

## LUTHER AND CALVIN: COMRADES IN CHRIST

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### **A Damaging Division**

Following the death of Martin Luther in 1546, relations between the Lutheran and Reformed branches of Protestantism became tense and sometimes overtly hostile. This distressing development has continued into modern times, although in diminishing measure, as spokesmen for the two traditions at times misunderstand and therefore misrepresent each other.<sup>1</sup> Lack of understanding and appreciation in the latter part of the sixteenth century caused divisions at the very time the Protestant movement was in urgent need of unity, as it faced a resurgent Roman Church inspired by Counter-Reformation zeal. Rather than presenting a united front, however, Lutherans and Reformed engaged in mutual recriminations and thereby enlarged the distance between them.

A particularly emphatic expression of distrust occurred when Lutheran Prince Ludwig IV (r. 1576-83) in the German state of Palatine removed Reformed professors from the faculty at the University of Heidelberg and purged other Calvinists from various offices in his government. By that time French Protestants were enduring bloody persecution in the wake of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572, and consequently seeking support in other lands, especially in Germany, where Reformed churches had been growing. That very growth alarmed Lutheran rulers who feared it would disrupt the fragile Peace of Augsburg (1555) which had inaugurated a policy of toleration for the Catholic and Lutheran faiths alone. Vigorous Calvinist missionary work in Germany they perceived as a threat to the peace.

In 1577 most German Lutherans subscribed to the Formula of Concord<sup>2</sup> as a means to settle doctrinal disputes among themselves in an effort to achieve stability for their territorial churches. The Formula as adopted is confessional and apologetic and aimed, in part, at the Reformed churches, an intention Calvinists in and outside of Germany were quick to discern. It is clear that some Lutheran leaders had, by that time, come to regard their Reformed counterparts as heretics, even though John Calvin had earlier endorsed the Augsburg Confession of Faith (1530), the initial Lutheran statement of doctrine.

Despite obvious Lutheran hostility toward them, some Reformed leaders worked to promote understanding as a means to obtain unity with the Lutherans. Perhaps no one was more energetic in this pursuit than Philippe du Plessis-Mornay (1549-1623), the most prominent and influential Huguenot at that time. This advisor to the King of Navarre, who would become French monarch Henry IV (r. 1589-1610), desired a comprehensive Protestant union of international scope, and to that end, he tried to convince the Lutherans that Reformed Protestants agreed with them in all essential matters. Mornay's efforts failed, as the Germans rebuffed his appeals by insisting on Huguenot subscription to the Formula of Concord as the price for their agreement. The formal Huguenot response appeared in *A Harmony of the Confessions of the Orthodox and Reformed Churches*, the composition of which Calvin's successor Theodore Beza (1519-1605) was the supervisor. The Harmony includes the Augsburg Confession and the territorial confessions of

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<sup>1</sup>A staunchly orthodox Lutheran pastor once presented me with a tract that identified Luther's major opponents as the Romanists, the Radicals, and the Reformed.

<sup>2</sup>For a concise and insightful treatment of these matters, see Robert D. Linder, "The French Calvinist Response to the Formula of Concord," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 19 (1982), 18-37, an essay from which I have borrowed extensively. See also *The Book of Concord*, tr. & ed. Theodore G. Tappert, *et al.* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 486.

Saxony and Wurtemberg and affirms Reformed concurrence with them, while offering friendship to the Lutherans of Germany. The preface to the Harmony expresses a lament that other Protestant churches were not supporting their persecuted brethren in France, while urging the Lutherans to reconsider their disavowal of the Reformed faith. When Germany became engulfed in the Thirty Years' War (1618-48), Calvinists expressed sympathy for their" Lutheran brethren," but even that did not evoke a positive response.

Although the Formula of Concord accomplished much for Lutheran unity, it did so, in part, by depicting the Reformed churches as dangerous competitors, enemies rather than allies, against Rome. Lutheran leaders continued to assail their Calvinist counterparts, especially Theodore Beza, for whom they expressed particular disdain. Reformed Protestants were, in that era, much more vigorous than the Lutherans in seeking unity.

### **A Fraternity of Faith**

Unfortunate divisions notwithstanding, in the early phase of the Reformation, relations between Lutherans and Reformed were more cordial as Martin Luther and John Calvin held each other in high regard, and Calvin and Phillip Melanchthon (1497-1560) maintained a close personal friendship that endured in spite of disagreements between them. Twenty-five years older than Calvin, Luther welcomed the younger reformer's efforts to promote a resurgence of biblical Christianity, Calvin, in turn, revered Luther as the pioneer of the Reformation to whom he owed a large debt. In a letter to Heinrich Bullinger (1504-75), chief pastor in Zurich, Calvin wrote at a time when the Wittenberg reformer had recently expressed disdain for other Protestants who did not endorse some of his ideas. Calvin's moderation contrasts sharply with Luther's invective. He wrote:

. . . of this I do earnestly desire to put you in mind, that you would consider how eminent a man Luther is, with what strength of mind and resolute constancy, with how great skill, with what efficiency and power of doctrinal statement, he hath hitherto devoted his whole energy to overthrow the reign of Antichrist, and at the same time to diffuse far and near the doctrine of salvation. . . . Even though he were to call me a devil, I should still nonetheless hold him in such honor that I must acknowledge him to be an illustrious servant of God. But while he is endued with rare and excellent virtues, he labours at the same time under serious faults. Would that he had rather studied to curb this restless, uneasy temperament which is apt to boil over in every direction.<sup>3</sup>

It is worthy of note that this tribute to Luther appeared only two years before he died, a time when he had become irascible and therefore difficult to placate. Calvin nevertheless admonished Bullinger to "consider . . . that you have to do with a most distinguished servant of Christ to whom we, all of us, are largely indebted." He urged Bullinger against disputing with Luther, for that would benefit only enemies of the Reformation.<sup>4</sup> Calvin, in fact, criticized other reformers who did not share his admiration for Luther. It is no exaggeration to call John Calvin "Luther's best disciple,"<sup>5</sup> yet the reformer of Geneva reserved the right to differ with his mentor and to express disapproval for some of Luther's actions, his bombastic and often acidic polemics especially. Calvin too engaged in strident polemics at times, but he was more reserved and

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<sup>3</sup> *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters* 4. ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987 Rpt. of 1858 ed.), 433. Letter of November 25, 1544.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 433-34.

<sup>5</sup> David C. Steinmetz, "Luther and Calvin on Church and Tradition," *Michigan Germanic Studies* 10 (1984), 99.

temperate than Luther where other Protestants were concerned. Calvin perceived correctly that unrestrained attacks upon fellow Evangelicals would benefit no one but enemies of the Reformation.

Luther became aware of Calvin's work as a reformer by 1539 when, in a letter to Martin Bucer (1491-1551), reformer of Strasbourg, the Wittenberg professor expressed delight at reading one of Calvin's defenses against the papal church. The book Luther had in mind appears to have been the *Reply to Sadoletto*, which Calvin composed while in Strasbourg, after being forced to leave Geneva in 1538. The absence of Calvin from Geneva prompted Jacopo Cardinal Sadoletto (1477-1547) to appeal to the magistrates there to restore Catholicism in the city-state, and no one was there competent to answer the learned papal scholar, so the rulers turned to the reformer they had recently banished. Calvin then produced an effective rebuttal, one which Luther applauded.<sup>6</sup>

A short time before Calvin's *Reply to Sadoletto* appeared, Luther had issued *On the Councils and the Church*, so he was pleased that Calvin too had assailed the claims of the papacy, thereby making himself an effective ally in the cause of reformation.<sup>7</sup> A comparison of these two treatises shows the great affinity between the authors. Both contended they were not innovators, and both cited inconsistencies in conciliar pronouncements and referenced ancient fathers of the church in support of their doctrine, while they insisted on the supremacy of Scripture over councils and fathers.<sup>8</sup>

The two reformers did not aspire to abolish traditions *per se*, only those which conflicted with Scripture. Calvin, in particular, contended Protestants were not schismatics but true Catholics who loved the true church. To Sadoletto he explained, "with this church we deny that we have any disagreement. Nay, rather, as we revere her as our mother, so we desire to remain in her bosom."<sup>9</sup> Neither Luther nor Calvin was content to surrender the name *Catholic* to Rome.

Luther read Calvin's answer to Sadoletto while traveling to Weimar to meet Phillip Melancthon, Luther's approval of Calvin's *Reply* appears also in a letter Marcus Crodol, a teacher in Torgau, sent to Calvin on March 6, 1545.<sup>10</sup> Luther Himself, writing to Martin Bucer, in 1539, expressed satisfaction with Calvin's apologetic against Sadoletto.<sup>11</sup> About that same time (fall 1539), Melancthon indicated that both Luther and Bucer rejoiced about Calvin's defense of the Reformation.<sup>12</sup>

Early in the development of Protestant thinking about the sacraments, Calvin had expressed reservations about Luther's doctrine of the real and bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, an issue about which Luther was especially sensitive. This might have led to a hostile relationship between the two leading reformers, and Luther related to Bucer his wish that Calvin would reconsider his attitude toward the teaching at Wittenberg. That no animosity did develop

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<sup>6</sup> Texts of Sadoletto's appeal and Calvin's response appear together in *John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoletto: a Reformation Debate*, ed. John C. Olin (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976 rpt. of 1966 ed.); Luther's letter of October 14, 1539 is in *Luther's Works*, 50, ed. & tr. Gottfried G. Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 187-91.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church," *Luther's Works*, 41, tr. Charles M. Jacobs and Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) 3-178.

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, *Reply to Sadoletto*; 92; Steinmetz, "Luther and Calvin," 101-05.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Reply to Sadoletto*, 62.

<sup>10</sup> B. A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New* (London: T. & T. Clark International, 1982), 285, n. 31 cites the full documentation.

<sup>11</sup> H. Neuser, "Calvin and Luther," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 38 (1982), 90 cites the text of his letter.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-91.

is a tribute to the patience with which each treated the other, while the two theologians studied the matter and maintained a relationship of mutual respect. Complaints about Calvin's teaching on the Eucharist came more from Lutheran professors than from Luther himself.

### A Costly Contention

By 1529, which was before John Calvin embraced the Protestant faith, diverse understandings of the Eucharist had become intense to the point they threatened to divide the Evangelicals at a time when the survival of the Reformation appeared to demand unity. To avoid a permanent rupture, Martin Luther met with Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), the original reformer in Zurich, at Marburg Castle. The Swiss scholar had aroused Luther by advocating the view that the Lord's Supper is only a memorial meal, one in which there is no special presence of Christ. Broad agreement on other doctrines could not compensate for disagreement about this one, and when the colloquy disbanded, Luther and Zwingli separated never to reunite. Thereafter Lutheran leaders came to regard Zwingli's view as the position of the Reformed churches at large, one they deemed no more acceptable than that of detested Anabaptists. Lutherans did not, at that point, realize Zwingli's doctrine would soon lose credibility among Reformed Christians, as Calvin's teaching superseded it.

Although Luther had expressed dismay about Calvin's rejection of his belief in the bodily presence of Christ in the Supper, he learned eventually that Calvin stood closer to his teaching than to that of Zwingli. By about 1533 Calvin had renounced the view of the elements in the Eucharist as "bare signs," the concept prevalent in Zurich. He found the concept of the real presence more convincing, although he did not endorse belief in a bodily presence. When this came to Luther's attention, he praised Calvin's view as contrasted with that of Zwingli and his disciples. In 1540 John Calvin set forth his understanding of this sacrament in a *Short Treatise on the Supper of Our Lord*, a work which a book merchant in Wittenberg brought to Luther's attention. That great reformer read it with much interest and concluded that, had the Zurichers read it earlier, disputes about the sacrament could have been avoided.<sup>13</sup>

Luther had good reason to acknowledge Calvin's contribution, for it displays the Genevan reformer's high regard for the sacraments which includes a categorical denial of a merely memorial significance assigned to the Supper. On the contrary, Calvin held that, in the Eucharist, believers receive nourishment for their souls, as the sacrament testifies to the finished work of Christ at Calvary and provides a means for continuing communion with the Savior. This assertion reflects its author's belief in the real but *spiritual* presence of Christ in the Supper.<sup>14</sup>

Calvin adopted Luther's view of a sacrament as a sign which God has annexed to his Gospel promises. The reformer of Geneva may have read Luther's treatise *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520). Both theologians saw the sacraments as signs to confirm the Word of promise, whereas Zwingli, like the Anabaptists, regarded the sacraments as ways to confess the faith. Calvin seemed to combine the teachings of Luther and Zwingli when he defined a sacrament as "a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual

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<sup>13</sup> The text of Calvin's treatise is in *Selected Works of John Calvin* 2, 163-98; Gerrish, *Old Protestantism and New*, 287, n. 53.

<sup>14</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. & annotated Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989 rpt. of 1975 ed.), 102-23. This is the first edition of the *Institutes* from 1536. Cf. the final edition of 1559, IV: xviii, 2-3. This is the *Library of Christian Classics* edition ed. John T. McNeill, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Lexington, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1960). All subsequent references to the *Institutes* are from this edition.

attestation of our piety toward him.”<sup>15</sup> Since the sacraments proclaim the Gospel, the Word of God makes them efficacious. The Supper confirms the Gospel truth that Christ died for his people; as a pictorial representation of the atonement, it nourishes believers’ souls.<sup>16</sup> Exactly how this occurs Calvin admitted is a mystery beyond comprehension. He nevertheless insisted that the Holy Spirit makes Christ truly present to believers who commune with him, receiving his body and blood in the Supper. In these words the reformer asserted:

the substance of our doctrine is that the flesh of Christ is vivifying bread, because when we are united to it by faith, it nourishes and feeds our souls . . . in a spiritual manner only because the bond of this sacred union is the secret and incomprehensible virtue of the Holy Spirit.<sup>17</sup>

Abundant evidence shows John Calvin believed in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and was therefore closer to the teaching of Luther than to that of Zwingli. While in Strasbourg (1538-41), he enjoyed fine relations with the Lutherans, perhaps because he, more than any other Protestant leader, maintained fidelity to Luther’s position on almost all major doctrines. As pastor of a French refugee congregation in Strasbourg, Calvin ministered to people who espoused Luther’s understanding of the Gospel and while in that position, he joined with Martin Bucer and Phillip Melanchthon in representing the Evangelical cause at colloquies with papal theologians. German Lutherans in attendance regarded him as one of their own persuasion. At one such meeting in Worms (1540), Calvin joined a delegation from the Lutheran state of Lueneberg. He had not gone to Worms to promote a sectarian position but to advocate the Cause of reformation.<sup>18</sup>

With considerably more zeal than Luther displayed, Calvin earnestly sought the unity of the Protestant cause. This became especially evident as he demonstrated goodwill toward Lutherans suspicious of his sacramental theology. Even though his own doctrine of the real presence was not identical with the teaching at Wittenberg, both Luther and Melanchthon appreciated Calvin’s contributions to the Reformation. Calvin hoped to obtain agreement between Wittenberg and the Swiss Protestants, but Luther showed little interest in that matter.

As an expression of sincere desire for Evangelical unity, John Calvin endorsed the Augsburg Confession, the statement Melanchthon presented to Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (r, 1519-56) and the Imperial Diet in 1530. When, in 1536, Martin Luther and Martin Bucer agreed to the Wittenberg Concord, with its affirmation of the real presence within a sacramental union, Calvin rejoice and subscribed. It is clear he believed this was a sufficient basis to cement a bond among the Protestants of Wittenberg, the South German states, and the Swiss, a hope destined to be dashed by future disputes.

The death of Zwingli in 1531 seemed to open possibilities for improved Pan-Protestant relations, but his successor Heinrich Bullinger was, at first, reluctant to concede anything to the Lutherans. Calvin, however, saw an opening to promote Protestant ecumenism and so moved to obtain an agreement between Zurich and Geneva, an effort that led to the Consensus of Zurich (1549). This drew Swiss Protestants together but made further progress with the Lutherans almost impossible. Calvin misunderstood the Lutherans by thinking the Consensus would

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., IV: xiv, i. For a helpful analysis of Calvin’s understanding of the sacraments, See B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude* (Eugene, : OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002 rpt of 1993 ed.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV: xviii, 1-3.

<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Selected Works* 2,374.

<sup>18</sup> Excellent coverage of this matter appears in W. Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata: Studies on the Reformation I* (Leiden: J. Brill, 1972), 97-114.

convince them that Reformed Christians were sound in their doctrine of the Supper. Most Lutherans, however, regarded the agreement in Zurich an unwarranted compromise with Zwinglian doctrine. Thereafter Calvin lost all credibility with strict Lutherans. His vigorous affirmations of Luther's theology in general and his subscription to the Augsburg Confession availed little, and his hope that Melanchthon would endorse the Consensus of Zurich was disappointed. His Wittenberg friend refrained and began moving away from Luther's doctrine of the *Bondage of the Will*, much to Calvin's dismay.<sup>19</sup>

Luther had been dead three years when the Swiss concluded the Consensus, and that was a loss Calvin felt keenly, for he believed all major assertions in the Augsburg Confession and the Consensus were harmonious. He thought, had Luther lived, agreement could have occurred. Instead, the heirs of Luther, minus Melanchthon, launched recurrent tirades against the Swiss, the doctrine of the Lord's Supper being the principal item of contention. Joachim Westphal (1510-74) became the major antagonist of the Reformed faith, as he spoke for a faction known as *gnesio-Lutherans*, that is, original Lutherans, defenders of true Lutheran doctrine.

Building on some items critical of the Swiss which Luther had written in 1544, Westphal, in 1552, began assailing the Reformed community in general and Calvin in particular. He realized Calvin's view of the Eucharist had influenced Melanchthon and his followers, so purging the Lutheran churches of that doctrine was his passion. Melanchthon had aggravated the *gnesio-Lutherans* when, after Luther died, he began referring to Calvin as *the theologian*.

Calvin responded to Westphal's tirades, still trying to show there was no fundamental disparity between the Augsburg Confession and the Consensus of Zurich, but to no avail. Calvin did hold that the Augsburg Confession was vague and imprecise in places, and he blamed that defect for some of the issues dividing Evangelicals. He insisted nevertheless that the Lutheran and Reformed positions were compatible where cardinal doctrines of the faith were concerned, and he urged recognition of those principles as the basis for fellowship and unity. Because he cherished unity, Calvin warned against intemperate expressions, but Westphal would not be deterred by appeals for civility.

Phillip Melanchthon's failure to support his efforts at conciliation was a particular disappointment for Calvin. The 1544 revision of the Augsburg Confession, known as the *Variata*, had pleased Calvin because he thought it expressed a view of the Eucharist much like his own. Melanchthon's timidity, when confronted with stem criticisms from *gnesio-Lutherans*, grieved his Swiss friend deeply. Calvin therefore expressed his dismay in a letter to Melanchthon dated August 27, 1554. It is irenic in tone and contains touching affirmations of affection while indicating its author's distress because of his friend's failure to declare his support against those who assailed the Reformed churches.<sup>20</sup>

While Melanchthon hesitated to take a stand, Westphal's attacks continued and became increasingly vituperative. Calvin greatly lamented the estrangement from the Lutherans due to what he thought was a matter that did not warrant it.<sup>21</sup> Luther and Calvin had agreed the Eucharist is a gift of grace, not just a means to profess faith, and together they maintained belief in the real presence of Christ, although they differed about the nature of that presence. To Westphal earlier cordial relations between the two reformers did not matter. He chose to indict Calvin and the Reformed churches because they denied the ubiquity of Christ's humanity, and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., II, 48-72.

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Selected Works* 6, 61-63.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV: xvii, 33; Calvin, *Concerning Scandals*, tr. John Fraser (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 80-83.

because they insisted only people with faith in the Savior receive the body and blood with the sacrament. All of Calvin's protestations notwithstanding, Westphal branded his doctrine of the Supper as Anabaptist, and the Formula of Concord decried the Reformed position even though Reformed statements of faith in that era incorporated some Lutheran elements.<sup>22</sup>

### **A Concord in Christ**

Although lamentable divisions shattered Protestant unity, the essential concord between Martin Luther and John Calvin remains a matter of record. Both reformers subscribed heartily to the ancient ecumenical creeds and so regarded themselves and each other as exponents of the genuine Catholic faith. *Sola Scriptum*, the formal principle of the Reformation, was the foundation for all they believed and espoused, and both referred often to the writings of St. Augustine (354-430) to show their doctrines were not innovations but reaffirmations of truth proclaimed tenaciously by that Doctor of Grace, as he had become known.

Because of his stature as the pioneer of the Reformation, Martin Luther received due applause for his courageous stand against false doctrine and in support of the Gospel of grace. Early Protestant authors frequently hailed him as the restorer of real Christianity, even a prophet comparable to biblical spokesmen of God's Word. This understandable adulation no doubt encouraged such confidence in Luther's teaching that any deviation from it aroused profound suspicion among his disciples. Luther himself, however, did not expect absolute concurrence with his position, as his relations with Calvin attest. To move from a Lutheran to a Reformed affiliation was not necessarily to abandon the great theologian of Wittenberg. The experience of Prince Frederick III (r. 1559-76), the ruler of Palatine, illustrates this well. When, in 1560, he adopted the Reformed faith, he denied he had rejected The Augsburg Confession, and he continued to hail Luther, while arguing that some Lutherans had distorted that reformer's teaching. The prince scolded people who assumed Luther was immune to error. Reformed theologians from Palatine echoed their ruler's confidence in Luther but denied he had brought the restoration of biblical Christianity to completion. When Hohenzollern Prince John Sigismund (r. 1608-20) embraced Calvinism, he allowed both Evangelical churches to operate in Brandenburg, although he cherished the eventual triumph of the Reformed Church, a development, he believed, would complete the work Luther had begun. Pastors and scholars who supported their princes' effort regarded themselves as disciples of Luther carrying forward the reform he had initiated, and at times they accused Lutherans of adulterating their founder's actual teaching, as they contended, the Formula of Concord had done. Along with Calvin, his heirs desired the preservation of Luther's achievements while avoiding excessive veneration that could thwart the consistent application of his principle *Sola Scriptum*. They professed to continue the work of reformation without renouncing or under-appreciating Luther's immense contributions. The Lutheran reaction was, one must regret, overwhelmingly negative, and often Calvinists encountered the complaint they had deformed the principles of the Augsburg Confession.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Formula of Concord, VII in *The Book of Concord*, ed. T. G. Tappert, et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 481-86; Joseph N. Tylenda, "The Calvin-Westphal Exchange: the Genesis of Calvin's Treatises against Westphal," *Calvin Theological Journal* 9 (1974), 182-209, is a thorough treatment of this subject; Calvin's "Last Admonition to Joachim Westphal" appears in his *Selected Works: Tracts and Letters* 2, 346-494.

<sup>23</sup> An excellent analysis of Lutheran-Reformed relations in Brandenburg comes from Bodo Nischan, "Reformation or Deformation? Lutheran and Reformed Views of Martin Luther," in *Pietas et Societas: New Trends in Reformation Social History*, eds. Kyle Sessions and Philip Bebb (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1988), 203-15.

Whatever their heirs may have said about one another, Luther and Calvin must be regarded as comrades engaged in a common cause. When Calvin composed the first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), he followed Luther's *Large Catechism*, a Latin translation of which had appeared in 1529. When he explained his objections to the Roman mass, the reformer of Geneva drew from Luther's earlier polemic *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520). Both authors denied the mass is a means to secure forgiveness of sins, and both maintained Christ is the perfect priest and no earthly professional priesthood continues, so the mass insults the finished work of Christ. To Luther and Calvin the Eucharist is a *sacrament*, not a *sacrifice*, and when Christians receive the sacrament, they do not do something for God, but God, in conferring his grace, does something for them. The only sacrifice remaining to be rendered is one of praise as an act of faith.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps more than in any other area of doctrine, the reformers of Wittenberg and Geneva stood together in their understanding of sin and salvation. They affirmed categorically the depravity of human nature because of the fall, and both rejected all synergistic and Semi-Pelagian views of salvation. In dealing with the human condition, Luther and Calvin published major treatises which assert *sola gratia* in unequivocal terms. In 1525 Luther responded to Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), when that Prince of Humanists attacked him for contending the sinfulness of mankind extends to a paralysis of the will. In *De Servo Arbitrio* Luther, in language more forceful than Calvin would use in addressing the same topic, contended original sin has permeated every facet of human nature so that no faculty has escaped its debilitating effects, and that means the intellect and the will are in bondage to sin. The Wittenberg theologian rebutted Erasmus effectively and in the process produced the most emphatic and powerful exposition of that fundamental Christian doctrine. In doing this Luther inspired others to write in defense of *sola gratia* in general and divine sovereignty over salvation in particular.<sup>25</sup>

As Luther replied to Erasmus, so Calvin defended the same principle against Albertus Pighius (c. 1490-1542), a papal official who represented the Vatican at theological discussions with Protestant leaders at Worms and Regensburg in 1540 and 1541. Pighius showed inflexible opposition to Evangelical teachings in such discussions, and thereafter he wrote polemics against them. Calvin, whom he appears to have met at Worms, became one of his targets, as the Catholic scholar defended papal authority against all its detractors. In accord with Christian tradition, Pighius acknowledged the reality of original sin but maintained it did not produce the corruption of human nature, as Augustine and other early Catholic thinkers had claimed, and as all Protestant scholars insisted. His arguments in favor of free will eventually led Calvin, in 1543, to issue a rebuttal entitled *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will*. In refuting the charges of his critic, John Calvin aligned himself with Martin Luther, whose earlier work on the will he defended against the complaints of Pighius. The reformer of Geneva cited his Wittenberg colleague as a most

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<sup>24</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV: xviii, 1-3; Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of The Church," tr. A. T. W. Steinhauser, Frederick C. Ahrens, and Abdel R. Weitz, *Luther's Works*, 36, 66; cf. Herman J. Seiderhuis, "Luther *Totus Noster est*: the Reception of Luther's Thought at the Heidelberg Theology Faculty," *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, 17 (2006), 101-19.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, tr. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1957). For an analysis of Luther's view, see James Edward McGoldrick, "Luther's Doctrine of Predestination," *Reformation & Revival* 8 (1999), 81-103.

distinguished apostle of Christ whose labor and ministry have done most in these times to bring back the purity of the Gospel; . . . that teaching which is the chief issue in this controversy, we defend today just as it was put forward by Luther and others at the beginning.<sup>26</sup>

In the course of his reply to Pighius, Calvin did not hesitate to identify himself as a Lutheran.

Closely connected with the doctrine of human depravity and the loss of genuine free will is the condition of human minds since the fall, the *noetic* effects of sin. In assessing this matter Luther and Calvin concurred heartily. Luther's description is especially graphic and compelling.

Sin has so blinded human nature that it no longer knows the Creator . . . . Man does not know even his own sin and thinks his blindness is the highest wisdom. If only Adam had not sinned, men would have recognized God in all creatures, would have loved and praised Him so that even in the smallest blossom they would have seen and pondered his power, grace, and wisdom. . . . these things [the beauties of nature] would have turned the mind of Adam and his kin to honor God and laud and praise Him and to enjoy His creatures with gratitude.<sup>27</sup>

Calvin's position on this subject is almost identical with that of Luther, as the following excerpt from the *Institutes* reveals.

All parts of the soul were possessed by sin after Adam deserted the fountain of righteousness. For not only did a lower appetite seduce him, but unspeakable impiety occupied the very citadel of his mind, and pride penetrated to the depths of his heart. . . [so] none of the soul remains pure or untouched by that mortal disease; . . . the mind is given over to blindness and the heart to depravity.<sup>28</sup>

As one perceptive interpreter has remarked, when commenting about Luther's *Large Catechism*, "Calvin's understanding of man and his place in the world might almost be said to provide a theological exegesis of this matchless confession of Luther's faith."<sup>29</sup> That conclusion applies equally well when one compares the writings of these reformers than pertain to the condition of human minds subsequent to the fall. Both scholars understood the noetic effects of sin and so cited the warped condition of the intellect as responsible for the way in which people deceive themselves about ultimate realities. So grave are the noetic effects of sin that humans are unable to perceive their own interests correctly. Lacking the proper knowledge of God, they fail to understand their own condition and, as a consequence, remain content with their own depravity and alienation from their Creator.<sup>30</sup>

In 1539, in a letter to William Farel, John Calvin reported receiving word from Phillip Melancthon affirming that Luther and Johann Bugenhagen (1485-1556), a highly regarded scholar at the University of Wittenberg, wished him to extend warm greetings to Calvin. As

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<sup>26</sup> John Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will*, ed. A. N. S. Lane, tr. G. I. Davies (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002 rpt. of 1996 ed.), 28-29. For additional evidence of Calvin's support for Luther, see D. Nauta, "Calvin and Luther," *Free University Quarterly* 2 (1952-53), 1-17.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in translation by David Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), 24-25.

<sup>28</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II: i, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Gerrish, *Old Protestantism and New*, 150.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Helm, "John Calvin and the *Sensus Divinitatis* and the Noetic Effects of Sin," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43 (1998), 87-107, covers this matter well.

Melanchthon stated, “Calvin has acquired great favor in their eyes.”<sup>31</sup> Luther and Bugenhagen had good reason to express confidence in their French colleague, since they labored in the same cause, sought the same goals, and proclaimed the same message.

Although some scholars have magnified the differences between the reformers of Wittenberg and Geneva, on all matters of cardinal importance the two agreed. Nowhere is this more evident than in their mutual understanding of justification *sola fide*, through faith alone. Luther considered this truth the article by which the church would stand or fall. In a doctrinal statement he prepared for the Smalkaldic League of Evangelical States in 1537, Luther wrote of justification *sola fide*:

On this article rests all that we teach and practice. . . . Therefore, we must be . . . certain and have no doubt about it. Otherwise all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and all our adversaries will gain the victory.<sup>32</sup>

Calvin readily concurred with Luther and considered the biblical doctrine of justification “the main hinge on which religion turns.”<sup>33</sup> Both reformers regarded this doctrine as indispensable to the Gospel. In Calvin’s words, it is the “the foundation on which to establish . . . salvation, on which to build piety toward God.” Justification “consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.”<sup>34</sup> This concurs exactly with Luther’s view of justification as a once for all judicial of God by which he declares believing sinners righteous before he bar of his justice, as he imputes the perfect righteousness of Christ to them.<sup>35</sup> These reformers maintained theirs was the only understanding of justification which glorifies God, so they denounced the common Scholastic teaching which asserted justification through faith plus works of merit. As Luther expressed this, “human nature, corrupt and blinded by the blemish of original sin, is not able to imagine or conceive of any justification above and beyond works.”<sup>36</sup> In Calvin’s view the contention about justification then raging was “the principal point of contention we have with the papists.”<sup>37</sup>

Neither Luther nor Calvin would have had any patience with modern interpreters who deny that justification necessarily includes the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to needy sinners. Both reformers identified *sola fide* as the heart of the Gospel, and both scorned synergism and emphasized mankind’s sinful inability to merit God’s favor. In their view imputed righteousness, received through faith, is the sole means of justification. As Luther stated this, justification “is accomplished by imputation on account of the faith by which I take hold of Christ.”<sup>38</sup> Proclaiming this truth is the central feature of worship, so Lutheran and Reformed churches elevated their pulpits to show the supremacy of God’s Word. God confers the gift of faith in

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<sup>31</sup> Calvin, *Selected Works: Tracts and Letters*, 4, 167, letter of November 4, 1539.

<sup>32</sup> Luther, “Smalkald Articles,” in *Book of Concord*, 292.

<sup>33</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III: xi, 1.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, III: xi, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Luther, “The Disputation Concerning Justification 1536,” tr. Lewis W. Spitz. *Luther’s Works*, 34 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 151 ff.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>37</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III: xix, 11, n. 14.

<sup>38</sup> Martin Luther, “Lectures on Galatians 1535,” tr. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther’s Works*, 26 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 232. To see how their doctrine of justification influenced the preaching of these great theologians, see David J. Lose, “Luther and Calvin on Preaching to the Human Condition,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 10 (1996), 281-318 and Mark Beach, “The Real Presence of Christ in the Preaching of the Gospel,” *Mid-American Journal of Theology* 10 (1999), 77-134.

conjunction with the proclamation of his Word, so preaching is the essential outward means to impart inward grace.<sup>39</sup>

Rather than seeking nuances or differences in emphasis between Martin Luther and John Calvin on justification, it would be well to recognize their “full concurrence about this truth. As one modern observer has remarked appropriately, “Reformation teaching on justification spoke with one voice on justification. On nothing were all the reformers more agreed.”<sup>40</sup>

Contrary to the contentions of Roman Catholic leaders in the sixteenth century and modern critics of *sola fide*, Luther and Calvin vigorously rejected the complaint that their teaching encouraged moral laxity and indifference toward good works. They concurred in declaring the freedom that comes with the reception of Christ through justifying faith leads to genuine piety expressed in obedience to God’s will. As Luther had affirmed in his treatise *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520)<sup>41</sup> Calvin declared, “those who seriously fear God will enjoy the incomparable benefit of this doctrine.” This truth prompts believers “to zeal for holiness and innocence.”<sup>42</sup> Like Luther, Calvin taught freedom from the condemnation of the law obtained through justification leads to eager obedience to the will of God.

## Conclusion

Much to the dismay of John Calvin, his affection for Martin Luther as a comrade in Christ and his adherence to almost all of the German reformer’s teaching did not prevent serious and sometimes acrimonious divisions among Protestants. Perhaps Calvin underestimated the significance of those few items of belief on which the theologians of Wittenberg and Geneva disagreed. The role of divine law in the Christian life, for example, became a subject of spirited debate between leaders of the two major branches of continental Protestantism, as did the permissibility to religious ceremonies Scripture does not mandate. In such matters Calvin was more tolerant than the Lutheran theologians who succeeded to leadership of their churches after Luther died. As was the case with differences about the Lord’s Supper, contention became common and sometimes hostile as other issues appeared. Calvin’s concern for Protestant unity led him to decry disputes and the divisions they were producing, and once in an expression of his chagrin, he wrote, “O God of grace, what pleasant sport and pastime do we afford to the papists, as if we hired ourselves to do their work.”<sup>43</sup> To show the sincerity of his desire for unity the reformer tolerated Lutheran rites of which he did not approve, and he sought an international conference of Protestant leaders to seek accord on issues dividing them. To that end he solicited cooperation from Phillip Melancthon, Heinrich Bullinger, and Anglican Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556). Calvin proposed formulating a confession acceptable to all churches of the Reformation. It was a painful disappointment when the death of Protestant King Edward VI (r.1547-53) and the subsequent execution of Archbishop Cranmer at the hands of Blood Mary (r.1553-58) ended prospects for such a conclave in England.<sup>44</sup>

While some interpreters have cited the differing positions of Luther and Calvin on the role of divine law in the Christian life, there is reason to conclude they have exaggerated the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>40</sup> M. Eugene Osterhaven, *The Faith of the Church* (Grand Rapids: (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 106.

<sup>41</sup> Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” tr. W. A Lambert and Harold J. Grimm. *Luther’s Works*, 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 327-77.

<sup>42</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III: xix, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Calvin, *Selected Works: Tracts and Letters* 4, 438, letter of January 21, 1545 to Melancthon.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 5, 345-48, letter of April 1552 to Cranmer.

discrepancy between their respective views.<sup>45</sup> The third or didactic use of God's moral law was of great importance to Calvin, less to Luther. The latter did not, however, want to discard the law. Rather he held that, in ideal circumstances, Christians should not need the law, because their love for God would prompt them to do his will without legal instructions. Luther knew, however, circumstances in this sinful world are far from ideal, so believers need God's law after all. To assist them in understanding their moral obligations, he composed his *Small* and *Large Catechisms*, major portions of which expound the Ten Commandments. In practice then Luther did recognize the need for the law in Christian living, so there was no essential discrepancy between his view and that of Calvin, who gave the law greater prominence.<sup>46</sup> On the function of the law to expose and condemn sin and to restrain evil doers, so civil society may endure, there was absolutely no difference in the teachings of these two reformers. Luther and Calvin agreed the law impels people to resort to the Christ of the Gospel, which they do when by faith they obtain acceptance with God *sola gratia*. Both theologians denied faith has an inherent power to justify. It is rather, as Calvin put it, "a kind of vessel" to receive the righteousness of Christ.<sup>47</sup>

While Luther emphasized justification primarily and Calvin sanctification, They agreed about both phases of salvation. Luther faced legalists who extolled salvation by works of merit, while Calvin contended with antinomians who made the doctrine of grace an excuse for their libertine behavior. The diverse challenges in Germany and Switzerland led the reformers to emphasize doctrines pertinent to those particular errors. Calvin, as a consequence, stressed the didactic use of the law as a means to promote sanctification, while Luther emphasized the role of the law which exposes sin and human helplessness to achieve salvation.

In addressing the human condition and mankind's urgent need for forgiveness and reconciliation with God, the reformers of Wittenberg and Geneva were united in the conviction that God's Word and his Holy Spirit work together to bring lost sinners to Christ. Although Scripture is God's Word and therefore imbued with divine power and authority, only people regenerated by the Holy Spirit will accept it in faith and respond positively to its proclamations. Calvin expressed this well when he asserted that faith receives the truth of Scripture only when that is "both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit."<sup>48</sup> Luther was no less emphatic in maintaining the necessity for the Spirit's operation to make the Word efficacious.<sup>49</sup> There was no fundamental disagreement between these theologians concerning the relationship of the Word and the Spirit. Both men were able expositors of Scripture, men of articulate ability and literary skill, who relied upon the Holy Spirit to make their ministry of the Word effective.

Martin Luther and John Calvin, the most influential theologians of the Reformation, were united in their love for the truth of *sola gratia, sola fide*. They knew themselves to be unworthy recipients of divine favor through sovereign election, and they were painfully aware of the continuing presence of sin in their own lives and in those of all Christians. They therefore called for daily repentance because the goal of the Christian life is perfection to be achieved only in eternity. As Luther declared in the first of his *Ninety-Five Theses*, "when our Lord and Master

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<sup>45</sup> See Lose, "Luther and Calvin on Preaching to the Human Condition."

<sup>46</sup> Luther, "Lectures on Galatians 1535," 222-25.

<sup>47</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III: xi, 7.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, III: ii, 7; Neuser, "Calvin and Luther," 96-99.

<sup>49</sup> A thorough study of Luther's understanding about the relationship between the Word and the Spirit is the work of Regin Prenter, *Spiritus.Creator*, tr. John M. Jensen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953), especially chapter II.

Jesus Christ said ‘repent,’ he willed that everyday in the life of a Christian be one of repentance.”<sup>50</sup>

Although Luther and Calvin lived in different countries and spoke different languages, and had very different backgrounds, they, by God’s grace, arrived at substantially the same understanding of the Gospel. Disagreements between them were few, and when they did occur, they did not lead to ruptured relations. Mutual appreciation bound them together, as they labored for the cause of Christ, even though their systems of theology were not identical. The heirs of the Reformation, orthodox Lutherans and Calvinists, would do well to compare the works of their sixteenth century mentors with a view toward realizing the immense body of doctrine they hold in common and to appreciate one another as Luther and Calvin did. Organic union between Lutherans and Calvinists may not be possible or even necessary, but the two bodies of Christians have good reason, as did the reformers, to consider one another comrades in Christ.

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<sup>50</sup> Martin Luther, “The Ninety-Five Theses,” tr. C. M. Jacobs and Harold J. Grimm, *Luther’s Works*, 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 17. For An examination of Calvin’s view of repentance, see T. H L. Parker, *Calvin: an Introduction to His Thought* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1995), 85-88.