



## Calvin's influence

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# What's in a name?

Amanda Wells

Our society is founded on names. We exist as individuals in a web of networks, not as swappable beings subsumed by community. In some cultures, children aren't named till they reach a certain age, in case they die; in our culture, parents often give children names when their gender is known, months prior to birth. We in the West seem to practice veneration of the individual about all things, perhaps amplifying our difficulty in dealing with grief.

People with common names often want to give their children a label that's a little more distinctive, while those with unspellable names often prefer the classics. But we all have an opinion on the subject. Kraft's choice of the name "iSnack 2.0" for some bizarre kind of cheese-infused vegemite has drawn universal derision and apparently a second search is now underway (or was it a PR stunt all along...). MP3 player does not have quite the same cachet as "iPod", nor will sparkling wine ever top champagne. We're very sensitive to names, brands, and their connotations.

I went to a conference last month at which people kept talking about the GFC. Not to be confused with a Roald Dahl character or type of chicken, this acronym refers to the Global Financial Crisis. On this side of the ditch, we seem to employ a different term of phrase. An interesting snap poll involves asking those around you how they refer to our current economic state. "The recession", "the financial crisis", and "the downturn" all rate a mention. But there is a lack of singular name, as far as I can tell.

Giving something a name gives it more power. It's defined as something clearly different and distinct, with an identity and significance above similar events. Our recession seems to have fuzzier edges than Australia's clearly defined GFC (which they have officially declared over, on the strength of a quarter of GDP growth). People attach connotations much more readily to a definable object because it is more available for characterisation.

Christianity has had centuries in which to build up a load of connotations, and we have to admit that few of them are good. People are more likely to draw associations with rules and boredom than they are with grace, justice and freedom. Explaining your faith is just as much about stripping away your interlocutor's negative baggage than it is about defining your belief system.

Similarly, if you say "Calvin", most people will have a response. Perhaps along the lines of "dour", "rigid" or "no fun" (assuming they are thinking "John Calvin" not "Calvin Klein"). Would Calvin view these associations as valid? His concerns for social justice and his pastoral care are little remembered. And "Calvinist" has developed its own set of connotations that may be even more severe.

Many of the publications that have crossed my desk this year have carried articles celebrating Calvin's 500th birthday. Most have taken a revisionist approach, looking for things about Calvin that challenge or subvert readers' stereotypes, arguing that Calvin is about more than Predestination or the Protestant work ethic. One of the main details I've absorbed was his prolific output in the face of undeniable ill health. He struggled to produce work that he obviously felt was more important than his personal comfort. So much work, that it's almost impossible to succinctly survey it.

If you are interested in Calvin and in digging deeper than the stereotypes, then you'll enjoy this issue of *Candour*. Calvin is such a towering figure that few feel equipped to comment on his legacy. At one point, I thought I had lost the piece of paper that listed the names of contributors to this issue. After several searches of my desk, I realised that the piece of paper had never existed. Because no one had agreed to contribute, despite a good handful of email requests sent out. As you can imagine, this was not a happy moment, three weeks before the deadline.

My thanks to Graham, Murray and Jason who responded majestically to a plea for help and have made this a dense 24-page Calvin fest. Their essays in this issue are edited versions of the successful two-day Calvin conference held in Dunedin last month and attended by 75 people. The line-up of speakers was headed by two world-renowned figures, Elsie McKee (Princeton Theological Seminary) and Randall Zachman (University of Notre Dame).

The November issue of *Candour*, which is the final issue for 2009, will have the theme "Statements of belief" and a deadline of 30 October. If you would like to contribute, please email [candour@presbyterian.org.nz](mailto:candour@presbyterian.org.nz). During November, we will be planning the issue themes for 2010. Suggestions are very welcome, please email me.

# Calvin rediscovered

Graham Redding, Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership, Dunedin

Few people in the history of the church would inspire the level of celebration that has been taking place around the world this year to mark the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Calvin's birth. A quick Google search shows hundreds of conferences and celebratory events have been taking place.

Here in New Zealand, the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership partnered with Otago University's Department of Theology and Religion to host a two-day conference featuring two internationally renowned Calvin scholars and a strong local line-up of speakers that was attended by 75 people.

In the lead-up to the conference, about 800 people attended a three-night *son et lumière* season at the landmark First Church of Otago. Written and directed by Richard Huber, this stunning "sound and light" performance related the history of the building of First Church to the vision that the Rev Thomas Burns and his fellow Presbyterian settlers had for a city of God not unlike Calvin's Geneva, which was once described by John Knox as "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles".

In 1922, when teaching a course on Calvin, a young Karl Barth confessed his own feelings of inadequacy in relation to assimilating and presenting Calvin and his legacy. He went on to say that he would gladly and profitably set himself down and spend all the rest of his life just with Calvin.

What was it about Calvin that evoked such awe and respect from the likes of Knox and Barth? For many of us, the first thing we probably think about in relation to Calvin is his theological legacy. In 1536, he was only 27 years old when he produced the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It became a life-work for him. By the fifth and final edition 23 years later (1559), the six chapters that constituted the first edition had been expanded into seventy-nine chapters.

Calvin wrote the *Institutes* primarily for pastors, to equip them for the task of preaching. He believed that preaching requires a sound appreciation of the scope and content of Christian doctrine, which is itself derived from Scripture. The *Institutes* served this purpose, as did the catechisms and occasional treatises that he produced.

If doctrine is important for preaching, so too is knowledge of the Bible. To this end, as well as writing the *Institutes*, Calvin produced commentaries on most of the books in the Bible. He was a Biblical scholar as well as a theologian.

Nowadays, when we think of Biblical scholarship and theology, we tend to think of an academic world that exists independently from church life. Not so with Calvin. He wrote for pastors and preachers, and he was a pastor and preacher in his own right. It is estimated that during his Genevan ministry that he preached over 2300 sermons, many of which he reluctantly allowed to be published. His reluctance stemmed from his belief that a sermon is spoken into a particular context and occasion. Its form and purpose is entirely different from that of a theological text or Biblical commentary.

As a pastor, Calvin was deeply concerned about the shape and content of public worship. His Genevan service book had a profound influence on the development of worship in the Reformed tradition. For Calvin, it was vitally important that worship be Biblical, Trinitarian, participatory, evangelical in spirit and catholic in form. He was not interested in creating a new, sectarian form of worship. Reform did not mean innovation, but rather a recovery of Biblical patterns and principles of worship, especially those that were evident in the life of the early church. Christian worship he said, consists of two parts: the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Lord's Supper. Within that two-fold structure, there are certain elements of worship that must be present, including a prayer of confession, assurance of pardon, the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, prayers of intercession and the Lord's Prayer. Those who come to worship must be participants, not mere observers. To that end, worship should be in the language of the people (not in Latin, as was the practice of the medieval church). It should also involve singing. In Calvin's day, the congregation sang Psalms, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed and the Nunc Dimittus.

The reformation of Christian worship was a key aspect of Calvin's ministry. But reform did not end there. Calvin was equally concerned for the reform of public life. When he accepted the call to Geneva in 1541, he insisted on two things: a form of catechism to be sure that the entire community could understand Christian doc-

trine; and a form of discipline to be sure that the entire community behave in a Christian way.

It is the latter that has proved most controversial in relation to Calvin's ministry and legacy. Not long after he arrived in Geneva, a Consistory was established to attend to matters of discipline. It met weekly to consider a wide range of situations, including cases involving marriage and divorce, sexual immorality, disputes (within families, among neighbours and between business associates), the suppression of "papist" devotional practices, lack of respect for authority, and improper behaviour (e.g., public drunkenness).

The Consistory developed mechanisms for resolving disputes. In trying to resolve disputes over business, it also challenged what it regarded as sharp practice. People found guilty of usury or other deviations from ethical business practice were subject to harsh penalties. Calvin believed that justice should go beyond contractual relations. Justice cannot restrict itself to the simple terms of a contract because a contract may be a cover for one party getting the upper hand. Creditors must not be too rigorous or iron-hearted in their pursuit of justice lest they deprive the poor of what they need to earn their living and provide for themselves. What Calvin was advocating here was a socially responsible economic system.

This ruffled a lot of feathers. Many Genevans objected to their behaviour (private and public) being placed under such scrutiny. Many left the city. Others stayed. Labelled as libertines by Calvin, this opposition group consisted mainly of wealthy, politically powerful and interrelated families of Geneva. They stirred up discontent and defied the authority of the Consistory.

However, despite this opposition the majority of Genevan citizens lived in such a way that John Knox was moved to observe, "In other places, I confess Christ to be truly preached, but manners and religion to be so sincerely reformed, I have not yet seen in any other place." So central a feature did it become for the Reformed life of faith that the Scots Confession (1560) declared "Ecclesiastical Discipline uprightlie ministered" to be a mark of the true church, alongside the true preaching of the Word of God and the right administration of the sacraments.

Discipline and moderate behaviour were not the only things for which Calvin's Geneva became known. Under his influence, the Genevan authorities opened the gates to political refugees, many of whom came from France, Italy and England. Interestingly, this pastoral initiative turned out to be a remarkably effective church-growth strategy, because when many of the refugees returned to their home countries, as John Knox did, they took with them the Reformed teaching and model of worship that they had observed and experienced in Geneva. Calvin was intentional about the spread of the Reformed movement, especially to his home country of France. He dispatched dozens of ministers there. Modelled on the church in Geneva, Reformed churches became known for their disciplined and serious pursuit of the Christian life.

Alongside his concern for refugees, Calvin showed great concern for the care of the poor and needy, and the establishment of a proper system of education. In 1559, he opened an Academy consisting of two parts – a private

school (*schola privata*) where children first learnt to read and write and then received instruction in Latin, Greek and philosophy; and a public school (*schola publica*) where graduates of the *schola privata* could continue their

studies at University level in theology and the liberal arts, or medicine or law. When Calvin died in 1564, the *schola privata* had about 1200 pupils and the *schola publica* 300. The Academy was illustrious from the beginning. The combination of high quality instruction with evangelical piety produced an educated, Reformed elite who influenced the confessional identity of Europe.

There has been a lot of debate over the years about the points of continuity and discontinuity between Calvin and the movement that came to bear his name – Calvinism. Doctrinally, there are some significant differences in emphasis. For example, Calvinism gave far greater prominence to the doctrine of Predestination than Calvin did, and this had a significant flow-on effect, not least of which in relation to the Atonement: Did Christ die for all humanity or just the Elect?

Liturgically, there were some significant differences too. Under Calvinism's influence worship became more austere and didactic than that favoured by Calvin. No doubt the elevation of church discipline to a mark of the true

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### What Calvin was advocating here was a socially responsible economic system

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church, and the consequent manner in which it was applied had a lot to do with this. The infrequent celebration of Holy Communion and the practice many Reformed churches adopted of “fencing off” the communion table distorted Calvin’s understanding of the sacrament and significantly altered the dynamics of public worship.

Calvinism inherited from Calvin a rather bleak view of the human condition, as expressed in the following excerpt from his prayer of confession:

*We confess and acknowledge before thy holy majesty that we are poor sinners, conceived and born in iniquity and corruption, prone to do evil, incapable of any good, and that in our depravity we transgress thy holy commandments without end or ceasing. Wherefore we purchase for ourselves thy righteous judgment, our ruin and perdition.*

To the modern ear this assessment of the human condition seems unduly negative. We want to accentuate the positive. However, Calvin is not in the business of dividing the human condition up into good and bad portions. Not only does such a futile attempt constitute a denial of the pervasiveness of sin; it also undermines the totality of grace that is to be found in Jesus Christ.

This is the key point.

Calvin only talks about the totality of sin in relation to the totality of grace, which he describes in terms of a “miraculous exchange” based on 2 Corinthians 5:21. He describes it in this way:

*That, becoming Son of man with us, Christ has made us children of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that, receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself (which oppressed us), he has clothed us with his righteousness.*

For Calvin, then, our humanity, which in itself is rebellious and depraved, has been joined to the humanity of the Saviour, and therein lies our hope and salvation. For in Christ, with Christ and through Christ our humanity is reconstituted.

If we want to understand what it means to be human, therefore, we look not to ourselves (and all our faults

and failures) but to the One in whom our humanity has been reconstituted, to the One through whom our sins have been forgiven, to the One with whom we have been brought to share in the very life of the Triune God.

Being in union with Christ, not merely following the example of Christ, is of crucial importance for Calvin. Being in union with Christ expresses the vitality of a process by which our humanity is progressively transformed by the humanity of the Saviour.

Interestingly, the place in his *Institutes* in which Calvin talks about being in union with Christ is in relation to the Lord’s Supper. It is as we gather around the Table that the Lord gives himself to us afresh and declares us righteous.

Thus, in the Calvin’s Exhortation to come to the Table, we are assured ...

*... that the sins and imperfections that are in us will not prevent Him from receiving us and making us worthy partakers of this spiritual Table. For we do not come here to testify that we are perfect or righteous in ourselves: On the contrary, by seeking our life in Jesus Christ we confess that we are in death. Know therefore, that this Sacrament is a medicine for poor sick souls, and that the only worthiness which our Lord requires of us is to know ourselves sufficiently to deplore our sins and to find all our pleasure, joy and satisfaction in Him alone.*

“Medicine for poor sick souls”. We can detect in these words not merely the descriptive words of a theologian, but also the heart of a pastor, yearning for the people of God to be made whole and to live the fullness of life that God intends for them. What better way of summing up that which lay at the heart of Calvin’s ministry and theology?

# Calvin on the authority of Scripture

Murray Rae, University of Otago, Dunedin

When Karl Barth gave a series of lectures on the theology of Calvin to his students at Göttingen in 1922, he began by advising the students that one did not become a Calvinist merely by repeating Calvin's formulations. The aim in studying Calvin is to enter into dialogue with him. Good students of Calvin may, in the end, say something very different from Calvin but they will have learned it through engagement with him. That advice seems especially apposite in respect of Calvin's Biblical hermeneutics. Reading Calvin's commentaries we come across passages and formulations that few Biblical scholars are likely to repeat today, yet that does not mean that nothing can be learned through the careful study of Calvin's commentary upon Scripture. It behoves us to penetrate beyond the surface of Calvin's sometimes astonishing claims about what a Biblical author intended to the theological framework from which Calvin's claims arise. We will find in that framework, I suggest, a far more profound and robust conception of Scripture than that which informs some of our hermeneutical choices today.

Before developing that suggestion, however, let me offer just a few examples of the kinds of claims Calvin makes that Biblical scholars today are reluctant to make. Consider, for instance, Calvin's comments on the opening verse of Isaiah 49. The verse reads: "Listen to me, you islands; here this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name." Contemporary commentators explain, rightly enough, that the one "called by the Lord" is Israel. The context is Israel's exile in Babylon and this verse identifies the basis of Israel's presumption that she is the rightful occupier of the land of Palestine. Israel reminds the "distant nations", those currently occupying Palestine, that her claim upon the land is based upon Yahweh's call.<sup>1</sup> Contrast that account with Calvin's comments on Isaiah 49:1

*After dealing with the future deliverance of the people, Isaiah comes now to Christ, under whose guidance the people were brought out of Babylon, as they had earlier been brought out of Egypt. The earlier prophecy must have been confirmed by this doctrine because they would scarcely have hoped that the Lord would deliver them if they had not looked to Christ,*

*by whom alone desponding souls can be comforted and strengthened; from him they ought not only to expect eternal salvation but ought equally to expect temporal deliverance. Besides, when the prophets are talking about the restoration of the church they commonly bring Christ into view, not only because he wants to be the minister of the church, but because on him was founded the adoption of the people.<sup>2</sup>*

Without feeling the need of any explanation, Calvin simply assumes here that when Isaiah speaks of the one "called by the Lord", he is referring to the very same one who Christians refer to when they speak of Jesus Christ. He further supposes, again without feeling the need to provide any warrant, that Isaiah is concerned here with "the restoration of the church". "When the prophets are talking about the restoration of the church", Calvin says, as though that is straight-forwardly what Isaiah is doing, "they commonly bring Christ into view". He also credits Israel with remarkable Christological insight: "they would scarcely have hoped that the Lord would deliver them if they had not looked to Christ".

The christological and ecclesiological assumptions evident here continue to inform Calvin's commentary upon the subsequent verses and pervade, indeed, the whole of his treatment of Isaiah. I take the commentary on 49:4 as further example. The verse reads: "But I said, 'I have laboured to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God.'" Calvin writes in explanation:

*The prophet here brings forward a grievous complaint in the name of the church, but he does so in such a manner that we must begin with the Head. Christ complains along with his members, then, that it seems as if his labour were thrown away... he introduces the church as complaining that her labours are fruitless because [and here is further exegetical novelty] people do not repent at the preaching of heavenly doctrine.<sup>3</sup>*

A representative contemporary commentator, by con-

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Isaiah: The Classic Crossway Commentaries*, Alister McGrath and J.I.Packer, eds. (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 2000) 299.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin, *Isaiah*, 300.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, John D.W. Watts, *Word Biblical Commentary: Isaiah 34-66* (Waco: Word Books, 1987) 187.

trast, reads the lament of verse four as Israel's "self-serving sigh of pseudo-piety".<sup>4</sup> The contemporary scholar will have nothing to do with Calvin's christological and ecclesiological reading, although, as an aside here, it seems clear that for the contemporary commentator too the interpretive task is informed by assumptions drawn from somewhere outside the text itself. It is not obvious from the immediate context that this is Israel's "self-serving sigh of pseudo-piety". The point of difference between Calvin and the contemporary scholar then, is not that one operates with an interpretive framework shaped by convictions arising from beyond the text while the other does not. The point of difference, rather, concerns the nature of the convictions that each brings to the text and that constitute, therefore, the interpretive framework within which each does his or her hermeneutical work.

My intent in this paper, however, is not particularly to draw comparisons between Calvin's Biblical hermeneutics and that of contemporary scholars, but rather to investigate Calvin's interpretation of Scripture on its own terms and then to consider whether there might be an enduring validity in the theological convictions and hermeneutical strategy that shape his reading of Scripture. We will begin with an account of what Calvin takes Scripture to be, before then considering how it is to be read.

It is clear that Calvin is well aware of the human provenance of the Scriptural texts and that they are shaped, in part at least, by particular historical circumstances and occasional interests. "There are many passages of Scripture," he says, "the sense of which depends on the circumstances connected with them."<sup>5</sup> Something along the lines of historical criticism would seem to be important, therefore, to the task of Biblical interpretation, but discernment of the circumstances connected with the production of a Biblical text is, in Calvin's view, a very slight part of the hermeneutical task. The major part and the true end towards which the reading of Scripture ought to be directed is attentiveness to what God communicates through the Biblical text.

The expectation of Calvin that God addresses us through Scripture is an expectation born of his experience that that is so. The authority of Scripture in this regard simply reveals itself, or, more particularly, is revealed by the Spirit under whose inspiration Scripture was formed. II Timothy 3:16-18 is the straightforward expression of what Calvin holds to be true: "All Scripture is inspired by God, and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that eve-

ryone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."<sup>6</sup> Commenting on this text, Calvin explains, "Our religion is distinguished from all others in that the prophets have spoken not of themselves, but as instruments of the Holy Spirit; and what they have brought to us, they received by heavenly commission."<sup>7</sup> In the *Institutes*, Calvin explains that Scripture is given by God to facilitate a true understanding of himself and as a safeguard against human error.

For, if we consider the mutability of the human mind,—how easy its lapse into forgetfulness of God; how great its propensity to errors of every kind; how violent its rage for the perpetual fabrication of new and false religions,—it will be easy to perceive the necessity of the heavenly doctrine being thus committed to writing, that it might not be lost in oblivion, or evaporate in error, or be corrupted by the presumption of men. Since it is evident, therefore, that God, foreseeing the inefficiency of his manifestation of himself in the exquisite structure of the world, hath afforded the assistance of his word to all those to whom he determined to make his instructions effectual,—if we seriously aspire to a sincere contemplation of God, it is necessary for us to pursue this right way. We must come, I say, to the word...<sup>8</sup>

It is a mistake to consider the divine inspiration of Scripture to be a presupposition of Calvin's hermeneutics. It is certainly both the starting point and the framework within which Calvin's reading takes place, but, on Calvin's own terms, the doctrine of divine inspiration is *given* rather than presupposed. That the Scriptural text is for us the very word of God is not known through human conjecture or supposition but is itself revealed. It is vital to understand this distinction, for Calvin takes pains to point out that the authority of Scripture is a self-authenticating authority. "For the Scripture exhibits as clear evidence of its truth, as white and black things do of their colour, or sweet and bitter things of their taste."<sup>9</sup> Thus the authority of Scripture is not bestowed upon it by some human authority but is in faith simply recognised and received. Calvin's view is thus distinguished from those accounts of scriptural or canonical authority, that suppose that the authority of the canonical texts is a product of the church's collection of these texts and not others to be its authoritative scripture. Calvin resists this claim, precisely because it makes the authority of scripture subordinate to that of the church.

6 This and all scriptural quotations are taken from the NRSV unless contained within citations of Calvin himself.

7 *Calvin: Commentaries*, vol XXIII, ed and trans. Joseph Hartounian, (London: SCM Press, 1958) 84.

8 Calvin, *Institutes*, I.6.3.

9 Calvin, *Institutes*, I.7.2.

4 Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, 187.

5 Calvin, *Institutes*, IV. 17.23.



“[W]hen the Church receives [Scripture], and seals it with her suffrage, she does not authenticate a thing otherwise dubious or controvertible; but knowing it to be the truth of her God, performs a duty of piety, by treating it with immediate veneration.”<sup>10</sup> The point had to be secured, of course, in the context of Reformation polemics—if Scripture was not an authority over the Church, then it could not be appealed to in cases where the Church had strayed into error. The antecedent and superior authority of Scripture is a principle of Reformed theology, however, that challenges those of our age too who wish to subject all truth claims to the authority of human judgement. Calvin might just as well have had the post-Enlightenment sceptic in view when he wrote, “...with great contempt of the Holy Spirit, they inquire, Who can assure us that God is the author of [the scriptures]? Who can with certainty affirm, that they have been preserved safe and uncorrupted to the present age? Who can persuade us that this book ought to be received with reverence...”<sup>11</sup> Calvin’s answer, not to the sceptic but to the faithful, is simply this: it is God who offers assurance, it is God who affirms, and it is God who persuades. He writes,

*The same Spirit who made Moses and the prophets certain of their calling, has now testified to our own hearts that he used them as his servants for our instruction. It is not surprising that many have doubts as to the author of Scripture. For even though the majesty of God is displayed by it, only those illumined by the Spirit have the eyes to see what should be evident to all men, but in fact is seen only by the elect.*<sup>12</sup>

Here I have quoted from the Commentaries but Calvin repeats this hermeneutical principle in numerous places, including the *Institutes*. There he writes, “...the testimony of the Spirit is superior to all reason. For as God alone is sufficient witness of himself in his own word, so also the word will never gain credit in the hearts of men, till it be confirmed by the internal testimony of the Spirit.”<sup>13</sup>

It may be objected that Calvin’s argument doesn’t advance us very far. Assurance that God’s word is to be heard through Scripture is attained through the word of God spoken to our hearts. That explanation won’t help the sceptic at all, but we must note again that the expla-

nation is not directed to the sceptic.<sup>14</sup> It is directed to the believer who is eager to read Scripture and to discern God’s word therein. Calvin here encourages in readers of Scripture a particular disposition, a disposition of trust and humility before Scripture. He encourages readers to set aside the pretentious demand that the Word of God be subjected to the authority of human judgement. “It is godless profanity”, he says, “to set up our own acumen as capable of understanding Scripture, which contains mysteries of God hidden to our flesh and sublime treasures of life which are far beyond our powers.”<sup>15</sup> Assurance of such mysteries can come only from God. Thus,

*...being illuminated by him, we now believe the divine original of the Scripture, not from our own judgement or that of others, but we esteem the certainty, that we have received it from God’s own mouth by the ministry of men, to be superior to that of any human judgement, and equal to that of an intuitive perception of God himself in it. We seek not arguments or probabilities to support our judgement, but submit our judgements and understandings as to a thing concerning which it is impossible for us to judge...*<sup>16</sup>

Post-Enlightenment epistemologists are unlikely to be impressed by such a claim but it is not for that reason untrue. There is no compelling reason to suppose, and much reason to doubt, that the authority of the eternal and ineffable God should be answerable to the provisional judgement of finite and limited human beings. If Calvin is right that in addition to being limited and provisional, human judgement is distorted by sin, there is even more reason to reject the view that divine authority must submit to the scrutiny of human reason. The suggestion that human judgement is distorted by sin is not popular, of course, but it may evoke less indignation if we translate a little. Our judgements are shaped, we might say, by self-interest, by deep-seated prejudices, by cultural assumptions and circumstances that render us insensitive to the plight and the perspectives of others. Likewise, we often read what we want to read in order to confirm our prejudices or to avoid uncomfortable truths. Put this way, we might begin to recognise the wisdom in Calvin’s insistence that our human logic is a fickle thing and has no power to stand in judgement over the logic and logos of God. The divine Word sounded in Scripture and made flesh in Jesus Christ

10 Calvin, *Institutes*, I.7.2.

11 Calvin, *Institutes*, I.7.1.

12 Calvin: *Commentaries*, vol XXIII, 85.

13 Calvin, *Institutes*, I.7.4.

14 Calvin dismisses all attempts in this matter to defeat the sceptic with human argument. ‘But those persons betray great folly, who wish it to be demonstrated to infidels that the Scripture is the word of God, which cannot be known without faith.’ *Institutes*, I. 8. 13.

15 Calvin: *Commentaries*, vol XXIII, 88.

16 Calvin, *Institutes*, I.7.5

ought to be seen as calling into question our cherished assumptions, our vested interests and our reluctance to concede that the world as we see it, may not be the world that is.

For the same reason, the reason of our propensity to interpret Scripture in conformity with our own perspectives and interests, Calvin insists that the assurance of the Spirit given to readers of Scripture does not make the devout and well-meaning individual a hermeneutical authority unto him or herself. The testimony of the Spirit does not license private interpretations. Drawing upon 2 Peter 1:20, Calvin advises that “it is not godly for [readers of Scripture] to come out with something out of their own heads”.<sup>17</sup> “We must test doctrines”, Calvin says, “in a twofold way, private and public. By private testing, each one establishes his own faith, and accepts only the teaching which he knows to be from God.” That is to say, individuals must satisfy themselves that interpretations of particular texts, their own or by others, are agreeable with Scripture as a whole. That is the first but not yet sufficient condition of faithful reading. What must follow is that theological claims be publicly tested according to “the common consent and polity of the church”. In the face of “fanatical men”, “believers should seek a remedy by coming together and reasoning their way to an honest and godly agreement.”<sup>18</sup> Beyond that, *and above all*, the safeguarding of the church against error rests in the hands of God. “It is a marvellous work of God”, Calvin says, “that, overcoming all our perversity, he makes us of one mind, and unites us together in the pure unity of faith.” This claim too might evoke some incredulity. Are those in the church of one mind, and held together in the pure unity of faith? Our answer may depend on whether or not we think that the Gospel has been preserved in the church. Does there exist across the vast diversity of Christian communities a Gospel, testified to in Word and Sacrament, that obliges us to recognise one another as a sister in Christ, a brother in Christ, whatever shape our individual perversities may take? Are we agreed, in spite of all else, that in Jesus Christ, God is reconciling the world to Godself? Wherever that Gospel is preached and heard and received, there is a unity of faith, sustained by the miracle of God’s grace, sustained in spite of all the church’s disagreements and disputes. Calvin was very far from being naïve about the fragmentation and disunity of the church, but he could trust nevertheless that despite the perversity of individual Christians, God sees to it that the Gospel is not lost; the Gospel is preserved and the church survives wherever the Word is truly preached and heard and the sacraments are rightly administered. Wherever

that takes place, the sinful remnant of God’s people are gathered together in the pure unity of faith.

I have attempted so far to give a brief account of what Calvin takes Scripture to be, namely the word of God which is recognised as such only through the testimony of the Spirit. It is time now to make explicit a further aspect of Calvin’s doctrine of Scripture, namely the testimony Scripture gives to Christ. For Calvin, as was evident in his exegetical remarks on Isaiah noted at the beginning of this paper, the whole of Scripture has to do with Christ. He is the Word heard in Scripture, and the one to whom all Scripture points. “We ought to read the Scriptures”, Calvin says, “with the express design of finding Christ in them.”<sup>19</sup> While Calvin held that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is manifest with a great deal more clarity in the New Testament than in the Old,<sup>20</sup> it is the Gospel of Christ nevertheless that is conveyed through the law and through the prophets. Calvin maintained, therefore, a very high view of the Old Testament and sternly resisted the likes of Servetus who regarded the Old Testament as virtually worthless so far as the Gospel was concerned.<sup>21</sup> While Calvin said things about the Jews that offend contemporary sensibilities he regarded them, nonetheless, as “partakers with [Christians] of the same inheritance” and consistently upheld both the divine authority of Israel’s Scripture and the continuing importance of the law and the prophets in the drama of God’s self-revelation.

Calvin’s insistence on this point is both remarkable and instructive, and the implications for Scriptural hermeneutics are profound. Calvin wants to be very clear: “The covenant of all the fathers [of Israel]”, he says, “is so far from differing substantially from ours that it is the very same; it only varies in the administration.”<sup>22</sup> In explanation of this claim, Calvin outlines three principles, the third of which is of most interest here; namely, that the Jews “both possessed and knew Christ as the Mediator, by whom they were united to God, and became partakers of his promises.”<sup>23</sup> Calvin offers a number of arguments in defence of the view that Israel knew Christ, ahead of time, as it were. “The whole substance of the [Old Testament covenant] terminates in Christ,” he writes. “Who then dares to represent the Jews as destitute of Christ,—them with whom we are informed the evangelical covenant

19        Commentary on John 5:39 in Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans, William Pringle (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1857) 218.

20        See, for example, the *Institutes*, II.9.4.

21        See Calvin, *Institutes*, II.10.

22        Calvin, *Institutes*, II.10.2

23        Calvin, *Institutes*, II.10.2

17        Calvin: *Commentaries*, vol XXIII, 88.

18        Calvin: *Commentaries*, vol XXIII, 87-8.

was made, of which Christ is the sole foundation.”<sup>24</sup>

Calvin does not contend here that the Jews of the Old Testament knew Jesus of Nazareth explicitly, but they understood the logic of the covenant relationship with God and they knew themselves to be a people who were called into being, commissioned and sustained by the Word of God. Therefore, according to Calvin’s reasoning, they knew the Word who was to become flesh in Jesus. And that in turn gives license for Christian readers of Israel’s Scripture to identify the Word of God in the Old Testament as the very same Word now sounded in Jesus Christ. It is therefore legitimate, theologically, and indeed exegetically, Calvin supposes, to give to the Word of the Lord revealed in the Old Testament the same name by which he identifies himself in the New, that is, the name, Jesus Christ. Kathryn Greene-McCreight thus observes that “while it would not be entirely accurate to say that Calvin believed that Isaiah [for example] predicted Christ in any detail, he clearly did understand Isaiah to preach the Gospel about Jesus in advance.”<sup>25</sup>

The so-called servant songs in Deutero-Isaiah are the texts most obviously amenable to Calvin’s line of argument. Indeed, in June 1558, Calvin preached a series of seven sermons on Isaiah 52:13-53:12 later published under the title, “Sermons on Isaiah’s Prophecy of the Death and Passion of Christ.”<sup>26</sup> Remarkable, in these sermons, once more, is the alacrity with which Calvin interprets Isaiah in explicitly Christological terms. Here is a sample: “Now the Prophet shows that without the wounds of our Lord Jesus Christ, there is nothing in us but death...”<sup>27</sup> Or again, “This is why the Prophet calls here to each of us and says, ‘You poor people, Look at what you are until God declared his mercy to you in our Lord Jesus

Christ His Son.”<sup>28</sup> A final example among many that might have been chosen illustrates Calvin’s confidence that his own Christological reading of Isaiah conforms straightforwardly to the author’s intention: “Even more let us learn that all of our desires are corrupt and that we will look for evil in place of the good until our Lord Jesus Christ corrects and reforms us and until he has placed in us the proper desire to obey Him. This is what the prophet wished to state.”<sup>29</sup> Modern commentators concerned to respect authorial intention (so far as it may be discerned) might struggle with such claims, but I want to suggest, in the time remaining, that there may be more exegetical merit and coherence with authorial intention in Calvin’s treatment of Isaiah, for example, than may appear to be the case at face value.

In defence of that claim, let me begin with Calvin’s insistence that the true sense of Scripture is the plain and literal sense, for Calvin’s christological reading of Isaiah 53 does not obviously conform to that exegetical advice. We are more likely to be persuaded that the plain and primary sense of the so-called servant song has to do with Israel’s situation in exile and the longing for one who will restore Israel’s fortunes. Calvin’s account of the plain sense of this text is not so plain to us, who have learned to read with an historical-critical eye. But, we must hear Calvin out.

Calvin’s appeal to the plain sense of Scripture was directed against the tradition of allegorical reading, going back at least as far as Origen. Commenting on Galatians 4:22, Calvin writes,

*Origen, and many others along with him, have seized this occasion of twisting Scripture this way and that, away from the genuine sense (a genuino sensu). For they inferred that the literal sense is too meagre and poor and that beneath the bark of the letter there lie deeper mysteries which cannot be extracted but by hammering our allegories.*<sup>30</sup>

A large part of Calvin’s suspicion of allegorical readings of Scriptural texts is the high demand made by such readings upon the ingenuity of the reader. Calvin expects God to communicate straightforwardly with his people, making himself understood to the humble rather than impart-

24 Calvin, *Institutes*, II.10.4

25 ‘Selections from John Calvin’s Sermons on Isaiah translated and introduced by Kathryn Greene-McCreight’ in Stephen E. Fowl, ed. *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997) 186-98, 187.

26 Kathryn Greene-McCreight reports that the sermons have been published in two modern English translations: *The Gospel According to Isaiah: Seven Sermons on Isaiah 53 Concerning the Passion and Death of Christ*, by John Calvin, trans Le Roy Nixon (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) and *Sermons on Isaiah’s Prophecy of the Death and Passion of Christ*, by John Calvin, trans T.H.L Parker, (London: James Clark & Co., 1956). See Greene McCreight, ‘Selections from John Calvin’s Sermons on Isaiah’, 188.

27 Greene McCreight, ‘Selections from John Calvin’s Sermons on Isaiah’, 191.

28 Greene McCreight, ‘Selections from John Calvin’s Sermons on Isaiah’, 192.

29 Greene McCreight, ‘Selections from John Calvin’s Sermons on Isaiah’, 194.

30 John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippinas and Colossians*, trans T.H.L Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 84.

ing his truth in a manner accessible only to the clever.<sup>31</sup> “The light which shines in [Scripture] comes only to the lowly”, he says.<sup>32</sup> Allegorical reading, however, assumes precisely the opposite:

*For many centuries [Calvin says elsewhere] no man was thought clever who lacked the cunning and daring to transfigure with subtlety the sacred Word of God. But this was undoubtedly a trick of Satan to impair the authority of Scripture and remove any true advantage out of the reading of it. God avenged this profanation with a just judgement when he suffered the pure meaning to be buried under false glosses.*<sup>33</sup>

Calvin has no time for flights of exegetical fancy. He is determined to discern the meaning given in Scripture itself and to “set aside as deadly corruptions, those pretended expositions which lead us away from the literal sense (*a literali sensu*).”<sup>34</sup>

Scripture, they say, is fertile and thus bears multiple meanings. I acknowledge that Scripture is the most rich and inexhaustible fount of all wisdom. But I deny that its fertility consists in the various meanings which anyone may fasten to it at his pleasure. Let us know, then, that the true meaning of Scripture is the natural and simple one (*verum sensum scripturae, qui germanus est in simplex*).<sup>35</sup>

We return once more to the problem at hand; how is Calvin’s insistence on the plain sense of Scripture to be reconciled with his christological readings of the Old Testament that seem far from being natural and simple. To read Isaiah as referring straightforwardly to Jesus Christ, or to read him as admonishing the church, seems to take us some distance beyond the plain or literal sense — unless Calvin means something different by the plain and literal sense than the mere verbal sense such as a naïve, literal reading might yield. There is abundant evidence

31 In fact, Calvin thinks that all of us stand in need of a simple manner of speech. God “has lowered himself to the level of our ignorance,” he writes. “When we find God prattling to us in the Bible in an uncultivated and vulgar style, let us remember that he does it for our sake... Anyone who cannot bear to lay hold of God as he comes down to him will still less soot up to him beyond the clouds.” Calvin, *Commentaries*, Vol. XXIII, 90.

32 Calvin, *Commentaries*, Vol. XXIII, 88.

33 Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippinas and Colossians*, 84.

34 Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippinas and Colossians*, 85.

35 Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippinas and Colossians*, 84-5.

in fact, that Calvin does not intend Scripture to be read in a naively literal way. To begin with, Calvin is very clear that the content of Scripture can be understood only under the guidance of the Spirit. “We should not rush at reading Scripture rashly, trusting our own wits; because the Spirit who has spoken by the prophets is his own interpreter.” The plain sense then, is not the sense that may be evident to any uninspired and unenlightened reader. It is rather to be understood as the sense disclosed by God, who “by the light of his Holy Spirit... opens an entrance into our hearts for the word... which otherwise would only strike the ears and present [itself] to the eyes, without producing the least effect upon the mind.”<sup>36</sup>

Further rejection of a naively literal reading of Scripture is found in Calvin’s polemic against the Anthropomorphites who imagined God to be corporeal, because the Scripture frequently ascribes to him a mouth, ears, eyes, hands and feet. Even the “meanest capacity”, Calvin writes, should understand “that God lisps, as it were, with us, just as nurses are accustomed to speak to infants? Wherefore such forms of expression do not clearly explain the nature of God, but accommodate the knowledge of him to our narrow capacity...”<sup>37</sup> Clearly the meaning of Scripture transcends, in these instances, what *we moderns* usually mean by the literal sense. Again it is evident that Calvin does not mean, in commending the literal or plain sense, that Scripture makes no use of metaphor or of other figures of speech. We need to pay attention to the subtleties of meaning and truth conveyed by different linguistic techniques. Inspiration by the Spirit does not entail that Scripture’s truth is conveyed in a single linguistic or semantic mode.

So far we have learned that the plain sense of Scripture is not evident to us unless we are tutored by the Spirit. We have learned also that preference for the plain and literal sense does not require us to be naïve about how language corresponds quite variously to reality, sometimes, for instance, through metaphor. But an important third indication of what Calvin does and does not mean in commending the plain sense of Scripture is given in the Preface to the *Institutes*. There Calvin explains, that,

*...my design in this work has been to prepare and qualify students of theology for the reading of the divine words, that they shall have an easy introduction to it, and be enabled to proceed in it without any obstruction. For I think I have given such a comprehensive summary, and orderly arrangement of all the branches of religion, that, with proper attention,*

36 Calvin, *Institutes*, IV. 14.8.

37 Calvin, *Institutes*, I, 13.1.

*no person will find any difficulty in determining what ought to be the principal objects of his research in the Scripture and to what end he ought to refer anything it contains.*<sup>38</sup>

The hermeneutical implications of these remarks are far-reaching, not the least of them being that to understand Scripture, to understand the *plain sense* of Scripture, students need to be tutored; they need to be prepared and qualified. Discernment of the plain sense requires something more by way of hermeneutical skill than the mere capacity to read the words on the page and to understand their verbal sense. The reader needs as well a sound appreciation of the scope and content of Christian doctrine. Or, to put it otherwise: in order to understand the plain sense of Scripture the reader needs to know the broad scope of God's creative and redemptive purpose for the world. A systematic exposition of that purpose is precisely what Calvin offers to his reader in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He offers it, let me repeat the point, so that "students of theology may be prepared and qualified for the reading of the divine words". Knowledge of the divine economy, from the law and the prophets through to the definitive gift of God's Word in Jesus Christ, is the necessary condition, Calvin suggests, for the reading of Scripture, and the indispensable context for the understanding of Scripture's plain sense.

Although we must be cautious in doing so because, for Calvin, Scripture itself provides the rule of faith, we may suggest here that Calvin's intent in the *Institutes* is to serve readers of Scripture in just the same way that the rule of faith was held to do in patristic exegesis and in much exegesis since. The rule of faith, that is to say, a more or less extensive, confessional, doctrinal summary of God's work in creation and through redemption, provides the conceptual framework within which Scripture can be understood on its own terms, and therefore, rightly.

We must be clear, however, that Calvin did not wish to *impose* a theological framework upon Scripture; rather the rule of faith is drawn from Scripture itself. There is of course a circularity here, but it is an entirely defensible circularity. It is a matter of common, everyday experience that we understand a thing by attending to its parts, but as well, we understand the parts in light of some conception of the whole. Calvin's Scriptural hermeneutics does not at this point require any special pleading on Scripture's behalf. What is required, however, is some account of the

unity of Scripture, some account that enables us legitimately to speak of Scripture as being a singular whole. Without at all denying the rich variety of Scripture, the multiple authorial perspectives and the diversity of insight and conviction represented in the Biblical texts, Calvin's hermeneutical strategy clearly requires that the texts of the Christian canon possess a unity more fundamental than the mere fact of their having been bound together in a single book. It didn't occur to Calvin to provide an account of this unity in terms that would satisfy our own much greater awareness of the diversity of the Biblical texts and the complicated story of their production, redaction and transmission. For us however, I suggest that the unity of Scripture may be defended on two counts, pertaining respectively to what we might call the two natures of Scripture, the human and the divine.

At the level of human authorship we may say that the texts constituting the Christian canon are unified by the intent of their authors to bear witness to the divine economy. In some cases that intent is inferred, while in others it is made quite explicit. Luke provides a paradigmatic example of the latter:

*Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things which you were instructed. (Luke 1:1-4)*

In the Old Testament, the constant refrain as numerous authors offer their account of Israel's story is, "This is what the Lord did..." or "Thus says the Lord..." The intent to bear witness to the divine economy, is, at the level of human authorship, then, a unifying feature of the Biblical texts. At the same time as they are witnesses to the divine economy, however, the Biblical writers may also be understood as instruments of that economy, called forth, and guided in their witness by the Holy Spirit of God. That accords with the view of Scripture set forth in II Timothy 3:16-18, which, of course, Calvin accepts, and that instrumentality is what the church claimed to have recognised in Scripture when it settled upon its canon. On both levels, the human and the divine, an account may thus be given of the unity of the Scriptural texts. If such an account is true, then we have every reason to observe Calvin's principle that Scripture is its own interpreter, and to read the parts of Scripture, the individual texts,

38 Calvin, *Institutes*, I have quoted from the 'Author's Preface' of 1559, but much the same wording appears in the 1536 edition.

in light of the whole. Calvin considers such a principle to be entirely commensurate with the authorial intentions of the Old Testament writers. When Calvin says, after an extensive Christological treatise, that “this is what Isaiah meant to say”, he means simply that Isaiah’s teaching, Isaiah’s inspired witness to the nature and purposes of God, is, as Calvin puts it, “understood more fully and shines more brightly now that the Gospel has been added to it”.<sup>39</sup>

Returning then to Calvin’s account of Scripture’s plain sense, the plain sense is the sense that appears in the light of all else we know of the divine economy, all else that we have learned through reading Scripture as a whole. This, I suggest, is the hermeneutical principle underlying Calvin’s insistence that we read the Scriptures with the express design of finding Christ in them. God is not duplicitous. He speaks with one voice, and so the Word made flesh, the Word spoken through the Son, is the very same Word who in many and various ways was given to “our” ancestors by the prophets. It is a claim utterly coherent and reasonable, therefore, that the Word Christians hear sounded in Jesus Christ should also be heard in the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel and Micah, for example, and in the books of the law as well. That is what Calvin believes and gladly affirms in his exposition of II Timothy. “*All Scripture* is given by the inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction [and] for instruction in righteousness.” The plain sense of such Scripture is not, we repeat, the sense apparent to anyone who understands the verbal sense of the

<sup>39</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, Vol. XXIII, 86.

words. It is the sense apparent to one who has learned the story that Scripture tells, who has been tutored by the Spirit, and who recognises in Jesus of Nazareth the one in and through whom the God of Israel gives himself to be known.

We may not find in modern commentaries, nor be inclined to offer ourselves, a repetition of Calvin’s exegetical formulations. But, to return to Barth’s point referred to at the beginning of this paper, we do not become true followers of Calvin merely by repeating what he said. We may need to say something very different from Calvin in our own hermeneutical work, but there are, nevertheless, things we may learn through engagement with him. Let me conclude by suggesting one thing in particular that we may learn.

If Scripture is properly described along Calvinist lines as the instrument of God’s self-communication; if it is both inspired and illumined by the Spirit, then, as Calvin himself puts it, “You will never come to it well prepared to read it, unless you bring reverence, obedience, and teachableness with you... [R]everence comes from the knowledge that it is God who speaks to us and not mortal men.”<sup>40</sup> To bring teachableness with you to the reading of Scripture, to bring reverence and obedience, is to come, not with the desire to master the text, but with a readiness to be transformed.

<sup>40</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, Vol. XXIII, 88.

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# John Calvin: Servant of the Word

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While the Church had known schism before, its program of reform in the 16<sup>th</sup> century led to fragmentation the likes of which it had not known since the “Great Schism” some five centuries earlier. The magisterial reformers were understandably concerned about the centrifugal force that their programme encouraged, and they did not dismiss lightly Rome’s sharp indictment that disunity indicated defect. In response, and by way of marking some distance from more radical wings of the reformation, the magisterial reformers reminded Rome of her own history of conflict and fragmentation, and, more substantively, addressed the question of what constitutes “true church”. Their conclusion, précised by John Calvin, is well known: “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists”.<sup>1</sup> These two “marks” function not as boundaries so much as “directional signs that point to the core of faithful church life”.<sup>2</sup> And they recall that no matter how frequently or intentionally the Church may engage in additional practices or activities, the most basic, indispensable and controlling hub of its life remains its witness to the one Word of God from pulpit, font and table. This article is mainly concerned with the place that the former occupied in Calvin’s ministry and thought, and it asks what remains serviceable about Calvin’s homiletic for those who preach – and for those who hear and taste – the Word of God today.

Bruce Gordon’s recent work paints Calvin as not only “brilliant, visionary and iconic”, but also as one who “intimidated, bullied and humiliated”.<sup>3</sup> But when Gordon comes to enquire what it was that made Calvin great, what made Calvin Calvin, he unequivocally concludes that it was Calvin’s “brilliance as a thinker and writer, and, above all, his ability to interpret the Bible”.<sup>4</sup> That I share

this assessment is one of the reasons why I have chosen here to focus on Calvin *as preacher*; not because Calvin got it all right, nor because everything about his homiletical method ought to be embraced by preachers today, but because there remain some abidingly-valuable things that we can learn from Calvin here. It is these more constructive elements that this article will seek to highlight. There certainly remains a place to offer constructive criticism of Calvin’s preaching – as well as other areas of his thought and practice – but this is not that place.

James Nichols, among others, has argued that “Whatever else it was, the Reformation was a great preaching revival, probably the greatest in the history of the Christian church”.<sup>5</sup> This reflects a conviction among the magisterial reformers that preaching (and so pastors<sup>6</sup>) is not only indispensable to Christianity,<sup>7</sup> but that it is also the means above all others by which Calvin and others (including the council of Geneva)<sup>8</sup> expected God to transform the Swiss city and the known world. But as central as preaching was to Calvin’s perception of pastoral ministry, the ministry of the Word comprises more than public speech, and includes catechism, private exhortation, shaping the Church’s liturgy, as well as civic and ecclesiastical administration. Calvin: ‘A man who spoke’<sup>9</sup>

Calvin’s focus during his first period in Geneva was lectures, but it was not long before he was “elected pastor” and so began his two-fold work of lecturing and preach-

5 James Hastings Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 29; cf. Rudolf Cruel, *Geschichte der deutschen Predigt im Mittelalter* (Detmold: Meyer, 1879), 370ff.

6 See the French (Gallican) Confession of 1559.

7 So Peter T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and Modern Mind: The Lyman Beecher Lecture on Preaching*, Yale University, 1907 (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1907), 1: ‘with its preaching Christianity stands or falls’.

8 Gordon recalls the Council’s high view of preaching, and in its ‘power to resolve communal problems and instill order’. Gordon, *Calvin*, 135. In 1549, the Council decreed that pastors would preach daily. This decree was opposed by Calvin who was concerned that pastors would burn out.

9 Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography* (trans. M. Wallace McDonald; Grand Rapids/Cambridge/Edinburgh: Wm. B. Eerdmans/T&T Clark, 2003), 288.

1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; The Library of Christian Classics; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), IV.i.9. See John T. McNeill, ‘The Significance of the Word of God for Calvin’, *Church History* 28, no. 2 (1959), 131.

2 Joseph D. Small, ‘A Church of the Word and Sacrament’ in *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches Past and Present* (ed. Lukas Vischer; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 312.

3 Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2009), vii.

4 *Ibid.*, viii.

ing.<sup>10</sup> He continued this pattern even when banished from Geneva in 1538 which led, from September, to his serving the French Church in Strasbourg where, in addition to his lectures on the New Testament (beginning with John's Gospel and 1 Corinthians) at the Strasbourg Academy, he preached, it would seem, four times a week – including (probably) twice on Sundays.<sup>11</sup>

From Calvin's return to Geneva in 1541, it was clear that the principal point of contact between him and the Genevan public would be the pulpit. The expectation of Genevans during Calvin's time was that Sunday would begin with a daybreak service comprising of a one-hour sermon, be followed by a catechism class for children at midday, and conclude with another sermon at three o'clock. Sermons were also fixed for Monday, Tuesday and Friday mornings until, in 1549, they increased to every day of the week. Speaking with few or no notes, though still prepared,<sup>12</sup> Calvin's practice was to preach twice each Sunday at Saint-Pierre's and once every day on alternate weeks. On Sundays his usual practice was to preach through the New Testament, with the exception of a few Psalms on Sunday afternoons. During the week, his sermons were almost always from the Old Testament. As he aged, and poor health restricted his movement, he requested to be carried to church in a chair so that he could fulfill his pulpit responsibilities. In his 55 years, Calvin preached over 2300 sermons (some forty-four volumes), including 200 sermons on Deuteronomy, 194 on 1 and 2 Samuel, 189 on the Acts of the Apostles, 174 on Ezekiel, and 159 on Job.

## Preaching as divine accommodation

With probably some indebtedness to Chrysostom, Calvin contends that by employing human speech, God accommodates God's self to us. God not only accommodates to the varying circumstances and "customs of each age and nation",<sup>13</sup> but also, in Christ, "God in a manner makes himself little, that he might accommodate himself to our comprehension".<sup>14</sup> The divine decision to self-disclose extends to the human inscription of the metanarra-

10 John Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia* (ed. Guilielmus Baum, et al.; Corpus Reformatorum; Brunsvigae/Berlin: Apud C.A. Schwetschke et Filium, 1863–1900), 21:58.

11 Calvin, *CO*, 10a:288.

12 Note Sermon XLIX on Deuteronomy, in Calvin, *CO*, 26:473–4.

13 Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.x.30.

14 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (trans. J. Owen; vol. 22; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 54; cf. John Calvin, *Sermons from Job* (trans. Leroy Nixon; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 290–1.

tive of God's soteriologically shaped engagement with creation in language available and apposite to us. So, "the creatureliness of the Bible is no hindrance to hearing God's Word but rather the completely necessary condition" for so doing.<sup>15</sup>

Preaching, for Calvin, represents a further example of divine accommodation, in (at least) three ways. First, through preaching, God addresses us "in human fashion through interpreters in order to draw us to himself, rather than to thunder at us and drive us away".<sup>16</sup> Christ, Calvin contends, declares himself through his ministers in such a way that "their *mouth* [is] to be reckoned as his *mouth* and their *lips* as his *lips*".<sup>17</sup> "God", Calvin writes, "does not speak openly from heaven, but employs men as his instruments, that by their agency he may make known his will".<sup>18</sup> When God speaks via servants it is, Calvin writes, "as though he were nigh to us, face to face".<sup>19</sup>

Second, Calvin believed God uses pastors to train our humility. He writes:

*If [God] spoke from heaven, it would not be surprising if his sacred oracles were to be reverently received without delay by the ears and minds of all ... But when a puny man risen from the dust speaks in God's name, at this point we best evidence our piety and obedience toward God if we show ourselves teachable toward his minister, although he excels us in nothing.*<sup>20</sup>

Implicit here is Calvin's conviction that in the face of human pride, it is appropriate that "God purposely selects vile and worthless persons to instruct and warn us".<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, he writes, "That the Lord ... should employ inconsiderable men in publishing his Word, may not be

15 Thomas Henry Louis Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 102. See also Calvin, *Inst.*, I.xi.1; I.xiii.1; John Calvin, *Sermons on the Ten Commandments* (ed. Benjamin Farley; trans. Benjamin Farley; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 153; John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John, Volume I* (trans. William Pringle; vol. 17; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 119.

16 *Ibid.*, IV.i.5.

17 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Volume 1* (trans. William Pringle; vol. 7; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 381.

18 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Volume 4* (trans. William Pringle; vol. 8; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 172.

19 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets, Volume 4: Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai* (trans. John Owen; vol. 15; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 343.

20 Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.iii.1.

21 Calvin, *Comm. John I*, 387.



quite so agreeable to the human mind. But it tends to humble the pride of the flesh and try the obedience of faith; and therefore God approves of it".<sup>22</sup> One might here also recall Alan

Lewis' words: "The human brokenness of the Church and of her preachers – intellectual, moral and emotional – only highlights the mystery of proclamation. For it encapsulates the risk which entrusts the Word of God to the implausible and the impotent, and assigns solely to the reality of that Word's presence, any persuasiveness and creativity in the words of the church".<sup>23</sup> Still, it is hoped that the preacher is indeed a person who humbly submits to God. As Calvin so eloquently put it, "It would be better for [the preacher] to break his neck going up into the pulpit if he does not take pains to be the first to follow God".<sup>24</sup>

Finally, both pastor and proclamation serve as a bond of union between believers. If each person simply interpreted the Bible for themselves, then this would sponsor an individualism and arrogance indifferent to the gathered community.

Divine accommodation, therefore, is grace, and recalls not only God's determination to undress before us, but also God's decision in freedom to descend to regions "far beneath his loftiness" in order to do so. Borrowing an image from Augustine, Calvin contends that like a nurse with a young child in her arms, "God is wont in a measure to 'lisp' in speaking to us".<sup>25</sup> It is such lispings that is so splendidly echoed in the first volume of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* wherein "Calvin's great modern exponent"<sup>26</sup> draws attention to the "intrinsic freedom of God, i.e., [God's] freedom to be unlike Himself".<sup>27</sup> "That God can become unlike Himself in such a way that He is not tied to His secret eternity and eternal secrecy but can

and will and does in fact take temporal form as well"<sup>28</sup> gives to such *human* action as preaching the possibility that it may be employed as the Word of God. But before we consider this claim, we must attend to a prior question: what or who is the subject of this Word; this divine self-disclosure offered so graciously? And the answer, for the Christian, must be that God constitutes the subject of God's own revelation. That the "God to whom there is no path nor bridge, concerning whom we could not say nor have to say a single word if he did not of his own initiative meet us as the *Deus revelatus* [revealed God]" is precisely the one who unmasks for us.<sup>29</sup> This is the situation in which it is possible that human persons can hear and know God,<sup>30</sup> and human speech be employed as God's word.

## Preaching as the Word of God

What is clear for the magisterial reformers is that the Word by and for which the Church lives is not the Church's own word, but is, in Barth's view, "the outside word which is spoken to it, so that it cannot seize or possess or control that revelation".<sup>31</sup> The Word is that whom the Church bows before, learns of, and, in genuine obedience, participates in. For both Luther and Calvin, the *verbum Dei* refers not principally to Holy Scripture *in se* but to the gospel concerning God's Son, the good news which creates the Bible and for which the Bible exists to bear witness. More specifically, the Word is the Son himself. So Calvin: "Word" means the everlasting wisdom, residing in God, from which both all oracles and all prophecies go forth".<sup>32</sup> The Word is nothing short of the very life of God who "abides everlastingly one and the same with God, and is God himself"<sup>33</sup> by and in which the Church is birthed, lives, worships, is made one, holy and catholic, and serves God in the world. It is this Word, Calvin insists, who is not only "set before us in Scripture" wherein God "opens his own most hallowed lips",<sup>34</sup> but who is also re-proclaimed through "all who thereafter ministered the heavenly doctrine".<sup>35</sup> To recognise this is to confess the gracious work of the Spirit.

22 John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Vol. 1* (trans. W. Pringle; vol. 16; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 124.

23 Alan E. Lewis, 'Kenosis and Kerygma: the Realism and the Risk of Preaching' in *Christ in Our Place – The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World: Essays Presented to Professor James Torrance* (ed. Trevor Hart and Daniel Thimell; Exeter/Allison Park: Paternoster Press/Pickwick Publications, 1989), 90–1.

24 Calvin, *CO*, 26:304; cf. Calvin, *CO*, 34:424.

25 *Ibid.*, I.xiii.1.

26 Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 2005), 181.

27 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1* (ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance; trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Edinburgh T&T Clark, 2004), 320.

28 *Ibid.*, 319.

29 *Ibid.*, 321.

30 See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.1* (ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance; trans. T.H.L. Parker, et al.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 32.

31 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.2* (ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance; trans. G.T. Thompson and T.F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 545.

32 Calvin, *Inst.*, I.xiii.7.

33 *Ibid.*, I.xiii.7.

34 *Ibid.*, I.xiii.7; I.vi.1.

35 *Ibid.*, I.xiii.7.

Calvin believes that while preaching is not the only method of divine self-disclosure, and that God can address us without the ordinary means of preaching, and that God does indeed do so,<sup>36</sup> preaching remains “the ordinary mode which the Lord has appointed for conveying his word”.<sup>37</sup> Made efficacious by the Spirit, preaching is, Calvin insists, “the instrument of faith”,<sup>38</sup> the mother who produces faith, and faith is the daughter who ought not to forget her origin.<sup>39</sup> Calvin rebukes as ungrateful those who think that “the authority of the Word is dragged down by the baseness of [those] called to teach it . . . For, among the many excellent gifts with which God has adorned the human race, it is a singular privilege that he deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of [people] in order that his voice may resound in them”.<sup>40</sup>

There is, for Calvin, a clear conviction that proclamation (which includes exposition<sup>41</sup> and application) is not “the third-hand conveyance of fourth-rate opinions”,<sup>42</sup> but is itself the Word of God, and this in a two-fold sense. First, because the Word that was given to the human authors of Scripture is forwarded on by the proclaiming community that has been created by that same Word; and second, because the same Spirit by whom the Word was so graciously given the first time continues to ensure (through the proclaiming community) that the Word shall find fertile soil in every generation and so not return empty. It is no accident that the reformers named the Church the “creature of the word”. As Christoph Schwöbel notes:

*The church is called into being by the word of God, and the source of its life without which it would die is the divine word. The divine word reaches us through human words. The divine word calls human words into its service, making them the instruments of the communication of a message that could not be spoken by human means alone: the message of God’s grace and truth for his creatures. God addressing us through*

*the ordinary means of human communication – that is nothing less than the sanctification of human communication.*<sup>43</sup>

This is the truth upon which rests Section One of the Second Helvetic Confession (*Confessio Helvetica Posterior*) penned by Calvin’s ally, Heinrich Bullinger,<sup>44</sup> who (in 1562 and revised in 1564) publicised that “The Preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God” (*praedictatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei*).

God confronts us precisely in the weakness of human communication. To infer that this is an unfortunate burden for faith is to miss the point. For behind this Confession is the assumption that preaching is God’s instrument for carrying God’s Word to God’s people. “The sermon is either the Word of God, or it is nothing but reflection and meditation”.<sup>45</sup> It is, as Randall Zachman has observed of Luther’s work, the act in which

*Christ continues to bear witness to himself through others, so that whoever hears them hears Christ. The human words that bear witness to Jesus Christ are to be heard as the words of Christ himself, for Christ has promised to speak to us through his witnesses and the testimonies he entrusted to them – preaching, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and brotherly consolation. If Christ did not continue to speak through his witnesses, their testimony to him would have disappeared long ago. Only Christ can bear testimony to us concerning the mercy of God for sinners, even if he does so through the testimony of human beings. [And] if only Christ can bear witness concerning himself and his work, then it follows that we cannot verify his testimony by what we see and feel.*<sup>46</sup>

What becomes increasingly apparent is that, for both Luther and Calvin, the Word of God cannot be bound on printed page. The Word of God is not a book, but is the dynamic God in the free act of gracious self-unveiling by human speech and deed. God’s Word, through Jesus’

36 Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.xvi.19.

37 Calvin, *Comm. Rom.*, 398.

38 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (trans. W. Pringle; vol. 21; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 209; cf. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (trans. William Pringle; vol. 21; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 91.

39 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, Volume 2* (vol. 20; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 397.

40 Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.i.5; cf. Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.iii.1.

41 On Calvin’s expository method see Thomas Henry Louis Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 79–92.

42 Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, 45.

43 Christoph Schwöbel, ‘Introduction: The Preacher’s Art: Preaching Theologically’ in *Theology Through Preaching: Sermons for Brentwood* (ed. Colin E. Gunton; Edinburgh/New York: T&T Clark, 2001), 3.

44 On Bullinger see Machiel A. van den Berg, *Friends of Calvin* (trans. Reinder Bruinsma; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 216–26.

45 Dietrich Ritschl, *A Theology of Proclamation* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), 76.

46 Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 59.

presence in the Spirit, becomes entangled with our word which, by grace, is “of no less authority than [God’s] own Word”.<sup>47</sup> This revelation is made possible by the crucified Word himself, and is prolonged in the proclamation of those who point away from themselves and towards Christ, as is so powerfully spoken in the underside image of Lucas Cranach’s 1547 altarpiece in Stadtkirche St. Marien in Wittenberg. What is remarkable about the magisterial reformers’ language about preaching is that they ascribe to the proclaimed word the muscle and efficacy that the Medieval Church credited to the seven sacraments.

For Calvin, the sermon’s divine authority is “an immediate authority”. That is, it “consists in the fact that God is present to declare his will; it is not simply an authoritative message from one remote”.<sup>48</sup> To be sure, there is an important qualification here that concerns the words “as if”: in preaching, “[God] calls us to him *as if* he had his mouth open and we saw him there in person”. But what is being denied by this qualification is “not the presence or the activity of God but only any sort of visible or audible perception of that presence or activity. Just as Christ is present at the Supper spiritually, that is, by the working of the Spirit, so he is present in the preaching spiritually – by the working of the Spirit”.<sup>49</sup> So God rules the Church by the preaching of God’s word, hence Calvin’s designation of the pulpit as “the throne of God, from where [God] wills to govern our souls”.<sup>50</sup> And because God has elected to be heard through the voice of pastors,<sup>51</sup> believers ought be cautious of criticising pastors, or of isolating themselves from those communities wherein the Word is proclaimed.

It ought to be clear from what we have noted so far that to preach is to do more – though not less – than read the Bible publicly. If preaching was only this, it would marginalise the Scriptures and transform the *kerygma* for all creation into a coded language for a select few, as right-wing fundamentalism has done. But modernity’s obsession to discover the “relevant message for today” reduces (at best) the Bible to merely a point of departure.<sup>52</sup>

## The Word as exhortation

While there are times when Calvin’s sermons take on a

47 Ritschl, *Theology of Proclamation*, 67–8.

48 Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, 42.

49 *Ibid.*, 42.

50 Calvin, *CO*, 53:520.

51 See Calvin, *Comm. John I*, 396.

52 Here I follow Heiko A. Oberman, ‘Preaching and the Word in the Reformation’, *Theology Today* 18, no. 1 (1961), 29.

harsher tone – such as those sermons preached against the tumultuous backdrop prior to the reforms in Geneva around 1553, or those preached amidst the tense relationship between Geneva and Bern in which Calvin championed a ministry of reconciliation before the relationship was healed in 1557 – these are more an exception than a rule. For what is alarmingly apparent as one reads Calvin’s sermons is that they betray so little indication of the stressful storms in which this preacher ministered, and so much evidence of Calvin’s quiet, clear, persuasive and persistent call to frame our lives according to Holy Writ.<sup>53</sup> Parker suitably notes:

*The reader [of Calvin’s sermons] will have noted the low key in which he speaks. There is no threshing himself into a fever of impatience or frustration, no holier-than-thou rebuking of the people, no begging them in terms of hyperbole to give some physical sign that the message has been accepted. It is simply one man, conscious of his sins, aware how little progress he makes and how hard it is to be a doer of the Word, sympathetically passing on to his people (whom he knows to have the same sort of problems as himself) what God has said to them and to him.*<sup>54</sup>

The other noticeable feature of Calvin’s sermons is a consistency with which they are propelled toward exhortation, the encouragement and edification of each believer and the body of Christ as a whole: “We come together in the name of the Lord”, he said. “It is not to hear merry songs, to be fed with wind, that is, with a vain and unprofitable curiosity, but to receive spiritual nourishment. For God will have nothing preached in his name but that which will profit and edify”.<sup>55</sup> The Bible is given to increase, in believers, faith in and knowledge of God as our Father and of God’s Son as the principal revelation of God’s way in the world, to mortify the sin that “so easily entangles” that we might “run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Heb 12:1), to encourage believers that trust, obedience and perseverance in the things of the Gospel is the way of true life, and all of this so that the Church might be, in the Spirit of adoption, more perfectly formed to the *imago christi* and so better echo its teleological shape. The preacher’s task lay incomplete while the congregation is left without what Calvin calls “instruction on the framing of one’s life”. The Scriptures are given by God in order to train and to show “the way

53 Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, 118.

54 *Ibid.*, 118–9.

55 Calvin, ‘Sermon on II Timothy 2:16–18’. Cited in Leith, ‘Calvin’s Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word’, 222.

to live a godly and holy life”,<sup>56</sup> to teach what life in union with Christ entails. So Calvin: “The Word of God is not to teach us to prattle, not to make us eloquent and subtle and I know not what. It is to reform our life.”<sup>57</sup> And again: “If a [person] do no more but expound the holy Scripture it slips away, and we be not touched to the quick. Therefore, if teaching be not helped with exhortations it is cold and pierces not our hearts”.<sup>58</sup>

Of course, most preachers – and many congregations – can testify that it is precisely with the *application* of Scripture that the real homiletical challenge lies. But Calvin is consistently fit for this task. While his homiletical style has been described as “usually grave, sedate, and unfocused – perhaps even ponderous”,<sup>59</sup> his painstaking scholarship, his disciplined style, his determination to avoid speculation, his submission to the Bible as God’s inscripturated speech, his respect for original sources and vigilant attention to issues of translation and hermeneutics, his extraordinary commitment to the exposition of Scripture was underwritten by a concern to be as practical as possible, and to live in a way befitting one in union with Christ.

## The Word as event

In describing revelation’s reception via the Word preached, Calvin employs the grammar of “twice born”. The Word makes itself known through Scripture, and then re-proclaims itself through the preacher in the proclamation event. The proclamation event, therefore, has God’s commission to us behind it: it is God giving God’s self to us; God’s own address to us. How this happens – and the fact that it happens – is, as Barth noted, “God’s affair and not ours”.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, the proclaimed Word is neither mere communication nor an action borne by human beings, but is an inherent part of the salvation event itself, defined by the uniqueness of that event in history and its consequent witness in Scripture.<sup>61</sup>

Some of the themes upon which we have so far touched – on preaching as divine accommodation and exhortation – find specific locale in Calvin’s conviction that the sermon is always a specific word to the particular congregation in which it is heard. Sermons are “works of the moment”,<sup>62</sup> examples of God’s dynamic self-accommodation to this or that particular community at this or that

particular time. Indeed, one of the most striking features of Calvin’s preaching is that his sermons “fit”. They fit not only the Biblical text, but also the moment, the place, the people who heard and read them. One might conclude that Calvin considered the exegesis of his congregation, his society and his time to be as much a feature of the preacher’s task and attentiveness as that given to the Bible itself. The preacher’s task, Calvin believed, includes addressing the “real and pressing concerns of the community whether or not the people wished to hear them. Not to do so amounted to neglect of the apostolic duty”.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, it was *because* of his attentiveness to the written text that he took the human context as seriously as he did.

The Reformed sermon, as Heiko Oberman observes, “forces for itself a way to the heart and mind of the congregation”. It is not *preparation* for divine encounter (which then comes via the Supper) but is itself *decisive* encounter with God. Unlike the way that Dante (who is here representative of the Roman Catholic position) was required to change guides as he came near heaven, for the Reformed, the sermon is an “apocalyptic event”, by which “the doors of Heaven and Hell are put in motion”.

The sermon does not have to try desperately to be actual because it has the highest possible actuality ... The sermon is ... apocalyptic in the sense that, far from merely referring to the final evaluation of our records, it reveals to us *now* in time and space the final will of God for the individual Christian: it is God’s last word, to which no syllable will be added. For this reason the Reformation could preach the *certitudo salutis*, the certainty of salvation, because he who will judge us is the same who fulfilled the law. In the words of Calvin: “When a Christian looks into himself he finds cause to be afraid or even to despair ... [But] he will win a sure hope of eternal perseverance when he considers that he belongs to him who cannot fall or fail”. It gives pause to realise that this message which proved to lend the Reformation movement its reconciling and liberating power has virtually disappeared from the Protestant pulpit.<sup>64</sup>

That the sermon is such an “event” is one of the reasons for Calvin’s reluctance to have his sermons published. As his publisher, Conrad Badius, notes: “[Calvin] desired that his sermons should not extend further than his pastorate; because they were preached especially for his sheep, to whose capacity he accommodated himself as

56 Calvin, *CO*, 52:384.

57 Ibid., 54:292.

58 Calvin, *Sermons on Timothie and Titus*, 1199.

59 DeVries, ‘Calvin’s Preaching’, 121.

60 Barth, *CD I/1*, 109.

61 Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics* (trans. D.L. Guder; vol. 2; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), 585.

62 Cottret, *Calvin*, 289.

63 Gordon, *Calvin*, 138.

64 Oberman, ‘Preaching and the Word’, 19. The citation is from Calvin, *CO*, 49:313.

best he could".<sup>65</sup>

## The Word and the hermeneutical community

The Word of God is God in God's revelation. In, through and by the word inscripturated, God reveals God's *self*. God reveals God's self *through God's self*. The communication which is of the *esse* of the triune life spills over, as it were, onto paper and out of the lips of those given to its public exposition. It is for this reason that Scripture "enjoys the authority proper to God's communicative act" and why "it is to be obeyed and trusted, but not worshiped".<sup>66</sup> To champion Gospel proclamation, therefore, is to take up an invitation to "hear" and to "listen into" the eternal communication between Father, Son and Spirit. Moreover, it is to confess that that speech includes us, and invites and sanctifies our speaking and hearing. Christian worship cannot be reduced to hearing, and the Reformed liturgy sponsors a trilogue between God, God's creatures and God's creation. Put differently, we might think of the Triune God as a pulpit: of the Father who addresses, the Son who is the content of the Father's address, and the Spirit who listens to, celebrates and makes available the Word of the Father. And because the Spirit shares what is spoken and heard between the Father and the Son *with us*, we too are gathered up into this eternal conversation, and in so being gathered, our speech too is sanctified.

The application of Scripture is, for Calvin, to be directed to the wider congregation. This does not mean that he is unconcerned to address current affairs taking place in Geneva (around the 1555 City Council elections, for example, or the threat of infiltration by the Turks, who were at this time allied with France), or of engaging in what is sometimes (to our ears at least) harsh and sarcastic anti-Romanist, anti-Monarchic and anti-Anabaptist polemic towards those who would proffer what he calls a "bastard Gospel".<sup>67</sup> But, as Parker observes, Calvin's sermons are generally "saved from fragmentation into addresses to particular groups, and the unity of the congregation is preserved, by continual generalisation".<sup>68</sup> This does not mean that Calvin is unconcerned to address individuals. Indeed, Calvin insists that the word *is* addressed to individuals, and, "in the first place", to preachers themselves.<sup>69</sup> *All* the people of God are addressed by the one

Word who comes to us, as it were, from outside. So Calvin's "almost universal use of 'we' and 'us' and the rare address of 'you'".<sup>70</sup>

Congregations, for Calvin, are not passive receptors of the preacher's hard work, but are active participants and constituents in the proclamation and must work as hard as the preacher to hear and respond to the Word of God. The congregation, therefore, is indispensable to the Gospel's enactment in the world, and so Calvin expected the congregation to be active in the church's preaching, the assumption being that proclamation is a corporate action of the whole *ecclesia* and that listening is as much an act of faith as is speaking.

Just as every believer participates in the receiving of bread and wine, so too with the audible sacrament, which is heard and taken into oneself as the Word of God. And while Calvin never exhorted believers to study in advance those verses that would be preached upon, he did frequently urge members of the congregation to come well-prepared to the sermon, to have a clear idea of what the Church is claiming in and through this particular activity, and to "come to God's school with burning desire, seeing that [God] seeks nothing but our welfare and salvation".<sup>71</sup>

There is an expectation upon preacher and congregation alike to seek – and be pleased to receive – God's Word, and congregations ought to resist the temptation to make the preachers' task more difficult by appealing for competing words to be heard or by making preachers "swerve aside" from the truth and feed God's flock with "pleasing stories and buffoonery or 'old wives' fables". Such demands of itching ears, Calvin insists, constitute "the cause of some preachers degenerating and disguising themselves and transforming God's teaching, which is as bad as destroying it".<sup>72</sup> Calvin also hoped – and expected – that the Word who has engaged the congregation in its gathered worship might continue to be received and wrestled with long after the benediction has been pronounced.

Calvin's commitment to the *ecclesia* as an educated hermeneutical community is likewise evident in his sponsoring of the reformed pastors of Genevan "congregations" and those from territory outwith Geneva – together with devout lay people – to gather together to converse about some prearranged passage of Scripture. The intent was to create space wherein the "congregation" might

65 Cited in 'Publisher's Introduction: John Calvin and his Sermons on Ephesians', in Calvin, *Serm. Eph.*, x.

66 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 65.

67 Sermon V on Galatians, Calvin, *CO*, 50:329, and Sermon X on Galatians, Calvin, *CO*, 50:399.

68 Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 117.

69 See Calvin, *CO*, 50:327; Calvin, *CO*, 53:257–8.

70 Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 116–7.

71 Calvin, *CO*, 54:287.

72 Calvin, *CO*, 53:371.

wrestle in communal discourse in preparation for the preaching on the coming Sunday. “For as long as there is no mutual exchange”, Calvin writes, “each can teach what he likes. Solitude provides too much liberty”.<sup>73</sup> The practice of an “interpretative anarchy” was as much an anathema to Calvin as the “interpretive monarchy” of the pope.

## Words and ‘the holy bread of heaven which gives us life’<sup>74</sup>

When Calvin returned to Geneva in 1541, he sought to make the Lord’s Supper the defining centre of community life. His *Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, penned in 1545 (the year before Luther died), outlines Calvin’s notion that the institution of the signs of water, bread and wine was fashioned by God’s desire to communicate to us, and that God does this by ‘making himself ours’.<sup>75</sup> The signs testify to divine accommodation, to God ‘teaching us in a more familiar manner that he is not only food to our souls, but drink also, so that we are not to seek any part of spiritual life anywhere else than in him alone’.<sup>76</sup> But the signs are not only God’s. They are also *human* actions, faith’s testimony to the Church’s cruciform identity in the world, to its belonging, its ontology. Moreover, font and table remain places of privilege where believers expect to see, taste, hear and touch the Word’s carnality in ways not expected elsewhere. The drama performed around font and table constitutes the activity of the Church which, together with its pulpit, “proclaims the Lord’s death until he comes”. The sacraments “derive their virtue from the word when it is preached intelligently”.<sup>77</sup> In his *Short Treatise on the Lord’s Supper*, written while in Strasbourg but with an eye on Geneva (where it was printed), Calvin further expanded themes introduced in his Strasbourg liturgy, notably a more christologically-determined epistemology and doctrine of assurance, and the claim

that the “substance of the sacraments is the Lord Jesus’ himself”:<sup>78</sup>

*Jesus Christ is the only food by which our souls are nourished; but as it is distributed to us by the word of the Lord, which he has appointed an instrument for that purpose, that word is also called bread and water. Now what is said of the word applies as well to the sacrament of the Supper, by means of which the Lord leads us to communion with Jesus Christ.*<sup>79</sup>

This union is effected by the Spirit who, in Calvin’s words, “uses a double instrument, the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments”. Moreover, Calvin imagines that the union of believers with Christ involves “two ministers, who have distinct offices”. There is (i) the “external minister” who “administers the vocal word”, which is “received by the ears” and “the sacred signs which are external, earthly and fallible”, and (ii) there is the “internal minister”, the Holy Spirit who “freely works internally” to truly communicate “the thing proclaimed through the Word, that is Christ”.<sup>80</sup>

Clearly, for Calvin, the sacraments are essentially another form of the Word. They are, after Augustine, the *verbum visibile* (“a visible word”), “God’s promises as painted in a picture” and set before our sight.<sup>81</sup> They confer neither more nor less than the Word, and they have the same function as the Word preached and written: to offer and present Christ to us. They are, just as preaching is, the “vehicle of Christ’s self-communication . . . the signs are nothing less than pledges of the real presence [of Christ]; indeed, they are the media through which Christ *effects* his presence to his people”.<sup>82</sup> And they constitute – no less than preaching – the Church’s ministry of the Word.

The separation of pulpit, font and table, and the prioritising of “words” over the proclamation activities of baptism and eucharist, betray a failure to understand how these three particular activities might inform – and be informed by – theories of semiotics, ritual, dramaturgy and the sociology of knowledge. It is also, and more urgently, a failure to understand the nature and witness of Word in the Church’s “two marks”, and of the way the Spirit functions to create faith in us and to make us “living

73 Calvin, *CO*, 13:433.

74 The reference to ‘the holy bread of heaven’ is from Calvin’s eucharistic Great Prayer of Thanksgiving. See Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1961), 204.

75 John Calvin, ‘Catechism of the Church of Geneva, Being a Form of Instruction for Children in the Doctrine of Christ’ in *Tracts and Letters, Volume 2: Tracts, Part 2* (ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet; Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters. ed. Henry Beveridge; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 89.

76 *Ibid.*, 91.

77 John Calvin, ‘Short Treatise on the Supper of our Lord, in which is shown its True Institution, Benefit, and Utility’ in *Tracts and Letters, Volume 2: Tracts, Part 2* (ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet; Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters. ed. Henry Beveridge; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 191.

78 Calvin, ‘Short Treatise on the Supper of our Lord’, 169.

79 *Ibid.*, 166.

80 *Ibid.*, 173.

81 Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.xiv.6.

82 Gerrish, *Old Protestantism and the New*, 111. So Calvin, *Inst.*, IV.Xiv.26: ‘. . . words are nothing but signs’.

members of Christ”.<sup>83</sup> And this has, consequently, sponsored both disproportion between word and sacrament, and a tendency towards binitarianism, both to the detriment of Reformed worship and ecclesiology. Certainly, preaching and the proclamation activities of font and table constitute two parts of the one action. A “low” view of one results in a “low” view of the other. As Joseph Small has noted: “If word and sacraments together are the heart of the church’s true and faithful life, neglect of one leads inexorably to deformation of the other, for when either word or sacrament exists alone it soon becomes a parody of itself ... Reformed neglect of the sacraments has led to a church of the word alone, a church always in danger of degenerating into a church of mere words”.<sup>84</sup> Why a community claiming to be concerned with the proclamation of God’s good news would neglect to *taste* the Word in the Supper each time it gathers to *hear* the Word expounded in human speech truly is an oddity.

While Calvin argued that “it would be well to require that the Communion of the Holy Supper of Jesus Christ be held every Sunday at least as a rule”,<sup>85</sup> forlornly, many Reformed churches have propagated a situation wherein the pulpit and its associated wordiness have eclipsed the sacraments, sponsoring an arid intellectualism that has turned the worshipping community into “a class of glum schoolchildren”.<sup>86</sup> It is not uncommon to witness Baptism’s reduction to little more than a welcoming ceremony, for the Supper to be celebrated infrequently, and even for fonts and tables to be discarded in favour of a pulpit that stands unbefriended in the centre of the chancel. In more appalling cases, the pulpit has joined font and table as relics on the sidelines, casualties of modernity’s techno gods.

## By way of conclusion

When, in 1950, the city of Hamburg celebrated the anniversary of the death of Johann Sebastian *Bach*, Paul Hindemith recalled that:

*In the two hundred years since [Bach’s] death each rising generation has seen him differently; his creations have been analysed and criticised, performed*

83 Calvin, ‘Ministry of the Word and the Sacraments’, 173.

84 Small, ‘Church of the Word and Sacrament’, 315.

85 John Calvin, ‘Articles concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship at Geneva 1537’ in *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (The Library of Christian Classics. London: SCM Press, 1954), 49.

86 Brian Albert Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 82..

*and deformed, used and abused; books and pamphlets, paintings and plaster busts have made him a common household article; in short he has finally been transformed into a statue. It seems to me that having this statue constantly before our eyes has impaired our view of the true stature of Bach, both of the man and of his work.*<sup>87</sup>

A similar assessment might be offered regarding Calvin. While this essay paints a largely positive – perhaps too positive – portrait of Calvin, I confess to being entirely uninterested in emboldening a Calvin cult. I began with a basic question: what remains serviceable about Calvin’s homiletic for those who preach – and for those who hear and taste – the Word of God today? Does Calvin’s theology and practice of preaching have some purchase in recalling what the Church is called to in an age and culture so radically removed from sixteenth-century Geneva and so much more Biblically and theologically illiterate? Calvin, I think, encourages the Church to return to its ground, centre and end in the Word of God; to embrace with confidence its missional life in light of that Word; to repent of the godless banality and trivialisation of its worship and to recover its nutrition in the Spirit’s gifts of Bible, font and table; to recognise that while the Church is concerned with the publication of God’s Word, the copyright remains with the author; to reject self-veneration and be given over to service of the Word fleshed out in the living documents of congregations; that *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* is a call to being reformed by the Spirit and the Word rather than an invitation to an “endless cycle of idea and action, endless invention, [and] endless experiment”<sup>88</sup> for its own sake; to celebrate that God desires to be known and that God makes apposite accommodation to that end; to recall that while God’s principle apostle and prophet is Christ himself, proclamation still demands a lot of both preacher and congregation; that there is gospel-logic in making the training of ministers of the word a priority for the Church’s time, energy and budget; and to live in hope that the One who addresses his priesthood of believers in the event of faithful preaching is the very Word of God, and that that address occurs so that the hermeneutical community (which is the first fruit of a new reconciled and reconciling humanity) might know that its very life, diet, and future, remain in God alone.

87 Paul Hindemith, cited in Michael Steinberg and Larry Rothe, *For the Love of Music: Invitations to Listening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 117.

88 Thomas S. Eliot, ‘Choruses from “The Rock” – 1934’ in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 147.

I met Tom downstairs and he took me into a little room. He invited me to stand on a machine that would “tell me everything”. I’d always wanted to find a machine to do this, and so carefully placed my feet on the two aluminium plates. Sure enough, the lights flashed, dials moved, and in just a few short seconds the machine that would tell me everything fulfilled its promise. A series of numbers, but, by the look on Tom’s face, I knew that “everything” was not so good. Maybe knowing everything is not all that it is cracked out to be.

He looked down, and asked “are you religious?” It’s a question I always fumble with. First been told everything by a machine, and then asked about being religious. Why couldn’t the machine have told him that rather than him having to look at a form which detailed my employment? And how would the machine have answered the question on my behalf? Along with all the numbers from the all-knowing machine, “being religious” is not a way in which I would necessarily want to describe myself.

This was a kind of judgement day for me. A nasty present I brought for myself on making it through half a century. As you may have gathered I have just joined the gym. And not just any gym but one that is named after one of the great events in Biblical history – Exodus. But Exodus from what I thought? And where is the promised land in all of this? Looking around at the flat stomachs and bulging biceps perhaps there is some self-indulgent vision of salvation here. An earthbound promise of a new body? But at \$17.50 per week what was I expecting?

I am running now. I catch the eye of someone walking past the window. They see me sweating, head moving slightly, but they can’t see I am running. The height of the window hides the frame of the treadmill. Running but going nowhere. Running aimlessly, as Paul might have said in his warning to the Corinthians (1:9). But surely that is not what Exodus is all about? I am heartened to see the figure in the LCD display on the machine. I’ve burned 470 calories after only three minutes on the device. That’s like two Big Whoppers and a thick shake after only three minutes. An hour on this machine a week and I figure that I will have taken care of every over indulgence for the last month. Alas though. My failing vision picks up the small print below the 470 figure. This is per hour. If I were to continue on at this coronary-causing rate for another 57 minutes I will have taken care of 470 calories. For a moment there I was on the mountain top only to find myself again in the wasteland of endless hours listening to Beyonce on the cranked up volume of the gym’s stereo system, and going nowhere at the same time. Egypt, here we come.

My initial welcome to the gym was pleasant enough. But a look at my battered t-shirt in fading Otago colours and my decade-old New Balance running shoes was a dead giveaway. I was not one of them. I could tell. The entry turnstile would not open for me and I had to ask how to get the machine to read the barcode on my new membership card. The first “tell me everything” machine had now communicated its worrying findings to the assorted torture rack bank of muscle-building machines. Even their bright lcd “Hello Martin” hid a truth that we both shared: the remote control and I have been enjoying an unhealthy friendship for far too long, and something has to change.

Spend some time on Google and you get some interesting associations. Obama was criticised that he chose to go to the gym rather than attending church on the weeks before his inauguration; blogger Alexis says she goes to church for the same reason she goes to the gym – she feels better afterwards; and developer and bodybuilder Al Horvath has created a religious-theme gym built inside a former church. In his book *Grand Theft Jesus*, college professor Robert S McElvaine criticises the predominant Christian culture in America. He says, “the ‘Easy Jesus’ creed that passes for Christianity in wide swaths of America (and, increasingly, in other parts of the world as well) today is very much like one of the magical, miracle, no exercise, eat-all-you-want weight-loss programs: lose 50 pounds without diet or exercise! Get to Heaven without sacrifice or good works! This ‘religion’ can appropriately be given a name that reflects its similarity to effortless, no-sacrifice weight-loss plans: ChristianityLite. Its basic contention is simple: accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, and you can do whatever the hell you want.”

I am not sure if Robert, Alexis, Obama or even the “machine that will tell me everything” is right. Gyms provide some great benefits, but they also feed a contemporary nervousness around beauty and mortality. There is a kind of righteousness about those who “work out” – a sense that you are becoming a better person; that you can’t be overweight and saved. On the other hand, as diabetes and cardiovascular disease cause so much carnage, maybe we do have some prophetic role to play as a Church. Perhaps too, considering how interested Scriptures are in their many references to “the body” we need to think carefully how we respond in some more meaningful way to personal trainer Tom’s questions about “being religious”.

