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**JESUS CHRIST AND CREATION
IN THE THEOLOGY OF
JOHN CALVIN**

JESUS CHRIST

And

CREATION

In the Theology of

John Calvin

PETER WYATT

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PREFACE

This essay in historical theology attempts to provide a new perspective on the remarkable quality of internal tension in Calvin's theology. This tension has been attested often enough by interpreters, either explicitly through critical comment, or implicitly through the considerable effort required to sustain exposition of Calvin's theology as a consistent whole. The thesis advanced in these pages is that Calvin combined two distinct approaches in theology, one which could be called "existential" or evangelical, and the other "sapiential", and that as a practitioner of sapiential thought, Calvin was not only a critic, but also an inheritor, of medieval theology.

On the one hand, it was Calvin's reforming intention to affirm the pre-eminence of Jesus Christ as the proper focus of faith and theology, and in so doing to underscore the sole authenticity of knowledge of God which is knowledge of God's disposition toward us as fallen creatures. On the other, he makes room in his thought for a broader view, and for reflection on the implications of this redemptively focused knowledge, particularly with respect to the original divine purpose in creation and to knowledge of God the Creator.

As originally conceived, these pages were a dissertation for the Th. D. degree in the Toronto School of Theology. More than a dozen years ago, the position I took was that this tension amounted to incongruity and was evidence of a failure on Calvin's part to express his theology on as thorough-going a christological basis as his evangelical vision mandated. In effect, a Barthian template was laid on Calvin and he was found wanting. Today, I still encounter moments when the tension between the evangelical and the more philosophical Calvin approaches dissonance. However, when Calvin is seen as the mediating theologian that he strove to be, the "incongruity" in his theology can be recognized for what it usually is—the expression of a relatively inclusive theological interest, and of healthy tensions, if not complementarities. Though he was capable of intransigent and polemical behaviour, Calvin was not an either/or, but a both/and thinker. It is not surprising, then, that he did not regard the existential and the sapiential as mutually exclusive ways of going about the theological venture.

The interpretation advanced here may have a certain controversial character. However, my intention in presenting it is to add to the

repertoire of interpretive perspectives, not to displace or deny others. We have portraits of the christocentric Calvin, the Lutheran Calvin, the catholic Calvin, the revolutionary Calvin, the pneumatic Calvin, the pastoral Calvin, the rhetorical Calvin, the Calvin of metaphysical anxiety, the eucharistic Calvin, and so on. Each of these portraits offers insight vital to our understanding of the Reformer; none can claim to be a complete or uniquely correct appreciation of his work. To this ongoing work of interpretation I wish to add another portrait, that of the mediating and sapiential Calvin.

In order to allow Calvin to speak for himself as much as possible, the text is saturated with quotations, and end-notes abound. The standard English translations are used, namely, the McNeill-Battles edition of the *Institutes*, the New Testament commentaries edited by the brothers Torrance, and the Old Testament commentaries of the Calvin Translation Society. To facilitate ease of reference, simple citations of the *Institutes* will appear bracketed in the body of the text, rather than in end-notes. References to the commentaries will follow the generally accepted convention of citing the relevant Scriptural book, together with indication of the chapter and verse under discussion, as, for example, "*Comm. Rom. 8.5*". The major repeated abbreviations employed are as follows:

CO	<i>Calvini Opera</i>
Inst.	<i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i>
ST	<i>Summa Theologiae of Thomas Aquinas</i>
LW	<i>Luther's Works</i> (American Edition)

In undertaking the work of revision, I found myself responding to the worthy imperative of inclusive language, and an attempt has been made to honor it in my own prose. However, with regard to quotations, respect for the sources leads me to present them as they were penned. As well, the complexity of carrying on a dialogue with Calvin, Aquinas, Luther and others, especially with respect to the intimate nature of Trinitarian relationships, means that my own references to the deity do not always achieve the goal of inclusivity.

I express appreciation to David Demson of Emmanuel College, the supervisor of the thesis in its original form, to the late John Gilchrist of Trent University, who read the original with a view to making the "cuts", and to my wife and colleague, Joan Wyatt, whose encouragement has sustained me through many ventures. I dedicate the work in its present form to the memory of the Rev. Dr. P. P. Miedema, courageous pastor and faithful exponent of evangelical truth.

Peter Wyatt
October, 1995

INTRODUCTION

The character of any theologian's work is rarely shaped by a single determinant but rather by a complex of factors. In Calvin's case, at least three major influences of a spiritual-intellectual nature were formative in his theology. The first and most obvious is his conversion and commitment to the cause of reform and to the task of the restatement of theology on an evangelical basis. In this regard, his chief mentors were Luther and Bucer. The second is the matrix of humanism whose influence upon Calvin is signalled by the appearance of his first published work, the commentary on Seneca's *De clementia*, and by his continuing dialogue with Cicero on "natural" knowledge of God. The third factor is Calvin's inheritance of the overall theological tradition of Christendom. With respect to patristic authors, most notably Augustine, this influence could scarcely go unnoticed. Among the earlier medievals, the influence of Bernard of Clairvaux is especially evident, especially his teaching on the spiritual union of believers with Christ.¹ However, it is with respect to the ordering of Christian doctrine for the purpose of a comprehensive understanding and instruction in Scriptural faith that insufficient notice has been taken of the medieval influence on Calvin.

This influence is easily overlooked precisely because of his adversarial stance toward the unreformed church and its dependence on scholasticism. However, in criticizing inherited tradition, even the most radical reformer inevitably assumes a portion of the standards of the preceding intellectual ethos, and may ultimately learn to distinguish between its chaff and its grist. The aim of this study is to take into account the influence of the theological frame of intelligibility which Calvin inherited from "the sounder schoolmen" and to trace its usually complementary relationship to Calvin's evangelical presentation of the incarnate, mediatorial Christ. In particular, this complementarity will be explored through consideration of the relationship between Jesus Christ and creation in Calvin's theology.

THE HISTORY AND STATE OF THE QUESTION

Not long after the close of the First World War, Hermann Bauke posed the problem of widespread, apparent contradictions in the theology of Calvin and characterized the work of the Reformer as a

complexio oppositorum. Bauke argued that previous scholarship had been mistaken in seeking to interpret Calvin's theology on the basis of a single controlling doctrine. He asserted that this approach was typically German and assumed a "material principle of interpretation." The key to understanding Calvin was to be found, however, in a formal principle, an approach typical of the French mind. He argued that, in the case of Calvin, we have an example of "formal rationalism" in which opposing and equally important principles are set in dialectical relation to each other. Bauke attributed this dialectical method not to any speculative tendency but to the Reformer's "Biblicism," that is, his strategy to limit theology to the exposition of the authentic themes of Scripture.²

Bauke's perceptive eye and ingenious argument heralded a rebirth of critical scholarship. "Bauke's study was a genuine step forward," observes John H. Leith, "for it made plain that every attempt to interpret the *Institutes* must consider form as well as content. He dealt a devastating blow to the notion that Calvin was a speculative systematizer who deduced a system of theology from one or two principles."³ The continuing validity of Bauke's phrase, *complexio oppositorum*, is evidenced, furthermore, by the remark of François Wendel that "the paradoxes of Calvin," "the dialectical opposites," remain. "Calvin's is not a closed system elaborated around a central idea, but . . . draws together, one after another, a whole series of Biblical ideas, some of which can only with difficulty be logically reconciled."⁴

Scarcely any contemporary commentary can be found which does not draw attention to this "antithetical structure" in some way, though its significance is interpreted variously. Viewed in a thoroughly positive way by F. L. Battles, it is evidence of the way that Calvin sought to approximate ever more closely to truth, steering a middle way "between the Scylla of aberrant Romanism and the Charybdis of the radical tendencies of his time." With reference to Aristotle's concept of a spectrum between defect and excess, Battles asserts that for Calvin "every fundamental notion of his thought is defined as a field of tension—a true middle between false extremes."⁵ On the other hand, J. H. Leith sees the antitheses as evidence of inconsistency, deriving "from Calvin's intense concern to maintain the glory of God in Geneva" and resulting in the obscuring of divine grace through "speculative theological abstractions, laws and ecclesiastical discipline."⁶

Bauke's recognition of this internal tension in Calvin's theology forced interpretation to a reconsideration of the fundamental coherence of his work. In the past fifty years, two major approaches have been taken. Wilhelm Niesel's *Theology of Calvin* well represents the first approach in which it is argued that competing and apparently con-

tradictory emphases in the Reformer's thought can be resolved successfully around his doctrine of the person and work of Jesus Christ. For Niesel, this means that the Chalcedonian definition of the two natures in the person of the Mediator—union but not fusion, distinction but not separation—was employed by Calvin as a principle of method throughout his theology. Among other examples, he cites that of the relation of the living Word to the written Word: "The relation between the words of Scripture and the incarnate Word is analogous to that between the human nature of Christ and the Logos. The written word is not interchangeable with the one Word, but neither is it separable from the latter."⁷ It is Niesel's summary insight that "Jesus Christ controls not only the content but also Calvinistic thought."⁸

Niesel properly credited Karl Barth with a revolution in interpretation based on the principle that theology must be determined by its object, Jesus Christ. In the decade of the thirties, marked by the ascendancy of the Nazi ideology in Germany, interpretation of Calvin's theology became a flashpoint of bitter controversy. Emil Brunner of Zürich had published an essay on the place of a revelation from the creation in Calvin's thought and Barth replied to his fellow national with some heat, regarding Brunner's argument as a potential buttress for the "German Church" movement. In "No: Answer to Emil Brunner," Barth denies the possibility of attributing any kind of natural theology to Calvin since the expression *si integer stetisset Adam* brackets and qualifies everything the Reformer ever said about natural knowledge of God.⁹ Thus, the notion of a knowledge of God from nature is purely hypothetical because of the noetic blindness occasioned by human sin. The only way one can ascribe to Calvin a revelation in nature distinct from the revelation in Christ is by taking advantage of "that little corner which has been left uncovered in Calvin's treatment."¹⁰ Peter Barth joined his brother in taking this approach, and, in the English-speaking world, T. F. Torrance and T. H. L. Parker are among those who have affirmed that Calvin is an unequivocal progenitor of christocentric theology. Parker echoes Barth in saying, "Calvin always follows what appear to be generous concessions to natural theology by denying any religious validity to them at all."¹¹

Emil Brunner and E. A. Dowey are representative of the other major approach, based on the conviction that Calvin's position is more complex than a strictly christocentric interpretation will allow. Neither wishes to deny the centrality of Christ to Christian faith and knowledge, but they maintain that Calvin also has a special place in his theology for a knowledge of God from creation which is distinct, while not separate, from the knowledge given in the redemptive event of Jesus Christ. In the very essay to which Barth so angrily reacted, Brunner argues that we must speak of a double revelation and face the challenge

of discovering how the revelation in creation and that in Jesus Christ are to be related.¹² As a consequence of the existence of this special sphere of the knowledge of God in creation, he holds that there may be found in Calvin evangelical definitions of natural revelation, natural theology, and natural law.¹³ Brunner argues that in contrast to the Roman Catholic concept of an "unrefracted *theologia naturalis*," the Reformers espoused a dialectical one, one that could not be correct "unless Christ be taken into account."¹⁴

It is the singular contribution of E. A. Dowey to have attempted an explanation of the complex relationship obtaining between the knowledge of God the Creator and the knowledge of God the Redeemer in the *Institutes*. Dowey characterizes the knowledge of God the Creator as pertaining to "the orderly universal inclusiveness of law," while that of God the Redeemer to "the special-gratuitous quality of God's mercy." The relationship between the two orders of knowledge is one of "mutual presupposition."¹⁵ Knowledge of God's redemptive activity logically presupposes knowledge of God the Creator, since only the providential world-Ruler has the power to bring about the event of salvation. On the other hand, knowledge of God the Redeemer is the epistemological presupposition of the knowledge of God the Creator, since God the Creator cannot be known naturally by sinful humanity, but only through the regeneration wrought in Christ through the power of the Spirit.¹⁶ According to Dowey, "The believer can never build a continuous thought structure relating the creating and redeeming work of God because of . . . the noetic effects of sin."¹⁷ These two aspects of the divine work belong together because of God's own unity, who is both Creator and Redeemer, but this coherence can only be known from the perspective of faith.

While maintaining a christological center to Calvin's theology, Dowey is prepared to defend Brunner's use of the term, "Christian natural theology." Even if, because of the fall, the revelation from creation has a pre-eminently negative function (in rendering humans universally inexcusable before God), nevertheless it thereby possesses "eristic" potential: it offers no positive foundation to faith but it is "a battering ram against false 'faiths'."¹⁸ Moreover, after the regeneration of believers through faith, the revelation from creation occupies "a subsequent and subsidiary, but nonetheless essential, place," amplifying the knowledge of the one, triune God first gained in Christ.¹⁹ Thus, natural theology may be seen to complement, rather than undermine, evangelical truth.

The polarization of mid-century gave way to studies which, while profiting from the insights generated out of the Barth-Brunner controversy, attempted to achieve fresh perspectives. Especially notable

are works by David Willis and Benjamin Milner to which reference will be made in the body of this work. However, the present interpretive moment is characterized by an emphasis on Calvin's humanism and its pervasive impress on his theological vocation.

THE "RHETORICAL" CALVIN

Almost lost in the controversy over natural theology was the importance of pioneering work by Quirinus Breen, who, over sixty years ago, proposed that Calvin's humanism was the precipitate of his vocation as a reformer. Breen went so far as to say that "the Reformation is largely a defence of the new age that the Renaissance had ushered in."²⁰ Thirty years later, he saw fit to revise that remarkable opinion, but still managed to argue that in Calvin's doctrine of common grace is to be found "a post-conversion defence of secular studies, particularly the pagan classics" and a "charter of liberties" for these same studies.²¹ More recently (1971), Egil Grislis has suggested that, with respect to the question of natural knowledge of God, "Calvin's argument is essentially a restatement of Cicero's insight" and that "comparisons of Cicero have indicated both a literary dependence as well as a basic general agreement."²² In response to this position, Charles Partee adjudges that Grislis has made an over-interpretation of the evidence. Arguing that the parallels are clear but the dependence is not, he maintains that Calvin uses the resources of antiquity, and of classical philosophy in particular, "not as a source of truth but as a learned adjunct to the explanation of the Christian faith."²³ What especially characterizes Calvin's use of pagan writers is the selectivity by which he accepts some of their views and rejects others. "Calvin's use and evaluation of the classical philosophers is instructive not only as an illustration of his Christian humanism but as an important part of his theology."²⁴

The renewal of interest in Calvin's humanism in the eighties and nineties has focused not so much on the philosophical as on the philological and literary aspects of the classical legacy. Alister McGrath observes that the renaissance of the sixteenth century was "remarkably heterogeneous"; nonetheless, "if there is any common theme to humanist writings, it is the need to promote spoken and written eloquence." Ancient texts were read in the original tongues "as a means to an end, rather than as an end in themselves."²⁵ "Humanism was concerned with *how ideas were obtained and expressed*, rather than with the precise nature of the ideas themselves."²⁶ In almost every field there was a concerted attempt to escape the strangulation of the medieval glossators and thus to free the texts for fresh encounter and renewed uses.²⁷

"Humanism" has the present-day connotation of a world-view

developed without reference to the deity. However, far from being an enemy of theology, the humanism of the sixteenth century meant to "tap the pure, clear founts, overgrown with the thorny disputes of scholasticism . . . A piously learned examination of Scripture would release a golden stream of eloquence where only muddied rivulets of schoolish debate had trickled."²⁸ Thus Erasmus believed that an increasingly accurate philology would spark the renewal of theology and serve the cause of Christ. For this cause he was willing to endure the storm occasioned by the publication of his critical edition of the New Testament in which he corrected the translation of *logos* from *verbum* to *sermo*.²⁹

Quirinus Breen calls Calvin "par excellence the orator of the Reformation era":

He actually used his voice most of the time; he preached several times a week, and much in his commentaries was prepared for class lectures. His audiences represented a general cross-section of society, with no specific preparation for theology through years of drilling in a technical vocabulary, as was usual in a theological faculty at the universities. When he spoke, he addressed the whole man: mind, will, feeling. In all this he observed the canons of classical rhetoric. These canons also said that he must expound with clarity (i.e., clarity to the general run of men), with agreeableness (so that he would not put his hearers to sleep), and in such a manner as to move. All this was required for persuasion. The orator does not appeal to the mind alone, as the philosopher does, so as to convince; he intends to persuade for change of faith, and for action. ³⁰

Calvin's exposure to humanism came through his legal studies under luminaries like de l'Estoile and Alciati, where the goal of eloquence was approached through the Ciceronian way of "dialogue, interrogation, and persuasive speech."³¹ The legal provenance of Calvin's humanism, however, should not suggest images of dialectical jousting or manipulative technique. Quoting C. S. Baldwin, David Willis distinguishes between two different conceptions of rhetoric. In the Sophist sense excoriated by Socrates, it means the best possible presentation of a case, without regard to the truth or falsity of the argument, for the purpose of persuading one's hearers. "The other conception of rhetoric concentrates not on making the speaker effective, but the truth effective." On Aristotle's definition, rhetoric is "the energizing of knowledge, the bringing of truth to bear upon men."³² Willis concludes that Calvin's rhetorical formation led him to define knowledge of God in a highly experiential way: faith is a matter of being *persuaded* of God's goodness in Christ; truth is measured by its power to change those

whom it grasps; and divine revelation is the accommodation of God to human weakness for the sake of our persuasion.³³

A number of important corollaries may be drawn from the recognition of Calvin as essentially a rhetorical humanist. One is the critical importance that can be assigned to the concept of "accommodation" in understanding God's will and work in Calvin's thought. God now may be seen as the unsurpassable practitioner of the rhetorical gifts of informing, delighting and moving human minds and hearts. From beginning to end, revelation is the loving condescension by which God crosses the chasm between divine and human capacities. Here, if ever, *Infinitum capax finiti*,³⁴ or, as Willis puts it, *Humanitas capax divinitatis per accommodationem*. "That is, God begins with our incapacity, makes himself small to adjust to it, and by his gracious action of strategic self-limitation, transforms us so that we are increasingly united to God himself in Christ."³⁵ While others give important accounts of the principle of accommodation, it is F. L. Battles who argues most clearly for its programmatic significance:

Calvin makes this principle a consistent basis for his handling not only of Scripture but of every avenue of relationship between God and men. Thus the starkest inconsistencies in Scripture are harmonized through rhetorical analysis, within the frame of divine accommodation to human capacity . . . ; this method unlocks for Calvin God's beneficent tutelage and pedagogy of His wayward children.³⁶

While the concept of divine accommodation to human capacity functions to underscore God's parental goodness, it may also raise questions about the relationship between the *deus revelatus* and the *deus absconditus*. On Calvin's definition, "the mode of accommodation is for [God] to represent himself to us not as he is himself, but as he seems to us."³⁷ Does "accommodation" then imply discontinuity between God known in a tempered revelation and God's unknown essential being and character? Could it mean that God's ways, even God's disposition toward creatures, may change in response to diverse human situations and a changing creation? Calvin resolutely denied change in God, although his doctrine of accommodation might have led him in that direction, and seems to have made others suspicious that it did.³⁸ And while he maintained that speculation about the divine essence opened upon an inconceivable abyss, God's "naked divinity" is at least a boundary concept for him; moreover, a "hidden God" (God unrevealed) is presupposed logically by the notion of God revealed. Thus, there is latent ambiguity in the concept of accommodation and, as we shall have occasion later to note, it becomes a knife-edge in Calvin's account of the atonement.

A second major corollary is derived from the recognition of Calvin's vocation as a Christian humanist. For some interpreters it serves as corroboration of the fact that Calvin never was what later tradition made him out to be—the great systematizer. It was as a humanist committed to letting the text speak for itself—in other words, as a Biblical theologian—that Calvin proscribed speculative theology and came to regard system as the enemy of faith. According to William Bouwsma, the systematic Calvin is an “historical artifact: the artificial construct of his followers of the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when human insecurity and the yearning for social and political order received symbolic expression in a great wave of system building of the kind Calvin sought to avoid.”³⁹ The sixteenth century was too fragmented an age for the construction of grand, coherent systems of thought.⁴⁰ “A systematic Calvin, as that term is usually understood, would be an anomaly and an anachronism.”⁴¹

David Willis observes that if Calvin is recognized as a reforming humanist, then the tensions in his thought may be seen as “instances of rhetorical correlation rather than dialectical diastasis” and as “more cohering in an order of teaching and persuasion than in a formally systematic way.”⁴² Humanist *persuasio* is the contrary of system and, as a rhetorical humanist, Calvin's aim (like that of Marx!) was to change the world, not understand it.⁴³ In general agreement with the humanist interpretation of Calvin, but from the point of view of political philosophy, Michael Walzer sees Calvin as a “practical man of ideas,” not so much a theologian or a philosopher, as an “ideologist.” The practical task of bringing people “into the obedience of the gospel” was the engine driving his antispeculative *animus* and his can be called a “theology antitheological.”⁴⁴ In summing up, Bouwsma says, “It is hard to understand how anyone who has read Calvin could maintain the systematic nature of his theology.”⁴⁵

But not everyone seems to agree. “System” can mean many things. If it means the kind of logical exposition presented in Beza's *Sum of All Christianity*, in which a comprehensive account of the successive divine decrees determining the destiny of the elect and the reprobate is set forth in the form of a diagram, then Calvin has no system.⁴⁶ If it means the derivation of a selfconsciously complete account of Christian faith from a single principle or pre-eminent doctrine, then Calvin was no systematizer, though there are still moments when interpreters find themselves prepared to hazard the opinion that a certain doctrine or theme is central to the spirit and organization of Calvin's thought. Thus, for example, Brian Gerrish identifies the correlative theme of “grace and gratitude” (God's free adoption of believers and their thankful response) as aptly descriptive of a complex of images that shape Calvin's theology.⁴⁷ But the day is gone when an abstract

concept, such as absolute will or divine sovereignty, could be thought to control Calvin's thought and to be a canon according to which the varying themes of Scripture would be measured and incorporated into his theology.

It *would* be an anachronism to think of Calvin as a systematic theologian in our contemporary sense. Above all, Calvin was a pastor and a public lecturer in the Scriptures, who also published much of what he thought and said. But, as Melancthon adjudged, in these roles he was also a theologian, "the theologian." That he was a Biblical theologian and strove to make his thought an expression of the authentic themes of Scripture is beyond debate. But this did not mean that he avoided weighing the relative importance of these themes or ignored the need to relate them to one another in a coherent whole. Indeed, the existence of the *Institutes* in its varied and growing editions is the incontrovertible evidence that he regarded some expression of "the sum of religion" as essential to his vocation.

In his preface to the *Institutes* of 1559, Calvin says that he "was never satisfied until the work had been arranged in the order now set forth." His claims the office of "a teacher in the church" and declares (beginning with the 1539 edition) that his purpose in this labour has been "to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word":

For I believe I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts and have arranged it in such an order, that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture and to what end he ought to relate its contents.

He goes on to remind readers of what he first said in the second edition of 1539, namely, that in any future published interpretations of Scripture "I shall always condense them, because I shall have no need of long doctrinal discussions, and to digress into commonplaces." In the final edition, the French of 1560, his preface promises the work to be "first, a sum of Christian doctrine, and, secondly, a way to benefit greatly from reading the Old as well as the New Testament." The *Institutes* are meant to be both an introduction to the themes of Scripture and a compendium of what they teach.

To be a Biblical theologian is to be more than an exegete or an expositor. Edward A. Dowey notes that when Calvin is commenting on Scripture "the choice, sequence, disposition and interrelation of the elements are determined not by Calvin's mind but by his intent to express the mind of the writer." However, in his treatises, and particularly in

the *Institutes*, "Calvin's own ways of thinking, farther removed from any given Biblical text than in the commentaries and sermons, are freer to express his own mentality."⁴⁸ As theologian, the Biblical theologian's task is to set forth the Scriptural narrative in a way that its recurrent themes, underlying unity and doctrinal significance can be grasped. And surely it is the case that even as an exegete and expositor Calvin's own drumbeat can be heard. In remarks on Calvin's sermons that could be extended to his commentaries and letters, John H. Leith observes "that they fit into a theological framework with certain unifying perspectives that influence all doctrines....His theology is an organic whole not a machine put together with different parts."⁴⁹

It is noteworthy also that there is a difference between Calvin's finished work in the *Institutes* and the topical method employed by Erasmus and Melancthon.⁵⁰ Unless one persists in treating "system" as a shibboleth, the utility and widespread influence of the *Institutes* can be seen to derive from a quality that one naturally would call systematic. Gerrish notes that the O. E. D. defines "systematic" as "arranged . . . according to a system, plan, or organized method." He goes on to observe of Calvin: "He was a systematic theologian in exactly the same sense as Schleiermacher; he looked assiduously for the interconnections between doctrines, the way they 'hang together' (their *Zusammenhang*)."⁵¹ Calvin's quarrel with scholastic theology did not concern its organization but its entanglement in abstraction, speculation and contorted reasoning.

Sooner or later we all manage to fall under the ban of our own indictments and Bouwsma is no exception in his essay on "Calvinism as a Renaissance Artifact." Having argued that it is anachronistic to think of Calvin as a systematic thinker, he later asserts that his theology "was directed not to all time, but to his own."⁵² Ascribing this viewpoint also to humanism in general, he concludes that "an understanding of the historicity of theological discourse may be essential to a proper interpretation of its substance."⁵³ Is it not anachronistic to suppose that sixteenth-century authors, living on the farther side of the nineteenth-century historiographical revolution, could have conceived of their discourse as historically conditioned in the radical sense that we do? While Bouwsma is right to underline Calvin's insistence on achieving practical results through galvanizing his hearers, did this emphasis on action and utility exclude passion for truth, and for stating it in a precise and coherent way?

Bouwsma's assertion that Calvin rarely made truth claims⁵⁴ is surprising, particularly in light of a quotation cited near the end of his essay, in which Calvin begins by saying, "Let us hold this as an undoubted truth which no siege engines can shake..." This particular pas-

sage, in which Calvin asserts the complete vitiation of human powers in graphic and virtually scatological terms,⁵⁵ is a salient example of a recurring characteristic in Calvin's prose, that is, the coincidence of his passion to persuade with his intellectual conviction. Rhetorical purple underscores the intensity with which he holds "undoubted truth." One might be forgiven for thinking that making claims about the truth of the Christian religion, in both rhetorical and intellectual senses, is something Calvin did virtually non-stop throughout his career.

THE SAPIENTIAL CALVIN

The re-apprehension of Calvin as a sixteenth-century humanist is a breakthrough in the work of interpretation and functions to inform, delight, and almost persuade. The difficulty is that the proponents of the rhetorical Calvin seem committed to an oppositional approach of either/or. Either Calvin was a humanist or a rationalist, a contextual thinker or a systematizer, a proponent of rhetorical persuasion or discursive truth. Is it possible that Calvin was both?⁵⁶ Bouwsma's gripping portrait of Calvin as a human being caught between the labyrinth of selfconfining order and the abyss of chaotic freedom suggests as much. In *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* he speaks of "Calvin's struggle to reduce the incompatible impulses in himself" and of Calvin's Calvinism as "composite," acknowledging that while there is one Calvin who was a rhetorical humanist, there is another who "was a philosopher, a rationalist and a schoolman in the high scholastic tradition represented by Thomas Aquinas."⁵⁷ There are moments when the duality of Calvin's thought appears to be an either/or alternative of incompatibility. However, there is another and more positive way of looking at the relationship between the rhetorical and the intellectual Calvin, that is, on a both/and basis: often enough the dual interests evident in his thought can be seen also to complement and presuppose each other.

Calvin seems not to have conceived that his goal of evangelical restatement would preclude sapiential discourse and systematic considerations. In his treatise, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church," for example, he indicates that the reforming mandate is not without certain limits: "All our controversies concerning doctrine relate either to the legitimate worship of God or to the ground of salvation."⁵⁸ Again, in a Confession of Faith, he writes:

Wherefore all our differences relate to the following points: on what our confidence of salvation should rest, how we ought to invoke God, and what is the method of well and duly serving him. And there are points depending on these, viz., what is the true poli-

ty of the Church, the offices of prelates and pastors,
the nature, virtue and use of the Sacraments. 59

As viewed by Calvin, the great issues between the Reformers and Rome concerned soteriology and ecclesiology (especially liturgy). It is no surprise, therefore, that it is in these contexts that we find him most adamant about the all-encompassing need of humanity for God, and the radical initiative of God in reaching out to us in Jesus Christ. But care must be taken not to assume an attitude of total rejection on Calvin's part to medieval theology, thus imposing on his thought an unwarranted opposition between evangelical humanism and sapiential breadth. In fact, a proper definition of the sapiential approach will show it to be inclusive of the fundamental humanist dynamic. The *animus* of sixteenth-century humanism was directed at the convoluted speculation of later nominalism and the scandal of ecclesiastical abuses, not against the broad stream of Augustinian tradition. What the humanists opposed was an obfuscating theology, not theology itself.

The meaning of humanism is not exhausted under the heading of rhetoric or eloquence: the passion of humanism includes wisdom and prudence also, and in this sense it is sapiential. While the humanism of the sixteenth century had a particular focus on persuasive eloquence, it had in common with the earlier renaissance of the twelfth century an openness to truth arising from ancient (and therefore mostly pagan) sources. Humanist non-theological sources susceptible of adoption and adaption by the theologian belongs to the definition of the sapiential. Integral to the high scholastic vision was a resolve to overcome the initial challenge of the philosophical revolution of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—the recovery of Aristotle through Muslim provenance—by co-opting the dynamic of this revolution. What was true of the Aristotelian renaissance is arguably true of the later, more philological and literary, renaissance of the sixteenth century. Thus the degree to which Calvin continued to employ the resources of his humanist erudition reflects also the degree to which he was an inheritor of the medieval tradition and a practitioner of sapiential theology.

Defining the Sapiential

In an essay in the genre of "ecumenical theology," Otto Pesch has set in relation to one another the signal contributions to theology of Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther. He proposes that the real source of opposition between the two is found not in differing thought content or even differing thought forms (*Denkformen*), but in two distinct "intellectual styles of performance" (*Denkvollzugsformen*).⁶⁰ Such a difference in intellectual style arises out of "a basic concern and interest which is prior to all theological reflection, which may not even be con-