

Kevin P. Emmert

John Calvin and the Righteousness of Works



Reformed Historical Theology

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This research project is a slightly expanded version of my PhD thesis, and my aim is that students and researchers of John Calvin, the Reformation, and Reformed theology will find it to be a useful resource as they seek to better understand Calvin and his understanding of works-righteousness. Before we set out on the journey of retrieving Calvin's position understanding of works-righteousness, I want to express my gratitude to those who helped me accomplish this work, for no work such as this could be undertaken without help and support from others.

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Abbreviations

Works of Calvin

<i>Antidote</i>	<i>Antidotes to the Council of Trent</i>
<i>BLW</i>	<i>Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defense of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice against Pighius</i> . Translated by Graham I. Davies and edited by A. N. S. Lane. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996. Cited by page number, followed by COR reference.
<i>CO</i>	<i>Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia</i> . Edited by Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Edward Reuss. 59 volumes, <i>Corpus Reformatorum</i> volumes 29–87. Brunsvigae: A. Schwetschke and Son (M. Bruhn), 1863–1900. Cited by volume and column number.
<i>Comm.</i>	Commentary. All references to Calvin's Old Testament commentaries are from the Calvin Translation Society edition, reprinted by Baker Book House; <i>Calvin's Commentaries</i> . Volumes 1–15. Reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979. All references to Calvin's New Testament commentaries are from <i>Calvin's New Testament Commentaries</i> . 12 Volumes. Edited by David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959–1972. Cited by Scripture reference, followed by COR or CO reference.
<i>COR</i>	<i>Ioannis Calvini opera omnia denuo recognita et adnotatione, critica instructa, notisque illustrata</i> . Edited by Brian G. Armstrong, et al. Genève: Librairie Droz, 1992–. Cited by series, volume, and page number.
<i>Inst.</i>	<i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> . 2 Volumes. Edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960. In some cases, the Beveridge translation is used: <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> . Translated by Henry Beveridge, 1845. Reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008. Cited by book, chapter, and section, followed by OS reference. Dates of specific editions from which references are taken are provided in parentheses. Multiple dates separated by a comma indicate the reference is from multiple origins (e.g., 1536, 1539); dates separated by a forward slash indicate that the reference is an altered/revised version of a previous edition (e.g., 1539/1536).
<i>Inst. 1536</i>	<i>Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1536 Edition</i> . Translated and annotated by Ford Lewis Battles. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986. Cited by page number, followed by OS reference.

OS	<i>Ioannis Calvini opera selecta</i> . 5 Volumes. Edited by Peter Barth, Wilhelm Niesel, and Dora Scheuner. Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1926–1652. Cited by volume and page number.
Reform	<i>The Necessity of Reforming the Church</i>
SC	<i>Supplementa Calviniana. Sermons inédits</i> . Edited by Erwin Mülhaupt, et al. 1936–. Cited by series and volume number, followed by page number.
Serm. Deut.	<i>Sermons on Deuteronomy</i> . Translated by Arthur Golding. London: Henry Middleton, 1583. Reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987. Cited by Scripture reference, with page number in parentheses.
Serm. Gen.	<i>Sermons on Genesis 1–20</i> . 2 Volumes. Translated by Rob Roy McGregor. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009. Cited by Scripture reference, with volume and page number in parentheses, followed by SC reference.
Serm. Ten Com.	<i>Sermons on the Ten Commandments</i> . Edited and translated by Benjamin W. Farley. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001. Cited by page number, followed by CO reference.
Tracts	<i>Tracts and Letters</i> . 7 Volumes. Translated by H. Beveridge (vols. 1–3), D. Constable (vols. 4–5), and M. R. Gilchrist (vols. 6–7). Edited by Jules Bonnet (vols. 4–7). Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009. Cited by volume and page number, followed by OS or CO reference.
True Method	<i>The True Method of Giving Peace and of Reforming the Church</i>

Other Works

Ap	<i>Apology of the Augsburg Confession</i>
ATJ	<i>Ashland Theological Journal</i>
BC	<i>The Book of Concord</i> . Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000.
BRom	Bucer, Martin. <i>Metaphrasis et Enarratio in Epist. D. Pauli Apostoli ad Romanos, in quibus singulatim Apostoli omnia cum argumenta, tum sententiae & uerba, ad auctoritatem diuinæ scripturæ, fidem[que] Ecclesiæ Catholice tam priscae quàm præsentis, religiose ac paulò fusius excutuntur</i> . Basel: Peter Perna, 1562.
BSELK	<i>Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche</i> . Edited by Irene Dingel. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014.
CH	<i>Church History</i>
CP	<i>Common Places of Martin Bucer</i> . Translated and edited by David F. Wright. Appleford, Abingdon, Berkshire, England: The Sutton Press, 1972.
CR	<i>Corpus Reformatorum</i> : Philip Melancthon, <i>Opera quæ supersunt omnia</i> . Volumes 1–28. Edited by C. G. Bretschneider and H. E. Bindseil. Halle and Braunschweig: Schwetckhe, 1834–1860. Cited by volume and column number.
	Huldreich Zwingli, <i>Sämtliche Werke</i> . Volumes 88–101. Edited by E. Egli and

- Georg Finsler. Berlin, Leipzig, and Zurich, 1904–. Cited by volume and column number.
- CTT* Melancthon, Philipp. *The Chief Theological Topics: Loci Praecipui Theologici* 1559. Second English Edition. Translated by J. A. O. Preus. Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 2011. Cited by page number, followed by CR reference.
- ETL* *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*
- ExAud* *Ex Auditu*
- EQ* *Evangelical Quarterly*
- FH* *Fides et Historia*
- HTR* *Harvard Theological Review*
- IJST* *International Journal of Systematic Theology*
- JCS* *Journal of Church and State*
- JETS* *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
- JTI* *Journal of Theological Interpretation*
- LW* *Luther's Works*. American Edition. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman. 54 Volumes. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1955–1967. Cited by volume and page number, followed by WA reference.
- MAJT/MJT* *Mid-America Journal of Theology*
- Niemeyer Niemeyer, H. A. *Collectio confessionum in ecclesiis reformatis publicatarum*. Lipsiae, 1840.
- NPNF* *The Nicene Post Nicene Fathers: First Series*. 14 Volumes. Edited by Philip Schaff. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994. Cited by volume and page number.
- NRSV* New Revised Standard Version
- PRJ* *Puritan Reformed Journal*
- PRTJ* *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*
- RC* *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation: 1523–1693*. 4 Volumes. Edited by James T. Dennison Jr. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008–2014. Cited by volume and page number.
- Romans* Melancthon, Philip. *Commentary on Romans*. Translated by Fred Kramer. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1992. Cited by page number, followed by CR reference.
- RTR* *The Reformed Theological Review*
- SCJ* *The Sixteenth Century Journal*
- TB* *Tyndale Bulletin*
- TRINJ* *Trinity Journal*
- VE* *Vox Evangelica*
- WA* *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Weimar: Hermann Bohelau, 1883–1983. Cited by volume and page number.
- WTJ* *Westminster Theological Journal*

Introduction

Throughout Christian history, the relationship between faith and works has been understood in various and often divergent ways. Debate over their connection is as old as Christianity itself and continues to this day,¹ yet it reached a crescendo in the sixteenth century. With the Protestant Reformation, Western Christianity became divided over various matters regarding doctrine and practice, with major debate centering on whether faith and works, especially in relation to one's status as righteous, are compatible or antithetical. Protestants upheld the Bible as the ultimate authority for Christian theology and practice. Yet Scripture includes seemingly contradictory statements regarding faith and works, tensions that Protestants and Catholics understood in conflicting ways.² In the New Testament alone, we learn that “no human being will be justified in [God's] sight³ by deeds prescribed by the law” (Rom. 3:20 NRSV) and that “a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law” (3:28), yet also that “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (Jas. 2:24) and that “faith without works is . . . dead” (2:26). This tension is compounded when one attempts to reconcile the perceived differences between the Old and New Testaments, particularly passages that promise life and blessing to keepers of the law, on the one hand, and those that speak of the limitations of the law and human inability, on the other hand. Scripture seems to prioritize works-righteousness in some instances yet faith-righteousness in others.

John Calvin (1509–1564) was acutely aware of these tensions. Against perceptions that he was a rigid systemetician whose theology was concerned primarily with

1 Notable contemporary examples include discussions within New Testament and systematic studies surrounding the “New Perspective on Paul” (NPP) and Protestant-Catholic dialogue on justification. For resources showcasing multiple perspectives regarding the NPP debate, see Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (eds.), *Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates?* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005); and Bruce L. McCormack ed., *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006). For a helpful entry to recent Protestant-Catholic dialogues on justification, see Anthony N. S. Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2006).

2 Neither Protestantism nor Catholicism, however, were monolithic in their understandings of Scripture's teaching on faith and works. On the various sixteenth-century approaches to and understandings of faith and works, particularly the doctrine of justification, see Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 208–357. David Fink, “*Divided by Faith: The Protestant Doctrine of Justification and the Confessionalization of Exegesis*,” PhD dissertation (Duke 2010), demonstrates the diverse Protestant understandings of justification during the sixteenth century. Cf. Fink, “Was There a Reformation Doctrine of Justification?” *HTR* 103 (2010): 205–235.

establishing logical frameworks, scholarship in recent decades has become increasingly appreciative of his exegetical work.³ Calvin was not a “systematic” theologian in the contemporary sense.⁴ While the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is the most extensive expression of his thought, it is one of numerous types of writings that he composed, each of which reflects its unique character and possesses a distinct purpose.⁵ Richard Muller has demonstrated that from 1539 on, Calvin’s *Institutes* became increasingly concerned with gathering *loci communes* and *disputationes dogmaticae* in an orderly manner, while the exegetical-theological conclusions of his commentaries, which were intended to be read alongside the *Institutes*, often lack systematic elaboration.⁶ Donald McKim explains, “While it is true that Calvin presented Christian theology in a more organized or ‘systematic’ form than Luther, it is also true that there is much more to his theological understandings than is found within the pages of his *magnum opus*.”⁷ Calvin wrote commentaries on the whole New Testament except 2 and 3 John, and Revelation. After publishing these, he wrote commentaries proper on Isaiah, Psalms, the Pentateuch, and Joshua, and

3 E.g., Raymond A. Blacketer, “Commentaries and Prefaces,” in *The Calvin Handbook*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis, trans. Henry J. Baron, et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 181–192; Richard Gamble, “Calvin as Theologian and Exegete,” *WTJ* 23 (1988): 178–194; Donald K. McKim, ed., *Calvin and the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, 2nd edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993); Parker, *Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986); John L. Thompson, “Calvin as Biblical Interpreter,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, 58–73; Randall C. Zachman, *Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian: The Shape of His Writings and Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 103–130.

4 Scholars debate the extent to which Calvin’s *Institutes* may be classified as “systematic.” E.g., Brian G. Armstrong, “*Duplex cognitio Dei*, Or? The Problem and Relation of Structure, Form, and Purpose in Calvin’s Theology,” in *Probing the Reformed Tradition: Historical Essays in Honor of Edward A. Dowey, Jr.*, ed. Elsie Anne McKee and Brian G. Armstrong (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 135–153; Armstrong, “The Nature and Structure of Calvin’s Thought According to the *Institutes*: Another Look,” in *John Calvin’s Institutes: His Magnum Opus*, ed. B. Van der Walt (Potchefstroom: Institute for Reformation Studies, 1986), 55–81; William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 5; Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 195–196; Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 101–108.

5 See Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 69, 102–108, 140–145; Jean-François Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, trans. Karin Maag (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2005), 39–82.

6 Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 108, 140. On the symbiotic relationship between Calvin’s *Institutes* and commentaries, see Elsie Anne McKee, “Exegesis, Theology, and Development in Calvin’s *Institutio*: A Methodological Suggestion,” in *Probing the Reformed Tradition*, 154–172. Cf. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 6–8, 16–17, 29.

7 McKim, preface to *Calvin and the Bible*, xi.

his friends and supporters compiled and published his lectures on the remaining Old Testament prophetic books—though he never finished lecturing through Ezekiel before his death in May 1564.⁸ As a preacher, he “mounted the pulpit of the churches of Geneva . . . more than four thousand times in order to explain the Bible from that place and apply it to the congregations.”⁹ Calvin was a prolific commentator on Scripture, and his theological writings were driven by exegesis. Calvin, therefore, must be recognized as a biblical interpreter, or even as a “humanistic theologian”¹⁰ who aimed to derive his doctrinal formulations from Scripture.

This study will show that Calvin was sensitive to Scripture’s dynamic teaching on faith and works. It may seem there is little new to contribute on the matter, yet this study will show that Calvin’s understanding of the relation between faith and works—or more specifically, the relation between *iustitia fidei* and *iustitia operum*—is more complex than is commonly recognized.

Calvin believed the Bible teaches conspicuously that human works are worthless and cannot make one righteous, yet he also admitted that certain passages concerning personal righteousness pose difficulties for the doctrine of justification *sola fide*.¹¹ Further, Calvin freely confessed, “Scripture shows that the good works of believers are *reasons* [*causas*] why the Lord benefits them” (all emphases added to Calvin’s works are mine unless otherwise noted).¹² Such a concession might seem to contradict the Protestant doctrine of justification *sola fide*. Yet such statements reflect that Calvin was devoted to understanding Scripture on its own terms. As Anthony Lane states, Calvin “was committed to listening to and accommodating

8 See Parker, *Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries*, 13–34; Pete Wilcox, “Calvin as Commentator on the Prophets,” in *Calvin and the Bible*, 107–111.

9 Wim Moehn, “Sermons,” in *The Calvin Handbook*, 173. Cf. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992).

10 Christoph Burger, “Calvin and the Humanists,” in *The Calvin Handbook*, 142, says it is better to call Calvin a “*humanistic theologian* rather than a *humanist* who worked as a theologian.” Burger provides a brief, helpful survey of the debate regarding whether to categorize Calvin as a humanist. Jason Van Vliet, *Children of God: The Imago Dei in Calvin and His Context* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 131–166, compares Calvin to Pico della Mirandola, Desiderius Erasmus, and Jascque LeFèvre d’Étaples, and argues that it is helpful to distinguish between *particular humanism*, which refers to a set of academic and pedagogical methods, and *general humanism*, which refers to certain religious and philosophical beliefs. Calvin, Van Vliet argues, shares many of the theological and pedagogical methods that Renaissance humanists held, but utilized Scripture and the church fathers more, and adhered more consistently to a “historical-grammatical” manner of exegesis (164). He also argues that Calvin holds religious and philosophical views that do not always accord with general humanism.

11 See *Comm. Ezek.* 18:14–17, *CO* 40:437; Stephen Coxhead, “John Calvin’s Interpretation of Works Righteousness in Ezekiel 18,” *WTJ* 70, no. 2 (2008): 303, 305, 310.

12 *Inst.* 3.14.21 (1539), *OS* 4:238.

even those passages which do not easily fit into his theology.”¹³ Similarly, John Leith wrote, “[Calvin] generally refuses to push the meaning of the text to make it fit some particular theory of his own.”¹⁴ Calvin believed not only that Scripture is a complex product of divine revelation but also that finite, sinful humans have difficulty understanding its full meaning. As Edward Dowey Jr. explained, Calvin believed that “the simplest mind can know all that is necessary for saving faith and ethical living because the Bible is sufficiently clear, yet the most learned scholar can never fully understand all problematic passages or plumb the depths of all the mysteries because it is not absolutely clear.”¹⁵ Moreover,

One of the most interesting and striking general features of Calvin’s work . . . arises with regard to the problems of the limited clarity of the revelation in Scripture, and the limited powers of comprehension of the believer. This feature is the predominance of single themes which stand out in their individual clarity, as over against numerous systematic inconsistencies that arise because the systematic interrelationship of the themes is relegated by Calvin to the status of incomprehensibility. Doctrines that are clear in themselves, but logically incompatible with one another, are placed side by side because Calvin finds them so in Scripture.¹⁶

While Calvin was certainly committed to expounding doctrines he found in Scripture, this study will show that he did not believe Scripture’s respective teachings on works-righteousness and faith-righteousness are necessarily incompatible. Although he recognized *seemingly* contradictory teachings in Scripture regarding the two, he ultimately believed that “Scripture may, without quibbling, be duly brought into agreement with itself”¹⁷ because he believed in “the beautiful agreement of all the parts with one another.”¹⁸

13 Anthony N. S. Lane, “The Role of Scripture in Calvin’s Doctrine of Justification,” in *John Calvin and the Interpretation of Scripture: Calvin Studies X and XI, Papers Presented at the 10th and 11th Colloquiums of the Calvin Studies Society at Columbia Theological Seminary*, ed. Charles Raynal (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Product Services, 2006), 382.

14 John H. Leith, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 59.

15 Edward A. Dowey Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 37.

16 Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology*, 37. Cf. Émile Doumergue, *Jean Calvin: les hommes et les choses de son temps*, 7 vols. (Lausanne: Georges Bridel, 1899–1927) 4:80, who states that Calvin believed that Scripture possesses “une clarté suffisante” but not “une clarté absolue.”

17 *Inst.* 3.17.8 (1539), OS 4:261.

18 *Inst.* 1.8.1 (1539), OS 3:72. Cf. H. Jackson Forstman, *Word and Spirit: Calvin’s Doctrine of Biblical Authority* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962), 59, regarding Calvin on reconciling “apparent divergencies in scripture.”

Interpreters have become increasingly aware of Calvin's efforts to reconcile perceived tensions between scriptures that speak of works-righteousness and faith-righteousness. Yet, as is the case for many topics in Calvin's theology, divergent interpretations abound regarding his understanding of the precise relation of the two. Further, that Calvin held a positive notion of works-righteousness is lost on many interpreters.¹⁹ This does not mean that most Calvin scholars have altogether neglected his understanding of works-righteousness. Nearly every discussion on Calvin's doctrine of justification explores his notion of works-righteousness to some degree. This is the most appropriate rubric under which to explore his teaching on works-righteousness, but scholars have tended to rehearse what he says *negatively* about the matter—that sinful humans cannot make and prove themselves righteous *coram Deo* on account of works—in order to relay his teaching on justification *sola fide*. After all, Calvin teaches that one is accounted righteous by God solely on account of Christ's perfect righteousness, which is apprehended by faith, not works. What is pleasing to and effective before God is *iustitia fidei* not *iustitia operum*.

This study will show that Calvin's understanding of works-righteousness is more complex than often recognized. Calvin held a positive notion of works-righteousness within the context where faith-righteousness is already established.²⁰ Before we proceed to our analyses of Calvin's writings, however, it is first necessary to give a detailed yet selective account of approaches to Calvin's theology and of recent investigations of his teaching on the relation between faith and works.

19 That I am aware, only several short-length studies—journal articles and book chapters—have explored Calvin's positive statements regarding works-righteousness. E.g., Coxhead, "John Calvin's Interpretation of Works Righteousness in Ezekiel 18," 303–316; Coxhead, "John Calvin's Subordinate Doctrine of Justification by Works," *WTJ* 71, no. 1 (2009): 1–19; Peter Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 176–193.

20 Coxhead and Lillback demonstrate this in their studies, yet I will provide more extensive evidence.

Chapter 1

Calvin, the *Duplex Gratia*, and Works-Righteousness in Contemporary Scholarship¹

Calvin understood works-righteousness not only in a negative sense but also positively within the proper theological context. Interpreters often conclude that Calvin contrasts works-righteousness and faith-righteousness to show that justification is apprehended by faith alone and that one's entire soteriological experience is accomplished by divine grace as opposed to human merit. While this conclusion is true, the question is whether Calvin *always* sees works-righteousness and faith-righteousness as theologically incompatible. An affirmative answer is certainly influenced by Calvin's own statements, since he often uses works-righteousness as a foil for faith-righteousness. Yet such a conclusion is also likely shaped by particular approaches to Calvin's theology. This chapter will focus on general and specific interpretations of Calvin's theology with the goal of highlighting themes and questions that we will explore in later chapters. One particular question is whether, and to what extent, Calvin successfully relates seemingly incompatible ideas such as justification and sanctification, faith and works, and, most importantly for this study, faith-righteousness and works-righteousness. Before analyzing relevant interpretations regarding these specific issues, however, it will be helpful to explore approaches to Calvin's theology in general.

1 Wilhelm Niesel, John Leith, Richard Muller, Cornelis Venema, William Evans, and Mark Garcia have masterfully summarized and analyzed the most notable approaches to Calvin's theology—with some focusing on noteworthy approaches to his soteriology—within the past two centuries. My literature review builds upon and concentrates their treatments to the end of highlighting issues raised therein that pertain to this present study. See Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1956), 9–21; Leith, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 23–35; Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Durham: The Labyrinth Press, 1986), 1–13; Cornelis P. Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ: The "Twofold Grace of God" and the Interpretation of Calvin's Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 14–30; William B. Evans, *Imputation and Impartation: Union with Christ in American Reformed Theology* (Eugene, OR: Paternoster and Wipf & Stock, 2008), 8–14; Mark A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin's Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 11–26.

1.1 General Approaches to Calvin's Theology

David Wright aptly remarked, “No one who labored for almost a quarter of a century over what we know as the *Institutes* can be regarded as less than systematic, at least in intention.”² With his magnum opus, Calvin labored to bear witness to all of Scripture and claimed he had “embraced the sum of religion in all its parts.”³ While not producing a systematic theology in the modern sense, Calvin intended to develop a theological work that organized the dominant teachings of Scripture within a logical framework.⁴ This endeavor was not unique to Calvin. Parallels can be drawn between Calvin's *Institutes* and the works of reformers such as Philip Melancthon, Wolfgang Musculus, Andreas Hyperius, and Peter Martyr Vermigli, all of whom sought to draw out, organize, and expound *loci communes* that they detected in Scripture.⁵ However, it is another matter altogether, as Wright acknowledged, whether Calvin successfully rendered a coherent, unified body of teaching.⁶ When assessing the various nineteenth- and twentieth-century approaches to this matter, three general classifications may be drawn.⁷

The first is the infamous “central-dogma” approach. For much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the most common approach to Calvin's theology conjectured that his doctrine was organized around a single dogma. Thus, the essential task for commentators was to detect and extrapolate the central motif that supposedly governed his entire thought. In his analysis of Calvin scholarship from the nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth, Wilhelm Niesel explained,

Calvin research suffers from the defect that the golden thread which runs through it has not yet been discovered. Certainly we are well informed about this or that individual feature of doctrine; but what is really in question when he writes his *Institutes* of the

2 David F. Wright, preface to Garcia, *Life in Christ*, xv.

3 “To the Reader” in *Inst.* vol. 1, p. 4 (1539), OS 3:6. On Calvin's intent to provide a comprehensive survey of Christian teaching, see T. H. L. Parker, “The Approach to Calvin,” *EQ* 16 (1944): 171; John H. Leith, “Calvin's Theological Method and Ambiguity in His Theology,” *Reformation Studies: Essays in Honor of R. H. Bainton*, ed. F. Little (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1962), 106–114. Cf. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 101–139.

4 Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 5.

5 Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 5, who references Philip Melancthon, *Loci communes theologici* (Wittenberg, 1521, 1536, 1543); Wolfgang Musculus, *Loci communes* (Basel: Iohannes Hervagius, 1560, 1561, 1573); Andreas Hyperius, *De theologo, seu de ratione studii theologici, libri IIII* (Basel, 1556, 1559); and Peter Martyr Vermigli, *P. M. Vermiglii loci communes* (London, 1576; 2nd ed., 1583), which was published fourteen years after his death under the editorial work of Robert Massonius.

6 Wright, preface to Garcia, *Life in Christ*, xv.

7 I am indebted particularly to Venema, *Accepted and Renewed*, 14–21, who has wonderfully summarized the three general approaches to Calvin's theology.

Christian Religion, what his governing intention is in constructing his theology, remains yet unknown to us. So long as we have not clearly grasped the kernel of the whole nor understood the essential inspiration, no attempt as an exposition of the whole can succeed.⁸

John Leith suggested that this interpretive approach stemmed from efforts to unite Lutheran and Reformed churches in Germany during the first half of the nineteenth century. In this search for unity, Leith remarks, scholars sought to understand not only Calvin's place in the history of Christian thought and his relation to Martin Luther in particular, but also the basic principle of Reformed theology.⁹ Richard Muller, however, indicates that the central-dogma approach to Calvin research arose from an attempt to create a new system of Reformed theology, beginning "with the theological question of the use of the past as posed by followers of the Schleiermacherian and Hegelian attempts to place both theology and philosophy once again on a sound footing."¹⁰ Whatever the initial impetus for this approach, it is now clear that many nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentators on Calvin analyzed his thought in light of their own understanding of theology, in terms of doctrinal centers or as a logical outworking of a series of principal motifs.¹¹

Both Leith and Muller pinpoint the work of Alexander Schweizer as setting the stage for the type of Calvin research—and for scholarly investigation of Reformed theology more generally—that would dominate the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹² Schweizer, a student of Schleiermacher, focused on the "awareness [*Bewusstsein*] of absolute dependence" on God as the "Materialprincip" of Reformed theology.¹³ Schweizer also stated that the *Bewusstsein* of absolute dependence upon God expresses itself particularly in the doctrine of predestination.¹⁴ Scholars soon began to argue that God's sovereignty and divine election were the central themes not just of Reformed theology but also of Calvin's. In his 1869 Calvin biography, for example, Franz Wilhelm Kampschulte argued that predestination was the dominating feature of Calvinism and the basis for every part of Calvin's

8 Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 9.

9 Leith, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 28.

10 Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 1.

11 Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 4.

12 On Schweizer's theology, see Brian A. Gerrish, *Tradition and the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 119–136.

13 Alexander Schweizer, *Die Glaubenslehre der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche dargestellt und aus den Quellen belegt*, 2 vols. (Zurich: Orell, Fussli & Co., 1844), 1:45; Leith, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 28; Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 1.

14 Schweizer, *Die Glaubenslehre*, 2:189; Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 2.

teaching.¹⁵ For the next half-century, this became almost the consensus among those utilizing the central-dogma approach.¹⁶

Several publications during the early twentieth century argued for a different approach to Calvin's theology: the form-method approach, our second general approach. In 1921, Émile Doumergue acknowledged the significance of God's sovereignty for Calvin yet opposed the idea that his theology was governed by a single motif. Calvin employed a *méthode des contrariétés*, he argued.¹⁷ Pointing to the opening of the *Institutes*, which states that all our knowledge pertains to God and ourselves, Doumergue claimed that Calvin's theology employs two methods simultaneously and establishes "apparent contradictions."¹⁸ In 1922, Hermann Bauke postulated that a key reason for conflicting interpretations of Calvin is that scholars had been focusing on the *content* of Calvin's theology to the neglect of its *formation* or *styling* (*Formgestaltung*).¹⁹ Calvin's theology, Bauke argued, is not arranged around any "Zentrallehre" or "Stammlehre"²⁰ because, unlike Schleiermacher's, it contains no "Materialprinzip" whatsoever.²¹ Calvin's theology, therefore, can be properly understood only by assessing its form: "Die Form natürlich nicht nur in dem Sinne der ausseren Gewandung, des Stiles, der Anordnung, Einteilung usw., sondern in dem umfassenderen und tieferen Sinne der Verarbeitung sowohl wie der Gestaltung und inneren Formgebung des gesamten theologischen Inhaltes."²²

Bauke detected three distinct characteristics of Calvin's *Formgestaltung*. The first is a formal-dialectical rationalism, whereby Calvin relates and systematizes theological themes in antithetical fashion.²³ The second is *complexio oppositorum*. Involving dialectical rationalism, this enables Calvin to juxtapose opposing theological ideas without relating them coherently.²⁴ Calvin's theology, therefore, is

15 Franz Wilhelm Kampschulte, *Johann Calvin: seine kirche und sein staat in Genf* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1869), 263.

16 Venema, *Accepted and Renewed*, 15. On the development in scholarly approaches to Calvin and Calvinism, see Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 1–13. As both Muller and Venema demonstrate, not all Calvin scholars during this era designated divine sovereignty and predestination as central to Calvin's theology or worked within the central-dogma paradigm.

17 Émile Doumergue, *Le Caractère de Calvin. L'Homme. Le Système. L'Église. L'État* (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1970), 76–82.

18 Doumergue, *Le Caractère de Calvin*, 77–78.

19 Hermann Bauke, *Die Probleme der Theologie Calvins* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich'sche Buchhandlung, 1922), 11–20.

20 Bauke, *Die Probleme der Theologie Calvins*, 11–12.

21 Bauke, *Die Probleme der Theologie Calvins*, 31.

22 Bauke, *Die Probleme der Theologie Calvins*, 12: "The form, of course, not only in the sense of external garb, style, arrangement, classification, etc., but in the broader and deeper sense of the processing, both as the organization and interior shaping of the entire theological content."

23 Bauke, *Die Probleme der Theologie Calvins*, 13–16; Venema, *Accepted and Renewed*, 16.

24 Bauke, *Die Probleme der Theologie Calvins*, 16–19; Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 13.

not a unified system organized around a single doctrine but an attempt to synthesize dogmatic themes that are logically incompatible.²⁵ The third characteristic of Calvin's formation is biblicism, meaning that Calvin attempted to not only derive his theology from Scripture but also provide a synthetic account of all the teachings of Scripture, even if they have no inherent potential to be synthesized.²⁶

While some commentators continued to work from the central-dogma approach, Bauke's study pushed Calvin scholarship in a different direction. It not only emphasized the need to consider the form *and* content of Calvin's theology but also, as Leith observed, "dealt a devastating blow to the notion that Calvin was a speculative systemitizer who deduced a system of theology from one or two principles."²⁷ By focusing on the form of Calvin's theology, with the aim of discovering his intended method, later scholars demonstrated that while certain motifs play a significant role in Calvin's thought, multiple doctrines and themes work together and are integral to Calvin's larger theological complex.²⁸ Yet not all scholars believed the form-method approach could resolve the perceived problems in Calvin's theology, particularly his *Institutes*, and conflicting proposals and interpretations continued to abound. Thus, the rise of our third key approach: the so-called neo-orthodox or christocentric-revelation approach.

One example of this approach is found in the work of Niesel: "The problems of [Calvin's] theology does not arise from questions of structure or from those of content, but from the fact that it makes a serious attempt to be theology. This means: in Calvin's doctrine it is a question of the content of all contents—the living God."²⁹ One on level, Niesel distanced himself from the central-dogma school; he did not see Calvin's theology as a system regulated by a single doctrine. Yet his conclusions reflect that he shared their general instinct: Calvin's theology could be truly grasped only in light of "the kernel of the whole" or its "essential inspiration."³⁰ For Niesel, the essential inspiration of Calvin's theology was not some static, impersonal doctrine but the personal "God revealed in flesh."³¹ Therefore, "the form of Calvin's theology

25 Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 13; Venema, *Accepted and Renewed*, 16–17.

26 Bauke, *Die Probleme der Theologie Calvins*, 19–20; Venema, *Accepted and Renewed*, 17.

27 Leith, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 31.

28 E.g., Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, and T. H. L. Parker, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God: A Study in the Theology of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1969), argued for the significance of the knowledge of God in Calvin's *Institutes*. Cf. Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 18–21. For a list of scholars who argued that the twofold knowledge of God and man is *a* or *the* controlling structure of Calvin's theology, see Gamble, "Calvin as Theologian and Exegete," 180.

29 Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 19.

30 Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 9.

31 Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 246.

was shaped by the axis on which it revolves. Jesus Christ controls not only the content but also the form of Calvinistic thought.”³²

The neo-orthodox approach, as Venema notes, shaped the course of Calvin studies until the mid-twentieth century.³³ However, historical-theological studies in recent decades have identified the need to study Calvin’s work in historical context without reading it through contemporary categories and assumptions.³⁴ Such investigation includes analyzing both the continuities and discontinuities of Calvin’s work in relation to the medieval tradition, his contemporaries, and his theological successors. This methodological shift has proved fruitful for Calvin research, yet some assumptions of the older paradigms still linger in recent studies.

1.2 Approaches to Specific Themes in Calvin’s Theology

Now we turn to more specific paradigms and proposals, focusing on themes integral to Calvin’s soteriology and understanding of the Christian life. Analyses of these discussions will not only demonstrate how some assumptions from older approaches to Calvin’s theology in general manifest themselves in approaches to specific themes in his teaching but more importantly raise issues that will provide opportunities to reconsider Calvin’s understanding of works-righteousness in relation to faith-righteousness.

1.2.1 The *Duplex Gratia* and *Unio cum Christo*

Prior to *Institutes* book 3, Calvin explains not just what Christ has accomplished but also what humanity’s condition is. To understand the former, readers must understand the latter. The fall brought upon rebellious, sinful humanity a double plight: guilt and corruption.³⁵ Yet in Christ, God has provided a remedy for our guilt and corruption, for unrighteous humans to be restored to righteousness—both situationally *coram Deo* and experientially. God declares believers innocent (reckons righteous) on account of Christ’s righteousness; and instead of leaving them in their

32 Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 247.

33 Venema, *Accepted and Renewed*, 19.

34 While many studies could be mentioned, I point to Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, and David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

35 See *Inst.* 2.1.5–11, especially 2.1.8. I am indebted to Jonathan Rainbow, “Double Grace: John Calvin’s View of the Relationship of Justification and Sanctification,” *ExAud* 5 (1989): 100–102, for highlighting this double plight and providing the terminology.

corruption, he gradually makes believers righteous by his Spirit.³⁶ God resolves our “double plight with a double grace”³⁷: “that being reconciled to God through Christ’s blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ’s spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.”³⁸

That the *duplex gratia* of justification and sanctification are integral to Calvin’s applied soteriology has not been lost on interpreters. Yet as Venema notes, “The general approach that interpreters have taken to Calvin’s theology has often had important implications for the interpretation of the ‘twofold grace of God.’”³⁹ It is not surprising, then, that some who worked within the central-dogma paradigm, such as Otto Ritschl and Hans Emil Weber, saw justification as subservient to predestination.⁴⁰ While the question regarding the significance of the *duplex gratia* in Calvin’s theology is indeed important, the question concerning the relation between justification and sanctification has produced considerable disagreement.

Erwin Mülhaupt believed the juxtaposition of justification and moral renewal established a problem in Calvin’s theology,⁴¹ and various scholars during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries argued that Calvin does not coherently relate the two.⁴² Willy Lüttge also perceived tension in Calvin’s soteriology, focusing on justification and its relation to union with Christ.⁴³ Lüttge rightly recognizes that Calvin uses *imputation* in two distinct ways: negatively, in reference to the non-imputation of sin, and positively, in reference to the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. Lüttge argues that Calvin fails to relate the two to each another and the second, *forensische*

36 See George Hunsinger, “A Tale of Two Simultaneities,” in *Calvin, Beza and Later Calvinism: Papers Presented at the 15th Colloquium of the Calvin Studies Society, April 7–9, 2006*, ed. David Foxgrover and Charles Edward Raynal (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Product Services, 2006), 225.

37 Rainbow, “Double Grace,” 102.

38 *Inst.* 3.11.1 (1539), OS 4:182.

39 Venema, *Accepted and Renewed*, 22.

40 Venema, *Accepted and Renewed*, 23. Otto Ritschl, *Dogmengeschichte des Protestantismus* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1926), 186, who argued that justification, for Calvin, simply effects God’s elective decree. Similarly, Hans Emil Weber, *Reformation, Orthodoxie und Rationalismus* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1937), 239, argued that justification merely manifests God’s decretive will.

41 Erwin Mülhaupt, *Die Predigt Calvins, ihre Geschichte, ihre Form und ihre religiösen Grundgedanken* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1931), 152.

42 See Venema, *Accepted and Renewed*, 23, who points to Mülhaupt, *Die Predigt Calvins*, 152; Weber, *Reformation, Orthodoxie und Rationalismus*, 239; Ritschl, *Dogmengeschichte des Protestantismus*, 199–200; Alexandre Ganoczy, *Calvin, théologien de l’Église et du ministère* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1964), 95–110; and Paul Wernle, *Der Evangelische Glaube, Nach den Hauptschriften der Reformation*, vol. 3, *Calvin* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1919), 254.

43 Willy Lüttge, *Die Rechtfertigungslehre Calvins und ihre Bedeutung für seine Frömmigkeit* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1909), 41–51. This discussion of Lüttge is in part dependent upon Venema, *Accepted and Renewed*, 150–152; and Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 10.