

Princeton Theological Monograph Series

Dikran Y. Hadidian

General Editor

CALVIN'S CONCEPT OF THE LAW

I. John Hesselink

SPICKWICK *Publications* • Eugene, Oregon

Pickwick Publications
An imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W 8th Ave, Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

Calvin's Concept of the Law
By Hesselink, I. John
Copyright©1992 by Hesselink, I. John
ISBN 13: 978-1-55635-007-8
Publication date 1/1/1992
Previously published by Pickwick, 1992

To the memory of my two Swiss mentors and friends, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, neither of whom totally agreed with the contents of this work but both of whom were constantly supportive and encouraging .

CONTENTS

Preface	ix
Introduction	1
Chapter I	Prolegomena 7
Chapter II	Creation and the Law 51
Chapter III	The Covenant and the Decalog 87
Chapter IV	Law and Gospel 155
Chapter V	The End and Use of the Law 217
Chapter VI	Conclusion: Calvin's Dynamic Understanding of the Law 277
Bibliography	291
Name Index	303
Subject Index	307

PREFACE

This work represents a revision, reduction, and refinement of my Basel University doctoral dissertation of 1961: *Calvin's Concept and Use of the Law*. Lest the mention of a dissertation frighten away some prospective readers, the following points may be reassuring: 1) In the main text I have translated all quotations from other languages. 2) This work, though still substantial, is shorter than the original, partially because I have reduced the number of footnotes as well as cut out some extraneous material. 3) Most importantly, I think most readers, including non-theologians and non-Calvin scholars, will find the style very readable.

There has been a very lively and encouraging interest in Calvin's life, work, and thought in the last twenty-five years. The annual Calvin bibliographies by Peter De Klerk in the *Calvin Theological Journal* (since 1971, usually in the November issue) give ample evidence of that.

However, given the importance of the subject, it is surprising that so little research has been done on Calvin's view of the law. One will find in Calvin bibliographies several essays which deal with one aspect or another of Calvin's approach to the law such as his treatment of natural law or the decalog. There have also been a few dissertations dealing with some aspect of Calvin's doctrine of the law which are cited in my Introduction, but no comprehensive treatment of Calvin's concept of the law has yet appeared. Hence this study still fills a gap, despite the proliferation of Calvin studies in the last three decades.

The danger in attempting a comprehensive study like this is that some aspects of the subject cannot be covered in the depth and thoroughness they deserve. For example, there are a number of monographs on Calvin's view of natural law as well as a few full-scale treatments of that subject. Since the particular focus of this work is the third use of the law (as a norm and guide for the believer), it might seem ad-

visible to skip that subject; but that is not possible if one is to gain an adequate understanding of Calvin's doctrine of revealed law.

On a more personal note, I must express my regrets for the fact that it has taken so long to make this work available in published form. Over the years I have received a number of requests for the dissertation. It has been utilized by several scholars who have had access to the dissertation in a few select libraries here and abroad, but its general unavailability has been a source of frustration to others.

It should also be noted that parts of this work have appeared in modified form as essays in symposia and Festschriften. Where that is the case, I have indicated that at the appropriate place with a footnote.

A word about translations. I have used the standard English translations of Calvin's works, generally preferring the more recent translations to the older, e.g., the McNeill-Battles edition of the *Institutes* rather than the older translations of Allen and Beveridge, and the Torrance edition of the New Testament commentaries to the old Edinburgh edition. In every case, however, I have checked the translations with the original Latin and French editions as found in the *Calvini Opera* (which is part of the larger *Corpus Reformatorum*) and *Opera Selecta*. However, I have modified the translations occasionally for the sake of greater consistency and where a more literal translation may serve to make a point. In the case of translations from German, French, and Dutch works the translations are my own, although in some cases I have had the translations checked by specialists in those languages.

Finally, I come to that delightful but difficult part of the preface to a book where one acknowledges mentors, friends, and colleagues who have inspired, guided, encouraged, and assisted in other ways in a major effort of this sort. One cannot list them all, but I must begin with my professor of theology as a student at Western Seminary, Professor Emeritus M. Eugene Osterhaven. He introduced me in a serious way to Calvin and has continued through the years to be a wonderful source of inspiration and encouragement. I count it a singular honor to have succeeded him as the Albertus C. Van Raalte Professor of Systematic Theology at Western Seminary.

Next in line would have to be the incalculable debt I owe to my two great Swiss mentors, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. I came to know Professor Brunner during the first years of my missionary career in Japan (1953-55) when he was a visiting professor at the International Christian University in Tokyo. We became good friends at that time

and our friendship deepened during the years I studied in Basel (1958-61), despite the fact that I had elected to pursue my graduate studies with Karl Barth! (Brunner had already retired, so there was no possibility of continuing my studies with him.) Professor Barth was my *Doktorvater*, i.e., dissertation advisor, and was the most genial and delightful mentor and guide one could hope for. Neither he nor Professor Brunner agreed with all my interpretations, but both were unstinting in their encouragement and assistance, which included the loan of many of their volumes of the *Corpus Reformatorum*.

I am also grateful to other Basel University professors who played a special role in my doctoral program: Professor of Ethics, Hendrik van Oyen, the second reader of my dissertation; Professor of Church History, Ernst Staehelin, my examiner in that field; and Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity, Oscar Cullmann, who was my examiner in New Testament and also my "host" in the *Theologisches Alumneum*, the venerable international student house where I spent my first semester in Basel. He, and particularly his sister, Fräulein Loulou Cullmann, were my first—and only—mentors in German, which I had never studied formally

Then there are the many friends—all of them Calvin scholars—who graciously read my dissertation and offered encouragement along with helpful suggestions. They include the late Dr. Wilhelm Niesel of the *Theologische Hochschule* in Wuppertal; Hendrikus Berkhof, Professor Emeritus of the University of Leiden; T. F. Torrance, Professor Emeritus of New College, the University of Edinburgh; Edward A. Dowey, Jr. and David Willis, respectively Professor of Historical Theology and Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary; David Little, Professor of Ethics at the University of Virginia; Herbert W. Richardson, Professor of Theology at St. Michael's College, The University of Toronto; and especially the late Ford Lewis Battles, who closed out his career at Calvin College and Seminary, and Brian Gerish, Professor of Historical Theology at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, for these friends in particular continued to press me to get this work published.

I am also very thankful to Dikran Y. Hadidian, General Editor of Pickwick Publications, for his patience and perseverance. He was promised this manuscript a long time ago but never gave up on me. I would also like to thank his wife, Jean, for her assistance in this project. I am also indebted to a faculty colleague, Professor Robert A. Cough-

nour, who kindly read through the whole manuscript and caught many errors and made helpful stylistic suggestions, and to emeritus Professor Richard C. Oudersluys for invaluable assistance in proofreading.

Finally, special thanks to Mrs. Marilyn Essink, our faculty secretary, who typed much of the manuscript not only with her usual accuracy and carefulness, but also with an admirable spirit, and also to Mrs. Anna Donkersloot, who took over this task at a crucial juncture and typed the last three chapters, and finally my wife, Etta, who typed the original dissertation.

I. John Hesselink January, 1992
WesternTheological Seminary

INTRODUCTION

The popular image of Calvin, which continues to persist despite considerable evidence to the contrary, is that of a cold, logical systematician who stressed the sovereignty of God and taught a deterministic doctrine of double predestination. He is further characterized as the dour, relentless reformer of Geneva who burned Servetus. This grim caricature is then often concluded by noting that with Calvin the Bible became a literalistically interpreted lawbook. He is hence dismissed as a "law-teacher" (*Gesetzlehrer*) who knew little of the love and grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.¹

Much of this image is based on myth, falsehood, and prejudice and has been thoroughly refuted by Calvin research in the last half century.² As a result, the older portrayals of Calvin and his work by the Catholics, F. W. Kampschulte and Imbart de la Tour, and the Jew, Stephan Zweig, are no longer taken seriously by responsible historians. However, the charge of legalism continues to be leveled against Calvin, but not so much by Catholics, Jews, and liberals as by orthodox Lutherans. Characteristic is a comparison of Reformed and Lutheran theology by Reinhold Seeberg:

God is, to pious minds in the Reformed Church, the Lord who rules omnipotently. The development of the universe is the product of his sovereign will; its goal his honor or glory. But the sovereignty of God is displayed above all through the "Law," which controls all life and all its ramifications. All that is done in the world, everything personal and natural, must subserve this end. Obedience is the whole content of life. Natural inclinations are bent and crushed beneath the pressure of the "law". . . . There is something "un-modern" in this magniloquent portrayal of the energy of obedience and that fanaticism of submission. . . . But the gospel, as it appears in Paul and John, we find in clearer and

brighter form in Luther than in Calvin. This God of Calvin is the omnipotent Will, ruling throughout the world; the God of Luther is the omnipotent energy of love manifest in Christ.³

This was originally written in 1898, only one year before the appearance of the first volume of Doumergue's monumental study of Calvin's life and work⁴ in which Calvin is presented in a much more favorable light. But substantially the same analysis of Calvin's theology is repeated in the last (third) edition of Seeberg's *Dogmengeschichte* written in 1920.⁵ Here we find repeated reference to "the legal (*gesetzlich*) tendency which is maintained in Calvin's doctrine of Scripture."⁶ Similar phrases still appear in contemporary church histories written by German Lutheran theologians. Hans von Schubert, for example, avers that "the equation of the Old Testament with the New gives to this biblicalistic moralism [of Calvin] the severe characteristic of Old Testament legality (*Gesetzlichkeit*)."⁷ Earlier works, such as P. Lobstein's *Die Ethik Calvins* (1877), Ernst Troeltsch's *Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* (1911), and Paul Wernle's volume on Calvin in his trilogy, *Der evangelische Glaube* (1919), treated certain aspects of Calvin's concept of the law with some originality, but all of them were hindered by a sterile view of the Old Testament and an insufficient appreciation of the unity of the Bible. Because of the prevailing view of the law and the Old Testament prior to the rise of dialectical theology or the theology of the Word and the biblical theology movement, it is not surprising that Calvin's treatment of the law was viewed with little appreciation or understanding. Georgia Harkness wrote a fresh, interesting study in 1931, *John Calvin—The Man and his Ethics*, in which she corrects some of the misconceptions of Max Weber. But her understanding of Calvin's view of the law and the Old Testament is superficial and is burdened with the same old clichés:

Calvin's system of doctrine is more Hebraic than Christian. It rests more upon the Old Testament than the New. His writings lack the note of warm, personal fellowship with Christ, and in his moral injunctions the Decalogue looms above the Sermon on the Mount. The place of Christ in Calvin's scheme of things is theological rather than personal and ethical.⁸

The same is true of the chapter on Calvin's theology and ethics

in R. N. Hunt's *Calvin*, written two years later. He repeats Max Weber's judgment that both Luther and Calvin believed in "a double God": the gracious and loving God of the New Testament and "the autocratic deity of the old dispensation." With Luther, however, the God of the New Testament always prevailed. But with Calvin "the *deus absconditus* of the Old Testament was always in the foreground, for his scheme of redemption always had need of Him and could never be wholly brought into line with the teaching of the Gospel."⁹

On the continent this type of criticism was rarely heard after 1930, with the exception of the Lutheran historians cited earlier. But as late as 1943, the distinguished American scholar, Reinhold Niebuhr, was still charging that Calvin is guilty of biblicism in both theology and ethics, inclines toward legalism, thinks of sanctification as "a rigorous obedience to law," and has an ethical system which is "pretentious as well as obscurantist."¹⁰

Niebuhr's contemporary classic was an anachronism, however, as far as Calvin studies were concerned. For there had been a major shift in Calvin research in the 1930's, when a host of dissertations and studies concerning particular aspects of Calvin's theology appeared, many of them influenced by Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. Although these researches were characterized by a basic sympathy for Calvin's general position, they were sometimes marred by polemic interests. This was particularly true of the dispute about natural theology where Calvin was used to support the Brunnerian position by his student Gunter Gloede (*Theologia Naturalis bei Calvin*, 1935) and at the same time was claimed for the Barthian position by the brother of the great dogmatician, Peter Barth (*Das Problem der natürlichen Theologie bei Calvin*, 1935).

A major breakthrough came with the independent, exceedingly thorough work by Josef Bohatec, *Calvin und das Recht* (1934). Bohatec, however, is not a protagonist of any particular school of theology, although he is often sharply critical of the earlier studies of natural law and positive law by Troeltsch, Beyerhaus, and Lang. But Bohatec is primarily interested in the more general aspects of the question of law and its relation to civil law.¹¹ The first scholar in the modern period to recognize the christological nature of Calvin's concept of the law and its relationship to the covenant was Wilhelm Niesel. His *Die Theologie Calvins*, which first appeared in 1938, is a landmark in Calvin stud-

ies.¹² Most subsequent studies reflect his influence.

As a result, it is now possible to refer to Calvin as "a man of law"¹³ without necessarily implying something ominous or opprobrious. It is being increasingly recognized—and in a constructive manner—that in order to understand the distinctiveness of Calvin's theology, one must see the role the law played in his thinking. Edward A. Dowey, for example, states that "Law is one of the basic concepts of Calvin's theology."¹⁴

Hence it is rather surprising that very few monographs or books have appeared in the last three decades which have dealt with this problem. François Wendel has a brief, balanced discussion of the law in his outstanding study of Calvin's thought,¹⁵ and one or more aspects of Calvin's doctrine of the law are discussed in studies which are basically devoted to another subject.¹⁶ But since the Second World War, only two books have been written about Calvin's concept of the law and both of these are limited to only one aspect of the problem. The one concerns the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, *Die Einheit des Bundes* (1958), by Hans H. Wolf. This is a rather brief and helpful study, but it concentrates on the nature of the covenant and thus only on the law as broadly conceived. The other work is the study by a Roman Catholic scholar, Jürgen Baur, *Gott, Recht und Weltliches Regiment im Werke Calvins* (1965). As the title indicates, the area of concern here is much the same as that of the works by Bohatec. Here again the chief questions dealt with are those of the relation between the righteousness of God and human justice, natural law, revealed law, and civil law, and the relation between church and state.

There are also a few fairly recent doctoral dissertations which deal with some aspect of Calvin's concept of the law. Three in particular are noteworthy: William C. Gentry, Jr.'s *A Study of John Calvin's Understanding of Moral Obligation and Moral Norms in Christian Ethics* (Southern Methodist University, 1970); Ralph R. Sundquist, Jr.'s *The Third Use of the Law in the Thought of John Calvin* (Columbia University, 1970); and Daniel Augsburg's *Calvin and the Mosaic Law* (University of Strasbourg, 1976). All three of these dissertations relate to the theme which is the particular concern of this study, viz., the third use of the law. But each one is more limited in its scope. Moreover they are not readily available to the scholarly world. Consequently, although many of the works cited make a distinctive and positive contribution to

Calvin's understanding of the law, a lacuna still exists. What is needed is a comprehensive treatment of this key issue. Toward that end the present study is offered.

NOTES

1. Friedrich Brunstad, *Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften* (Gutersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1951), 79, 80.

2. For documentation see especially two works which deal specifically with the questions of Calvin's personality and his activities in Geneva: Ernst Pfisterer, *Calvins Wirken in Genf* (Neukirchen Kreis Moers: Neukirchener Verlag, 1957); and Richard Stauffer, *The Humanness of John Calvin* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971).

3. *Textbook of the History of Doctrines*, Vol. II (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1952), 416.

4. *Jean Calvin les hommes et les choses de son temps* (Paris, 1899-1927).

5. *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* IV, 2, 5. Auflage (Basel: Benno Schwabe and Co., 1950), 560-566.

6. *Ibid.*, 565, 613, 631.

7. Elfte Auflage (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1950) p. 207. Karl Dietrich Schmidt refers to Calvin's "legal conception of Scripture which has become an earmark of Reformed Protestantism," *Grundriss der Kirchengeschichte*, 4. Auflage (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1953), 363.

8. *Op. cit.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 72. In a review of this paperback edition, the English Calvin scholar, T.H. L. Parker, complains that this book was out of date already at the time it appeared. It "starts out from the wrong premises, pursues an erring course and reaches largely mistaken conclusions . . . It is a dismal hangover from the nineteenth century," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Sept. 1961, 299.

9. (London: Centenary Press, 1933) 122.

10. *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), 202, 203.

11. Cf. his later works: *Calvins Lehre von Staat und Kirche* (1936), and *Budé und Calvin* (1950).

12. The English translation, published in 1956, is unfortunately based on the first edition. In 1957, a revised edition appeared which contains some

significant modifications.

13. J. S. Whale, *The Protestant Tradition* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1955), 164.

14. *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 222. In the final chapter of his book concerning the relation between the knowledge of God the Creator and the knowledge of God the Redeemer, Dowey uses the law as his chief illustration and comes to some very interesting conclusions which will be discussed in Chapter I.

15. *Calvin—Origins and Development of his Religious Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963. Original, 1950).

16. In addition to the works cited already some of the more significant are: Erwin Mülhaupt, *Die Predigt Calvins* (1931); A. Göhler, *Calvins Lehre von der Heiligung* (1934); S. van der Linde, *De Leer van den Heiligen Geest bij Calvin* (1943); D. Wilhelm Kolffhaus, *Vom christlichen Leben nach Johannes Calvin* (1949); Fritz Büsser, *Calvins Urteil über sich selbst* (1950); Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (1953); and *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (1959); Werner Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin* (1957); Andre Biéler, *La Pensée Économique et Sociale de Calvin* (1959).

I

PROLEGOMENA

I. THE PLACE OF THE LAW IN CALVIN'S THEOLOGY

Some estimate of the role the law plays in Calvin's theology can be determined by where and in what manner he deals with the law in his writings. A mere perusal of the formal structure of the *Institutes* and his commentary on the Pentateuch reveals how greatly Calvin was concerned with this question. More important, such an examination offers important clues as to his method of interpreting the law.

A. *The Institutes*

It is significant that the basic treatment of the law in the final (1559) edition of the *Institutes* is found in Book II, which is about the knowledge of God the Redeemer. This was not the original pattern, for in the first edition of 1536, which contained only six chapters, the first chapter dealt with the law. This was followed by chapters on the creed (faith), the Lord's Prayer, the two evangelical sacraments, the false sacraments of the Catholic Church, and finally a chapter on Christian liberty (including the offices of the church and civil government). The opening sentence of chapter one is strikingly similar to the famous statement with which the final edition begins: "Nearly the whole of sacred doctrine consists in these two parts: the knowledge of God and of our ourselves."¹

In the 1536 edition this reciprocal knowledge of God and humanity is not yet a major theme but is touched on only very briefly. Almost immediately Calvin begins discussing the law. First he considers its purpose, after which he gives a brief exposition of the decalog followed by a longer discourse on the meaning and the purpose of the law

which he describes in a threefold manner: 1) the awakening of the knowledge of sin; 2) the restriction of the godless through fear of punishment; 3) its use for the Christian. Thus, already in the first edition Calvin taught the threefold use of the law (*triplex usus legis*).²

In all of the succeeding editions of the *Institutes*, however, the law is treated separately and follows the chapters on the knowledge of God and of ourselves. Although there is a remarkable consistency throughout the various editions of the *Institutes*—especially when one considers that the first edition, a slight compendium written by the 26-year-old Calvin, eventually became a tome of 80 chapters written when Calvin was 50—the 1539 edition represents a decisive break. This is particularly evident in the treatment of the law.

In the first edition, Calvin was still influenced considerably by Luther and followed closely the ordering of Luther's *Small Catechism*.³ But in the second edition of 1539, Calvin comes into his own and shows a new mastery of his material. Here the theological significance of the place of the law in his theology is first discernible. The law is now related more closely to sin and redemption, thus anticipating the eventual placement in Book II of the final edition. In addition, an important chapter was added in the 1539 edition on the similarity and difference between the Old and New Testaments.

Wernle suggests two other ways in which Calvin develops his own position regarding the law in this second edition. He replaces the Lutheran exposition of the ten commandments with his own; and he stresses the unity of the Old Testament law with the spirit of the requirements of Jesus and that of the Mosaic law with Christian norms by "christianizing" the former and showing the origins of the latter in the Old Testament.⁴

If these facts were more widely known or were taken more seriously by those who are so quick to condemn Calvin as a legalist, much of the odium of this charge might have been eliminated. As Kolffhaus points out, "Treating the whole doctrine of the law under the title, 'Concerning God the Redeemer' . . . is completely Pauline and should prohibit, as P. Wernle says, attempts to dismiss his religion with the slogan 'law-religion'."⁵ For Calvin in the *Institutes* develops his concept of the law within the framework of *Heilsgeschichte*. As we shall see later, he constantly warns his readers against separating the law from Jesus Christ (and the Holy Spirit) who is its substance, goal, and fulfillment.

Nevertheless, from one standpoint it is surprising that Calvin's chief treatment of the law is in Book II rather than in Book III of the *Institutes*, for he designated the third use of the law, the use as a norm and guide for the Christian, as the principal one. Consequently, one might expect the major treatment of the law to appear in the third Book, which deals with the application of the benefits of Christ by the believer in the context of the work of the Holy Spirit. But the law receives no separate treatment in Book III and is discussed only briefly in different contexts here, even though the essence of the law is love and its main requirement the obedience of faith, both characteristics of the life in the Spirit, which is the subject of this book.

One school of Calvin scholars, however, submits that the logical place for the treatment of the law, particularly the decalog, is in Book I, which deals with the knowledge of God the Creator. Since Calvin sometimes equates the moral law—which finds expression in the second table of the decalog—with the law of nature, the exposition of the decalog could possibly be envisioned in Book I.

One of the exponents of this viewpoint is E. A. Dowey, Jr., who maintains that the location of the analysis of the moral law and the decalog in Book II of the final edition of the *Institutes* is not a reliable index to Calvin's total evaluation of the law.⁶ He warns against finding too much theological significance in the mere placement of any particular subject in the *Institutes*. Following Köstlin, he expresses dissatisfaction with the division of the 1559 edition into four books and asserts that "the really significant ordering principle of the *Institutes* in the 1559 edition is the duplex cognitio Domini, not the Apostles' Creed." Thus the *Institutes* is divided into two parts, not four: Book I on the revelation and knowledge of God the Creator, and Books II-IV on the revelation and knowledge of God the Redeemer.⁷

The merits or demerits of this thesis cannot be discussed here.⁸ The way in which Dowey applies the law in relation to his thesis, however, does relate to our present theme. Having divided the *Institutes* into basically two rather than four books, he seeks for some concept which will relate the knowledge of God the Creator to that of God the Redeemer. He finds one possibility in the idea of the law, which "spans the two orders of the knowledge of God."⁹ In order to support this thesis, Dowey proceeds to argue that the discussion of the moral law and the decalog in Book II is theologically misleading. "It is not the chief theological significance of the moral law or its content that determines

the placing of the decalog analysis in the *Institutes* of 1559 but rather its accidental or historical link to the 'ceremonial supplements' The content relates to God the Creator, the special act of giving it in this form refers to the covenant Thus before 1559 the moral law does not appear as a part of Calvin's soteriology"¹⁰

Dowey is correct in observing that the concept of law spans the orders of creation and redemption. As we shall see later in this chapter (Section II), the law did not originate with the revelation given to Moses, for this was only a particular historical form of the law. And as Calvin himself points out, the decalog is in a sense only a confirmation and clarification of the law of nature which has become obscured by sin.¹¹ The law ultimately must be traced to God's orderly will in creation.

Nevertheless, the "historical link" of the moral law (decalog) and the Israelite cultus ("ceremonial supplements") is hardly "accidental" and is therefore not merely a formal relationship. The decalog is not simply a collection of commands about how to live well, but is an integral part of the covenant of grace which God concluded with his chosen people Israel. Even Calvin recognized that some of these commands were not absolutely unique and had parallels in other legal codes, but what gave them special significance and authority was their incorporation into God's revelation on Sinai. The determining factor is not so much their content as the context in which they were given. Not the law as such but the Lawgiver, the Holy One, the Redeemer of Israel, was Calvin's concern.

There is no denying that for Calvin the content of the moral law is essentially the same as that inscribed on the hearts of humans "by nature." But Dowey, in reacting against some of the Barthian-inspired Calvin research which passed over this fact too quickly, tends to overestimate the significance of this correspondence and thus underplays the fact that in the decalog the moral law is radically reoriented and thus put in an entirely new perspective. Now the law no longer merely gives a dim apprehension of right and wrong and a sense of obligation toward God. As the law of the covenant, the response which it calls for is sincere worship and grateful service, and a love which is a spontaneous response to the redemptive love of God. The righteousness which the revealed law requires points to Christ himself, the end of the law. In a specific reference to the ten commandments, Calvin makes it clear that Christ is the end of the law (Romans 10:4) and that the Spirit

gives life to the letter which by itself is lethal (II Corinthians 3: 6ff., 17). We will misunderstand and misuse the law if we fail to see that it was "clothed (*vestita*) with the covenant of free adoption."¹²

Consequently, it would appear that the treatment of the law in Book II of the *Institutes* is a factor of considerable importance. As suggested earlier, this precludes on the one hand a legalistic understanding of the law and on the other a one-sided "naturalistic" interpretation of the law. Positively expressed, this concentration on the law within the discussion of the work of God the Redeemer points to one of Calvin's themes, namely, that Jesus Christ is the substance and soul of the law.

This becomes apparent already in some of the chapter headings of Book II, which is divided into three parts: 1. the sin and corruption of humanity (chapters 1-5); 2. the revelation of the Mediator to the people of the old covenant (chapters 6-11); 3. the incarnation of the redeemer and his saving work on earth (chapters 6-11). The chapter titles of chapters 6-11, in which the discussion of the law occurs, are especially suggestive. Chapter six, for example, has the title, "Fallen man ought to seek redemption in Christ." The actual content of this chapter, however, is the reality of Christ in the Old Testament, i.e., under the law, and the Old Testament witness to Christ. The theme of chapter seven is "The law was given, not to restrain the people of the old covenant under itself, but to foster the hope of salvation in Christ until his coming." Chapter eight is simply, "An exposition of the moral law," but the title of the ninth chapter is again of special interest: "Christ, although he was known to the Jews under the law, was at length clearly revealed only in the gospel." The similarity and differences between the Old and New Testaments are then taken up in chapters ten and eleven.

By these chapter headings we can see that the moral law or decalog is viewed from the perspective of the Mosaic covenant and the revelation given to Israel, and this in turn within the wider context of the history of salvation. This is expressed succinctly in the superscription for the whole of Book II: "The knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, first disclosed to the fathers under the law, and then to us in the gospel." Calvin is thus concerned in Book II—especially in chapters 6-11—with the question of law and gospel. However, in contrast to the usual Lutheran understanding of law and gospel, for Calvin these two terms do not first of all connote two kinds of righteousness or ways of salvation—that of works and that of grace—but rather two modes of God's redemptive activity or *Heilsgeschichte*. Calvin also recognizes

the narrower meaning of these terms and gives due attention to the Pauline antithesis of law and gospel, as we shall see later. But he is concerned first of all about the nature and unity of revelation. Consequently, in Book II the law is discussed as a form of God's economy of salvation under the old dispensation.

It should not be overlooked, however, that certain aspects of the law are discussed elsewhere in the *Institutes*. The second commandment also receives attention in chapters 11 and 12 of Book I; and even in the first five chapters, where Calvin has not yet come to the revelation of God in Scripture, he introduces the law at several crucial points.¹³

In Book IV, the law often enters into the discussion of the sacraments, especially where the sacraments of the New Testament are contrasted with those of the Old.¹⁴ In the last chapter of Book IV, which deals with civil government, the second use of the law (*usus politicus*) is presupposed, although its formal treatment is found in Book II. Nevertheless, three important sections (14-16) in this chapter are concerned with the relation of natural, ceremonial, and moral law to civil laws.

At this juncture it is good to recall Dowey's point that the formal structure of the *Institutes* does not necessarily provide the best index to the theological significance of the law. This is particularly true in reference to Book III. Granted, one chapter deals directly with the law, namely, chapter 17: "The agreement of the promises of the law and of the gospel." But apart from this, there is no formal discussion of the law in Book III, even though much of this Book deals with the Christian life. There are numerous allusions to the law,¹⁵ some of which are very significant, but this in no way indicates the significance of Book III in relation to Calvin's concept of the law. For as Paul Jacobs has pointed out, "The discussion of the doctrine of sanctification, the so-called ethic of Calvin (which is one of the main themes of Book III), is the expansion (*Entfaltung*) of the doctrine of the *tertius usus legis*."¹⁶

Calvin indicates as much himself, for he begins both chapters six and seven about the Christian life with references to the law. What is particularly noteworthy, however, is that in both cases he suggests that the law, even though it "contains in itself the newness by which his image may be restored in us"¹⁷ and "provides the finest and best disposed method of ordering a man's life (*constituendae vitae*),"¹⁸ can

profitably be supplemented with other passages of Scripture. In short, Calvin bases the Christian life on the foundation (*fundamentum*) of Christ who "has been set before us as an example whose pattern (*forma*) we ought to express in our life."¹⁹ The "more explicit plan" by which God wishes to shape his people therefore is found in such passages as Romans 12:1, 2: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice . . . Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind . . ."²⁰ This is how the "legalistic" Calvin develops the third use of the law!²¹ Moreover, here we have the basis, motive, and goal of the Christian life.

B. The Catechisms

This function of the law can be seen more clearly in the structure of Calvin's two Catechisms than in the *Institutes*. The earlier catechism of 1537, *Instruction in Faith*, appeared only a year later than the first edition of the *Institutes*, but already the structure of the later editions of the *Institutes* is presaged in several ways.²² Sections 1-3—"All men are born in order to know God," "What difference there is between true and false religion," and "What we must know of God"—correspond to Book I of the 1559 *Institutes*. Sections 4-11 correspond to Book II. Here Calvin discusses the fall of humanity and the doctrine of sin. In section seven he introduces the law for the first time: "How we are delivered and restored to life." Here the accent is on the first use of the law, the *usus elencticus*, whereby the law "exercises (*exerce*) us in . . . the knowledge of our sin and a consequent fear of the Lord."²³ The exposition of the decalog follows in the next section. The next three sections (9-11) also deal with the law, after which follows the discussion of faith. The transition is provided by section 11, "The law is a preparation to come to Christ." Sections 12 ff. describe various aspects of faith and correspond to Book III of the *Institutes*.

In section 17, however, Calvin returns to the law and relates it to sanctification. The title reads: "We are sanctified through faith in order to obey the law." In the *Institutes*, as we have seen, this is alluded to in Book III, but the formal explanation of the third use of the law comes in Book II, because this is where he discusses the three uses of the law.

The Geneva Catechism (French edition, 1542; Latin, 1545), like the final edition of the *Institutes*, represents a decisive change in structure, for it too is divided into four parts. But here the correspondence ceases, for in the 1559 *Institutes* the four parts correspond to the four parts of the Apostles' Creed. In the Geneva Catechism, the whole Creed is subjoined under one major division, namely, faith. This is the first part. The second concerns the law, after which Calvin takes up prayer and the sacraments.

Karl Barth, in his commentary on this Catechism, suggests that these four parts of the Catechism are in effect the content of the answer to question seven: "What is the right way of honoring God?" For Calvin answers the question thus: "To put all our *trust* in him; to study to serve him all our life by *obeying* his will; to *call upon* him . . . and lastly, to *acknowledge* him with both heart and mouth to be the author of all good things."²⁴ Barth concludes that the four parts given in this answer correspond to the four parts of the Catechism and constitute its foundation, namely, 1. trust (faith), 2. obedience (law), 3. request (prayer), and 4. praise (sacraments).²⁵

Thus the structure of the Geneva Catechism expresses a more characteristic emphasis than the 1559 *Institutes*, for here the third use of the law is more prominent. In the *Institutes*, judged only by its formal structure, one might conclude that the second use was the principal one. But in the Geneva Catechism the accent is on the role the law is to play in the life of the believer.

Calvin's transition in this Catechism from the section on faith to that of the law is especially interesting because it reveals in capsule form the essence of his thinking about the law in relation to his theology as a whole. Moreover, in this transition are woven together many of the key elements which form the mosaic against which Calvin's concept of the law should be viewed. He concludes his discussion of faith by saying that the whole doctrine of the gospel is comprehended in two points: faith and repentance. Then the question, "What is repentance?" Answer: "Dissatisfaction with and hatred of sin, and love of righteousness, arising out of the fear of God; for these two things lead us to denial of self and the mortification of the flesh, so that we yield ourselves to be ruled by the Spirit of God, and bring all the actions of our life into obedience to the divine will."²⁶

This is ostensibly a description of "the whole doctrine of the

gospel," but this could just as well apply to the law, for Calvin usually explains the law in the framework of one or more of these concepts, i.e., hatred of sin, love of righteousness, the fear of God, self-mortification, being ruled by the Holy Spirit, and obedience to the will of God. A key notion, however, is that of a rule or norm (*regula* or *norma*). For Calvin conceives of the law primarily as a rule, and it is precisely this concept which occurs next in this transition from faith to the law. In the next to last question in the section of faith Calvin states that "the true rule for worshipping God is to obey his will." In the first question in the section on the law Calvin asks, "What rule of life has he given to us?" Answer: "His law."²⁷ In Part III of this chapter we shall see how this idea of a "rule" is one of the key expressions in Calvin's thinking about the idea of law.

C. The Commentaries

Normally we would not expect to discover any guidelines in something so unsystematic as a commentary; yet even here a valuable clue is provided. For Calvin did something rather unique—he arranged the last four books of Moses in a harmony and wrote a great commentary based on it.²⁸ This is remarkable enough, but the important thing to observe is the manner in which he organized his material.

In the preface to this Harmony Calvin explains that these four books contain two different types of material: historical narrative and doctrine or teaching (*doctrina*). In the former we have reflected, "as in a bright mirror, the incomparable power as well as the boundless mercy of God in raising up, and, as it were, giving birth (*gigenda*) to his church." In the doctrinal parts of these four books we are taught how "the church is instructed in true piety (including faith and prayer) as well as in the fear and worship of God; and thus the rule of a just and holy life is laid down, and individuals are exhorted to perform their various duties."²⁹

Calvin divides the "doctrine" further into four major divisions: 1. a preface which contains various commendations of the dignity and authority of the law by Moses; 2. the *ten commandments* "in which God has comprehended briefly, indeed, completely, the rule of a just and holy life (*pie iusteque vivendi regulam*); yet not so as to separate

them from those scattered interpretations which the Lawgiver added"; 3. the third division (*caput*) of doctrine consisting of *supplements* (*appendices*) which include ceremonial and judicial laws; 4. the end and use of the law, which Calvin describes here particularly in terms of *usus elencticus*. "When God allures us so gently and kindly (*tam blande et suaviter*) by his promises, and then follows with the thunders of his curse, it is partly to render us inexcusable and partly to shut us up, deprived of all confidence in our own righteousness, so that we may flee to Christ who is the end of the law."³⁰

The most distinctive feature of the Harmony, however, consists in the way everything except the historical narratives, which are combined in a separate section, is subsumed under an exposition of the decalog. All of the minute regulations, ordinances, ceremonies, and moral precepts found in Exodus-Deuteronomy are—whenever possible—attached to one of the ten commandments! Those of a more general nature are used either in the preface or appendix (which deals with the promises and threats) to this exposition of the decalog.

In some ways this is a greater monument to Calvin's systematizing genius than the *Institutes*. For to comprehend almost all of the legislation and detail of the Pentateuch within the framework of the decalog must have been a formidable challenge even for the genius of Calvin. However, some have found this effort more a cause for reproach than for admiration, suggesting that Calvin was not content to abide by the God-given order.³¹ But such a criticism is captious and fails to understand Calvin's motive in attempting this Harmony.

Calvin was aware of the fact that he was exposing himself to criticism by making this rather novel attempt. No one would be more sensitive than he to the criticism that he had (in his own words) "inconsiderately and therefore unnecessarily altered the order which the Holy Spirit himself has prescribed to us." He explains further, "What Moses delivered in four books I have so attempted to collect and arrange that at first sight, and prior to a complete examination of the subject, it might seem that I was trying to improve upon it, which would be an audacious sacrilege." Fully conscious of all these hazards, Calvin, motivated by a pedagogical concern, nevertheless proceeded. "My purpose," he explains, "has been none other than this, namely, to provide some guidance for those readers who are insufficiently trained in order that they may meditate upon (*versentur*) the books of Moses more easily, conveniently and profitably."³²

More important, from a theological standpoint, is the presupposition underlying and making possible this Harmony. We have already noted that Calvin subsumes almost all regulations, laws, and ceremonies under one of the ten commandments. This was possible for him—though not always easy³³—because of his firm conviction that the decalog contains a perfect and complete rule for all true worship (the first table of the law) and justice and morality (the second table). This "spiritual worship . . . consists of faith, repentance (*poenitentia*), calling upon God (*Dei invocatio*), and praises which demonstrate our gratitude, yea even bearing the cross." From this spiritual worship follows "the promotion of justice towards men."³⁴

For Calvin, the fundamental principles of revealed religion are contained in the Pentateuch, and the core of the Pentateuch is the decalog. In the ten commandments—or "ten words" as Calvin, following Hebrew tradition, puts it³⁵—are found everything that we need for a rule for living well and uprightly. Hence all other laws, particularly the supplements (*appendices*) and political and judicial regulations, are only aids (*adminicula*) in the observance of the law and have no value when separated from the ten commandments. "Hence the wisdom of joining each precept to its proper commandment so that the law may be arranged as a whole."³⁶

This relating the bulk of the Pentateuch to the ten commandments may appear to be a severe restriction, but we must keep in mind that Calvin never views the decalog in abstraction but always in the light of the fuller revelation given in Jesus Christ. Moreover, Calvin concludes his exposition of the ten commandments in the Harmony with a special section on "the sum of the law." He collates such passages as Deuteronomy 6:5, 10:12, 13; and Leviticus 19:18, and notes that Christ declares that ultimately nothing is required of us by the law except love: love of God and love of neighbor. Therefore, it can be said that Calvin's high esteem for the law, as summarized in the two tables of the decalog, is nothing other than an attempt to give meaning and content to that which lies at the heart of the Christian ethic, namely, love.

D. *The Liturgy*

In concluding this section, it is of interest to note how Calvin uses the law in his Strasbourg Liturgy. When Calvin came to Stras-

bourg in 1538, having been banished from Geneva, he became the minister of a small group of French exiles. He adopted the German liturgy of Bucer and had it translated into French. He made a few minor changes, however, one of which was to introduce the singing of the decalog in meter. Calvin was not the first to have done this, for in Bucer's description of the worship at Strasbourg between 1526 and 1539, he explains that after the confession of sins, the absolution, the singing of some psalms or hymns and a New Testament Lesson, "then the congregation sing again, this time the Ten Commandments, or something else."³⁷

Nevertheless, in Bucer's German Liturgy of 1537, which Calvin copied, the decalog was not included. It is significant that in Calvin's liturgy the decalog is sung, not recited, and that it is introduced after the confession of sins and absolution, thus stressing the third use. This is brought out again in the fact that the two tables were divided by a short collect for grace to keep God's law. In his Genevan liturgy this practice, along with several others, disappeared, but this was due to "the extreme opinions that prevailed there among the magistracy," not to a change of mind by Calvin. Consequently, "we may take the Strasbourg rites as being a better indication of Calvin's own."³⁸

This survey of the place of the law in Calvin's systematic, catechetical, exegetical, and liturgical works provides us with a provisional indication of the importance and function of the law in his thought and practice. On the other hand, it has become apparent in the scattered references from Calvin's works that his use of the word law varies considerably depending on the context of the reference. Consequently, an introductory sketch concerning the variegated meanings of the law in Calvin's theology may prove helpful before beginning the main investigation. Prior to that, however, it is necessary to examine the implications of a passing reference in the Geneva Catechism, already noted, to obeying the will of God. For here Calvin substitutes "will" for "law," thus implying that the law, being an expression of the will of God, finds its origin or ground in that will.

II. THE ULTIMATE NORM: THE WILL OF GOD

The law of God is revealed to us in various ways and in various forms. Hence we can speak of natural, moral, ceremonial, and civil or positive law. But all of these forms are only variants of God's orderly

will for humanity. Calvin places special emphasis on the moral law because of its permanent significance. This law, in its specially revealed form, has been mediated to us through Israel. As such it is linked to the old dispensation which has been superseded by the coming of Christ and the gospel.

The law, however, is not a passing phenomenon to be identified with a temporal aspect of the religion of Israel. Nor is it an afterthought on the part of God in view of the rebellion of humanity. Rather, for Calvin, the law is something primary, basic, and permanent in the wisdom and plan of God. More specifically, Calvin sees in the law a direct revelation and expression of the eternal will of God. The will of God is the origin and foundation of the law. Hence to regard the law lightly is to refuse to take God seriously.

A. *The Law as an Expression of God's Will*

In one of his earliest writings, the correlation of the law with the will of God is stated succinctly: "In the law of God a perfect rule (*reigle*) of all righteousness is presented to us which with good reason can be called the eternal will of God."³⁹ Similarly, in the final edition of the *Institutes*: "The precepts of the law . . . comprehend the will of God."⁴⁰ "God has revealed his will in the law."⁴¹ Not that God's will is exhausted in the revelation of the law; but "the Lord, in giving us the rule of perfect righteousness, has referred all parts of it to his own will."⁴²

The commentaries abound with similar statements. The important thing to note here is the certainty, clarity, and familiarity with which God's will is made known to us through the law. Concerning Deuteronomy 29:29 Calvin comments: "Moses exhorts us to embrace the doctrine of the law, in which God's will is declared to us, as if he were openly speaking to us."⁴³ In the "book of the law" are found "the oracles of heaven, that is, the declaration of the will of God."⁴⁴ And this will "is first made known (*monstratur*) to us in the law."⁴⁵

One of the chief advantages we derive from the law is that "God reveals himself to us in the law and declares what kind of God he wishes to be toward us (*qualis erga nos esse velit*), lays down what he demands from us, and, in short, everything necessary to be known."⁴⁶ For in the law God has delineated his own character;⁴⁷ here his will is,

so to speak, "set before our face."⁴⁸ The Apostle Paul, even when arguing against the Jews' misuse and misunderstanding of the law, "concedes to them the knowledge of the divine will . . . which they had attained from the teaching of the law."⁴⁹ This is why deviation from the law is such a serious offence. For to depart from the law is to depart from the will of God, i.e., from the Lord himself.⁵⁰

This relating of the law to the will of God as its origin and foundation is in itself neither unusual nor peculiarly Calvinistic.⁵¹ Nevertheless, whenever emphasis is laid on the primacy of the will in the doctrine of God, there is frequently the suspicion of the alleged nominalist notion of an unconditioned, arbitrary will.⁵² Since Calvin's doctrine of God and the divine will is often identified with that of two of the leading nominalist theologians, Duns Scotus and William of Occam, this question has a direct bearing on his concept of the law.

B. God's Will Arbitrary?

Those who accuse Calvin of having been overly influenced by the nominalist notion of the priority of God's will interpret Scotus and Occam as teaching that God's sovereign will alone determines what is good. Seeberg maintains that with these nominalists God is almost identified with free will which he exercises arbitrarily as omnipotent power. Laws are just and good not because of their intrinsic moral quality and worth, but simply because God has arbitrarily so decreed.

Duns Scotus, for example, taught that natural law depends wholly on the will of God and not, as Thomas Aquinas taught, on his mind, and that it is therefore not absolutely immutable. Since God is sheer free will, no reason can be found for his willing or not willing, since all willing is without ground or reason. Occam was more extreme in promulgating this Scotist emphasis. He maintained that God did not will things because they were good, but that they were good because God willed them. "Nothing is of itself good or evil, the free will of God being the sovereign arbiter of what is so."⁵³ This God, this irresponsible almighty will, whose mere whim, as it seemed, had arbitrarily determined what should be counted good or evil had also arbitrarily decreed certain means of salvation and just as arbitrarily predestined some to be saved and others not.⁵⁴

Both Luther and Calvin were influenced by these nominalist theologians and their disciples, Luther even more directly than Calvin

since one of his mentors was the last great nominalist theologian, Gabriel Biel.⁵⁵ But at the Collège de Montaigu in Paris the young Calvin was also introduced to the thought of the leading nominalist theologians. While this does not mean that he was uncritical of this philosophy, it is safe to state that "these (nominalist) views in a modified form constitute part of the furniture of Calvin's mind."⁵⁶ Karl Reuter, the German Calvin scholar, concludes on a similar note: "Calvin has gained a reformed knowledge of salvation, but his doctrine of God exhibits displays of nominalistic disturbances (*Störungen*)."⁵⁷ However, to draw the following conclusion is another matter! According to Hunter, for Calvin

the sovereign will of God was governed by no considerations but its good pleasure. He found refuge in these principles from difficulties which frequently confronted him in his exposition of Scripture. If it plainly laid the responsibility upon God for acts that were offensive to our moral sense, he fell back upon the postulate that that is good which God wills to be so. Just as he could have made a man an ass or a dog (*Inst.* III.22.1) and might have given any property to the stars, so his good pleasure was limited neither by physical laws nor even on occasion by moral.⁵⁸

Hunter here is only echoing in a more cautious form the allegation of Albrecht Ritschl that Calvin, after the manner of the Scotists, reduced God to the bare notion of arbitrary will, without ethical content. This was repeated by Seeberg, Williston Walker, and others.⁵⁹ There is no denying that Calvin makes certain statements that resemble those of Scotus in particular, but it does not necessarily follow that their presuppositions are the same. Moreover, recent research has shown that many of these charges are based on a misunderstanding of what Scotus actually taught. For example, it is not true to say that he identified God's absolute power with the purely arbitrary.⁶⁰ Nor should we assume that anything which can be shown to have some affinity to nominalism is therefore ipso facto to be condemned as false!

Calvin, it is true, does not hesitate to affirm that God is a law unto himself, is above all laws, and is bound by no laws. In defense of his doctrine of predestination, for example, Calvin argues that "it is very wicked merely to investigate the causes of God's will. For his will is, and rightly ought to be, the cause of all things that are . . . For