

Arnold Huijgen

Divine Accommodation in John Calvin's Theology

Analysis and Assessment

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht



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Edited by
Herman J. Selderhuis

in co-operation with
Emidio Campi, Irene Dingel, Wim Janse,
Elsie McKee, Richard Muller

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Preface

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1. Introduction

1.1 Object of the present study

The idea of divine accommodation, which means that God adapts Himself to human capacity in His revelation, is well known among theologians, but it is not much supported by modern, Western, theologians as a viable characterization of God's revelation, because its presuppositions seems at odds with the conditions of modernity. As modern Westerners stand apart from most of the Church of all times and places in this respect, it can be asked why this idea is so commonly disavowed, and whether it could not possibly offer an appropriate way to characterize God's revelation. Could it possibly serve usefully to explain the unique character of God's revelation? The present study discusses this question by means of a systematic-theological evaluation of John Calvin's concept of accommodation.

The focus on John Calvin stems from indications that various conceptual lines converge in his concept of accommodation.¹ For the concept of accommodation was no invention of John Calvin, but it dates back to early patristic theology. Still, John Calvin uses the idea so extensively, in a variety of theological genres, and so intensively, as a central idea of his theology of revelation, that various lines converge in his concept of it. Therefore, his concept can serve as a representative of the concept of accommodation as such, which serves the intended systematic-theological evaluation of the present study.

These considerations provoke the present study. The central question is that of systematic-theological evaluation: *is Calvin's concept of divine accommodation a viable way to describe God's revelation?* A double task is set before us to answer this central question. First, we need to know what precisely Calvin's concept of accommodation is. So, an analysis of the concept of accommodation in Calvin's theology needs to be undertaken. The requirements for this analysis are obviously contingent on the situation in current Calvin research. Therefore, an overview of this research is given in the next section (1.2). Then, secondly, a systematic-theological evaluation of the results of the analysis needs to be undertaken. The criteria for this assessment should be derived from an examination of the motives for

¹ See the *Forschungsbericht* in section 1.2.

the general modern rejection of divine accommodation. For these motives can help to identify alleged flaws in the concept, and to formulate what an *acceptable* idea of divine accommodation should be. So, the criteria for the assessment are raised in an examination of these motifs in modern theology, in section 1.3.

On the basis of the formulation of desiderata from Calvin research, and of criteria for the assessment, the method, an outline of the present study is sketched in section 1.4.

1.2 “Divine accommodation” in recent Calvin research

This section offers an examination of the history of research on the concept of divine accommodation in Calvin’s theology, beginning with the early 20th century. At the end of this section, the specific contribution of this study as Calvin research is articulated, in relation to desiderata formulated in earlier research.

1.2.1 Polemical use of the concept

In the first half of the 20th century, most students of Calvin paid no particular attention to divine accommodation in Calvin’s theology.² For example, the theme is absent from the studies of Doumergue, Bauke and Wendel.³ Warfield and De Moor wrote extensive articles on Calvin’s views on the knowledge of God and on revelation, but paid no attention to divine accommodation.⁴ These scholars focused on relevant questions for the theological discussions in which they were engaged. For instance, the discussion on the question whether Calvin taught “verbal inspiration” or not. The

² LOBSTEIN, “La connaissance religieuse d’après Calvin,” 73 is only a small exception; Lobstein describes notions that belong to the concept of accommodation, but he does so only in passing and without reference to *accommodare* or *attemperare*.

³ DOUMERGUE, *Jean Calvin* 4, 52–82 (1910) spends a complete chapter on “La religion révélée et l’Ecriture sainte,” but without reference to accommodation. BAUKE, *Probleme der Theologie Calvins* (1922) does not identify divine accommodation as one of the “problems” of Calvin’s theology. WENDEL, *Calvin*, 110–122 (1950) treats the knowledge of God and revelation in Calvin’s thought, showing awareness of “la distance infinie qui sépare Dieu de sa créature,” but without a hint of divine accommodation.

⁴ WARFIELD, “Doctrine of the Knowledge of God,” 29–132 (1909) treats *Institutes* I 1–7; WARFIELD, “Doctrine of God,” 133–188 (1909) is an account of *Institutes* I 10–13. Whereas some of the most important texts on divine accommodation in Calvin are found in these passages, Warfield overlooks them. DE MOOR, “Calvin’s View of Revelation,” 172–192 (1931).

studies by Cramer and De Groot reveal typical results of this narrowed focus. Both treat Holy Scripture in Calvin’s thought but reach diametrically opposite conclusions: Cramer emphatically denied that Calvin taught verbal inspiration, whereas De Groot asserted he did.⁵

The neglect of the idea of divine accommodation was not complete, however. Cramer notes that “God aims at our comprehension by his education in His Word. If He had spoken His own language, then His majesty would have destroyed us.”⁶ Though the references to several of Calvin’s sermons and commentaries in Cramer’s footnotes all include the verb *accommodare*. Cramer does not present this as groundbreaking, but rather as referring to a well-worn topos. The reason for this may be that the idea of divine accommodation was traditional material at that time. In orthodox reformed theology, in which many students of Calvin at the first half of the 20th century were well versed, divine accommodation functioned in the prolegomena to theology as an expression of the imperfection of all human knowledge of God because of God’s transcendence.⁷ Accommodation was a rather formal notion in reformed scholastic prolegomena, which had no wider effect on the doctrines of God, revelation, and Christ. Besides, it had become to be considered dangerous material because of Cartesian use of the concept.⁸

In 1933, the Dutch theologian Klaas Schilder was the first in the 20th century to treat accommodation in Calvin’s thought extensively. Schilder devotes two complete sections of his dissertation to Calvin’s concept of accommodation, contrasting it with the view of dialectic theologians, notably Karl Barth, on revelation.⁹ Schilder describes how Calvin qualifies God’s transcendence with the idea of accommodation, which means that the relation between the speaking God and hearing humans cannot be determined *exclusively* as an infinite, qualitative difference, as dialectical theologians do. When God reveals Himself, He does not speak His own language, which would be in accordance with His majesty, but He accommodates to

⁵ CRAMER, *Heilige Schrift bij Calvijn*, esp. 31 (1926); DE GROOT, *Calvijns opvatting over inspiratie*, esp. 178–179 (1931) repudiates Cramer’s views and asserts that the position of “organic inspiration” as expressed by Abram Kuyper and Herman Bavinck takes up the “essential thoughts” of Calvin.

⁶ CRAMER, *Heilige Schrift bij Calvijn*, 87. Cf. DE GROOT, *Calvijns opvatting over inspiratie*, 123.

⁷ Cf. MULLER, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* 1:224, 229, 262, 439; 2:180, 204. The notion of divine accommodation is related to the distinction between *theologia archetypa* and *theologia ectypa*. Cf. VAN ASSELT, “The Fundamental Meaning of Theology,” 319–335.

⁸ See section 1.3.2 for an overview of the discussion between Cartesians, and Reformed Orthodox, on divine accommodation.

⁹ SCHILDER, *Zur Begriffsgeschichte des Paradoxon*, 419–447. On accommodation in Schilder, see DE JONG, *Accommodatio Dei*, passim, particularly 63–131.

our capacity. By doing so, God draws near to humans, condescending to their rudeness and infirmity.¹⁰ When Calvin hears “the word is very near you” (Deuteronomy 30:14), he finds God in that text as “a smiling father” and as “a nurse stooping down,” whereas for Barth the nearness of the Word is nothing but “dynamite,” because of the infinite, qualitative difference between God and humans.¹¹

The qualification of God’s transcendence that divine accommodation entails does not mean, however, that God becomes less majestic. On the contrary, the thought of accommodation leads believers to admire (*mirari*) God’s goodness and majesty, because this idea implies that all human curiosity, which tries to know more of God than is expedient, is prohibited. The transcendent God is therefore respected, admired and worshiped.¹²

Although it was not Schilder’s first intent to contribute to Calvin research, he certainly did so. Without reference to any relevant secondary literature, probably because there was none, Schilder painted a credible, though not entirely complete picture of Calvin’s views shaped by his polemic with Barth. Schilder rightly noted that Calvin used more metaphors for divine accommodation than just the one of a nurse stooping to a child. The metaphor of God as Father and Pedagogue contributes just as much, or even more, to the theological make-up of the concept.¹³

The next substantial contribution to the discussion was published almost twenty years after Schilder’s dissertation. In his monography on the knowledge of God in Calvin’s theology, Edward A. Dowey jr. describes its first characteristic as “The Accommodated Character of All Knowledge of God.” Dowey’s main distinction in this regard is the one between God’s accommodation to human finite comprehension and accommodation to human sinfulness. The first class of accommodation is concerned with God’s essence, the features of which—immensity, spirituality, and simplicity—are inaccessible to any human comprehension. This makes it necessary that God accommodates His revelation to human finitude; on the other hand, it forbids humans to use their creaturely and therefore limited comprehension to speculate on God’s essence.

The second variety of accommodation relates to human sinfulness; it “occurs exclusively through the self-abasement that God undertook when the Eternal Son assumed the office of Mediator. [...] All the various forms through which the special revelation has come at various times are simply

¹⁰ SCHILDER, *Zur Begriffsgeschichte des Paradoxon*, 422–428.

¹¹ SCHILDER, *Zur Begriffsgeschichte des Paradoxon*, 430, 435. Schilder contends that Barth knows the word “accommodation” only as an entry in the dictionary of idolaters.

¹² SCHILDER, *Zur Begriffsgeschichte des Paradoxon*, 436–447, esp. 440–441.

¹³ SCHILDER, *Zur Begriffsgeschichte des Paradoxon*, 426, 439. See section 4.1 of the present study.