:4, Eph 2:20, Matt 16:19)*

*Christ, as head of the Church, established the offices in the Church. God gave this biblical form of government to protect the Church from false teachers and heresy, and gave direction for the election of and rule by elders. (Eph 4:1-16, 1 Tim 4-6, Titus 1)*

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The PC(USA) General Assembly speaks to two audiences concurrently. It speaks to those within the PC(USA) through its actions, reports, and resolutions. It also teaches the world what the church believes. Paul writes in 1 Timothy that obedience by the Church to God's commands makes the Church an effective witness to those outside the Church.

The General Assembly is not an isolated, mystical entity. It is comprised of Elders and Ministers of Word and Sacrament who were elected by their presbyteries to serve as commissioners to the General Assembly. The procedure for this is laid out in the *Book of Order*, G-13.0102.

The actions of the General Assembly (GA) are the result of votes by those GA commissioners sent by the presbyteries. If Presbyterians are dissatisfied with the actions of a General Assembly, they are, in fact, dissatisfied with the vote of the majority of commissioners elected by the presbyteries. For example, since 1997 three General Assemblies have voted to amend the *Book of Order* to remove the ordination standards of "fidelity and chastity." Each time, a majority of the presbyteries voted against such removal. However, a majority of presbyteries that

voted to uphold the ordination standards also elected a majority of GA Commissioners who sought to remove those standards.

Clergy and elders, as leaders of the church, have a responsibility to guard it against false teaching. They ought to assure themselves that the GA commissioners elected by their presbytery will exercise the authority given them—the very authority Christ has entrusted to the guardians of the church—according to the Word and will of Christ.

The responsibility for General Assembly actions lies first with church members who elect elders to their session and call their minister, and secondly, with the ministers and elders who are sent by the session as the commissioners to presbytery (presbyters) and who in turn elect the GA commissioners.

Serving as a commissioner to General Assembly is not a reward for long service, active participation in presbytery activities, or popularity. Serving as a commissioner to General Assembly is a calling given by God. A person's inward call must be recognized and affirmed by presbyters in their election of that person to serve as GA commissioner. Presbyters should take their responsibility to discern a person's call by God seriously. They should satisfy themselves that the person knows Scripture, seeks to live in accordance with its teachings, and knows the constitution of the church including the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*. There is no biblical or constitutional diversity requirement to send commissioners to GA who the presbytery is aware will act in opposition to Scripture's clear teaching.

Presbyters cannot bind a GA commissioner's conscience to vote a certain way at the General Assembly. Presbyters have a responsibility, however, to know a GA commissioner nominee's understanding of Scripture, especially on issues that will be voted on at GA. If the GA commissioner nominee disagrees with any part of Scripture, the *Book of Confessions* or *Book of Order*, the presbyters should discover that and it

should be part of their discernment of whether indeed this person is called by God. God does not call people as leaders who reject his Word and substitute their own.

Other factors might also be weighed in discerning a person's call. Is he/she physically able to endure the exhausting ten days of meetings from early morning to late at night (GA has sometimes gone until 1:00 am in the morning) that includes substantial walking to and from hotels, convention center, and committee rooms? Is the person able to read and digest the over 1000 items of business he/she will have to consider and vote on? Is the person able to effectively use laptop computers since the GA is now paperless?

### **Responsibility to Examine Candidates**

In 1978, the Presbytery of Pittsburgh received a resolution from the session of the First Presbyterian Church, Carnegie, Pennsylvania requesting that time be docketed during a meeting of the presbytery so that nominees for commissioners to the upcoming GA might be individually questioned. There were controversies in the church in 1978 just as there are today in the church and the requesting session decided it was important to learn more about the commissioner nominees before they were voted on. The request was granted and time docketed.

Complainants protested and the case was eventually brought before the General Assembly's highest court, the GA Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC). The GAPJC upheld the right of the presbytery to examine GA commissioner nominees and even went as far as to state:

a procedure that merely allows members of a presbytery to be informed as to the present attitudes, beliefs, and philosophies of nominees who propose to represent the presbytery in the General Assembly after their election . . . in our judgment, does not preclude the nominee, if subsequently elected as a commissioner, from fulfilling his or her constitutional obligation or indeed limit the opportunity of the Holy Spirit to guide both him or her and the Assembly. To the contrary, it merely allows the members of the presbytery to make an informed judgment as to the persons it desires to elect to represent the presbytery in the highest judicatory of the church, each presbytery being entitled to such representation under the provisions of the Form of Government.

To prohibit members of a presbytery from making an inquiry of nominees (none of whom in this case were required to answer the inquires) as to their present attitudes and philosophy on issues deemed

important to the presbytery would result in depriving presbytery members of a right to make a meaningful and intelligent choice in their election of commissioners.<sup>1</sup>

Presbyteries can be grateful for the Presbytery of Pittsburgh's example in 1978 and can implement similar ideas in their own presbyteries' election procedures.

### **One Presbytery's Example**

The procedures in Los Ranchos presbytery also serve as an excellent model. Presently, the election rules of Los Ranchos presbytery state:

Those planning to be nominated to be commissioners to General Assembly shall provide the Stated Clerk's office with a completed, standardized biographical resume and responses to four questions. This form shall be submitted prior to the meeting of election, with sufficient time to be reproduced for all presbyters to have in hand at the time of voting.<sup>2</sup>

The four questions mentioned above are the following:

1. What do you believe the church is called to do in this world?
2. How did the Scriptures mold your faith?
3. How have you sensed God's call to serve as a commissioner to General Assembly?
4. What do you see as the most significant issue(s) coming before this year's General Assembly?

A two-minute nominating speech is given followed by a two-minute "Why I deserve your vote" speech by the nominee. These speeches, supplemented with the material written by each nominee in response to the questions, allows the presbyters to properly discern whether a person has been called by God to be a commissioner to the GA. It allows the presbyters to discern whether a commissioner nominee is equipped to watch over the church's doctrine and theology, and guard the flock from false teaching.

Other presbyteries have enacted election rules stipulating that the presbytery's nomination committee must present more than one nominee per open commissioner slot and an open question and answer period be held at presbytery immediately prior to the election. Some presbyteries have also placed in their election rules the requirement of a written statement by each nominee and alternate (with sufficient time before the next meeting) and contact information.<sup>3</sup> Questions from the floor are lawful but some presbyteries have found it helpful to place specific provisions in the election procedures to afford the opportunity for

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presbyters to examine the nominees during the election meeting.

### Changing the Presbytery's Election Process

Only a handful of presbyteries have election procedures in the standing rules that allow for such examination. Many presbyteries have no election procedures in the standing rules of the presbytery. To effectively examine potential GA commissioners, election procedures should be in place that allow for the examination. In order to create or amend such election procedures, a simple process needs to be followed.

A session must send an overture to the presbytery that requests that the presbytery create (or re-visit) policies for electing commissioners to General Assembly. It may overture the presbytery to do some of the following:

- Nominate at least two persons for each minister and elder commissioner slot allowed by the *Book of Order*;
- Require a verbal presentation from each minister and elder nominee;
- Allow a question and answer period;
- Provide a printed biographical resume of each nominee and alternate at least one presbytery meeting prior to the election meeting including contact information;
- Provide the written answers of each nominee and alternate at least one presbytery meeting prior to the election meeting regarding specific questions (e.g. the four questions Los Ranchos uses).

Once the overture is submitted to the presbytery, supporters of the overture should ensure that presbyters are aware of the benefit this overture would produce and that the presbyters will be present to vote the day the overture is taken up. If approved, a change to the

election procedures in the standing rules is made (or, in the case where there are no election procedures, they are created).

Presbyters who take their God-given responsibility as guardians of the church's faith seriously need adequate procedures to elect GA commissioners. If presbyters create such procedures today, the actions of the 2010 General Assembly will more faithfully reflect Christ's will revealed in Scripture.

Much more information and counsel to aid presbyters in creating/amending election rules can be found at [www.pforum.org](http://www.pforum.org) or by contacting The Presbyterian Forum at [info@pforum.org](mailto:info@pforum.org).

1. Gail G. Buchwalter, et. al. vs. The Presbytery of Pittsburgh, Remedial Case No. 190-12, GAPJC decision, 1978
2. Los Ranchos 2008 Announcement of Process, [http://www.losranchos.org/Resources/documents/2008AnnouncementofProcess\\_000.pdf](http://www.losranchos.org/Resources/documents/2008AnnouncementofProcess_000.pdf)
3. Overture to Change the Standing Rules by First Presbyterian Church, Greenwood, <http://pforum.org/documents2.php?id=8>

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